Nineteen Thirty-Four:
Generic Hybridity and the Search for a Democratic Aesthetic

by

Adam Hammond

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Graduate Department of English
University of Toronto

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Abstract

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Adam Hammond

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This dissertation poses a fundamental question: why does a concern about the value of literary writing emerge during a felt crisis in public speech, especially in times of war? My focus is 1934, the year that Hitler became Führer and Socialist Realism was formulated in the USSR. In this year, Mikhail Bakhtin and Erich Auerbach developed the foundations of their narrative theory, while Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis embarked on new ventures in genre. Despite their differences, I argue, these writers all sought to challenge the linguistic basis of political power by developing new forms that engage readers in independent, active ways. Woolf, Eliot, and Lewis responded to totalitarianism with experiments in generic hybridity, believing that inter-generic dialogue could promote social dialogue and democratic modes of thought.

My introduction analyses the political and aesthetic implications of German and Soviet propaganda in 1934. Chapter 1 establishes a theoretical frame through two works written in exile from these totalitarian regimes. Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel” and Auerbach’s Mimesis both posit the centrality of genre to political freedom, but Bakhtin’s binary of monologic poetry and dialogic prose contrasts with Auerbach’s arguments for the political potential of mixed forms. Chapter 2 shows how similar concerns about pluralist voicing inform debates concerning the “death of poetry” in England; nonetheless, I conclude that the political poetry of Thirties Poets often privileged ideology over dialogism. Three chapters then explore the emergence of hybrid genres in Woolf, Eliot, and Lewis. I argue that Woolf’s unpublished “Ode to Cutbush” is a prose-poetic hybrid that employs poetic rhythm and free indirect discourse to instill democratic values of
empathy and tolerance; that Eliot’s first completed play, *The Rock*, invokes the ideological complexities and unresolved political contradictions of his journalism and editorial practice to incite the audience’s active collaboration; and that Lewis’s novelistic poem *One-Way Song* attempts to escape the increasingly monologic voice of his political writings and return to the polyphonic style and polyvalent thinking of his earlier work. My conclusion demonstrates these writers’ continuing commitment to the democratic potential of generic hybridity during World War II.
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List of Abbreviations

ABR  The Art of Being Ruled
D    The Diary of Virginia Woolf
DN   “Discourse in the Novel”
L    The Letters of Virginia Woolf
MWA  Men Without Art
TWM  Time and Western Man
Introduction

The Hybridizers of 1934

Engineers of Human Souls

That 1934 was a good year for the totalitarian regimes in Germany and the Soviet Union can be inferred from the enormous parties both threw for themselves that year. By the time of the Soviet Communist Party’s Seventeenth Congress in January 1934, the hardships and complications of the period of the First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932) had begun to come under control. Stalin’s grip on power was firm: his former rivals Bukharin and Trotsky were respectively in hand and in exile, and a large-scale purge of the Party in 1932-33 had eliminated several hundred thousand “undesirables.” The forced industrialization of the massive, backward country was well under way; the collectivization of agriculture had begun, and the worst of the resulting famines were over. Having faced enormous challenges and triumphed over them, the Seventeenth Congress was prepared to name itself “the Congress of Victors.” As Stalin told the delegates, “[t]here is nothing more to prove and, it seems, no one to fight” (qtd. in Kenez 105).

In Germany, the National Socialists, having faced challenges of their own, were also triumphant. Following their assumption of power in 1933, the exigencies of rule had led to the so-called “Night of the Long Knives” in the summer of 1934. Needing to control the unruly paramilitary Brownshirts who had helped him come to power, Hitler ordered the execution of their leader and co-founder, Ernst Röhm, along with many of his lieutenants. Wishing at the same time to settle old scores and eliminate conservative opponents in the army and government, the Nazis murdered such prominent figures as the former Reich Chancellor, General von Schleicher. When these acts of extralegal political violence met with no resistance, the Nazis’ grip on power was assured. In August, following the death of Reich President Hindenburg, Hitler merged the offices of Chancellor and President and declared himself “Führer.” The next month, the Nazis convened their
massive, week-long Party Rally in Nuremberg, attended by roughly a million spectators (Trimborn 107). Addressing an assembly of Brownshirts and SS men, Hitler obliquely referred to the “dark shadow” that had “cast itself across our movement,” before, in the closing ceremony, celebrating his party as “an eternal and indestructible pillar of the German people.” Rudolph Hess, Hitler’s deputy, declared, “Hitler is Germany, just as Germany is Hitler.”

Increasingly assured in their political control, both regimes turned to culture in order to consolidate it. It is in this respect, primarily, that 1934 was a landmark year. On the Nazi side, it saw the production of perhaps their most successful single piece of propaganda: the film documentary of that same 1934 Party Rally in Nuremberg, Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*—a film, as Jürgen Trimborn argues, that “replaces politics with aesthetics: instead of political discussion we see the image of the ‘tamed man,’ shaped into and disciplined as marching columns and organized blocks” (108). The Nazis had recognized from the beginning the importance of culture. Only two months after he was appointed Chancellor in January, 1933, Hitler established a new Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda. Joseph Goebbels, a cabinet member of the ministry, announced in November of that year, “[t]he revolution we have made is a total one. It has encompassed every area of public life and fundamentally restructured them all.” As he had already said in March, “[r]evolutions never confine themselves to the purely political sphere. From there they reach out to cover all other areas of social existence. The economy and culture, science and scholarship, and art are not protected from their impact.” He added, “[t]here is no art without political bias” (qtd. in Evans 120). Fully convinced of the importance of such works, Hitler commissioned *Triumph of the Will* in April 1934, and allotted enormous resources to its production. A staff of some 170 worked on the film, including 36 cameramen. They made use of such novel technologies as telephoto and wide-angle lenses and pioneered numerous cinematic techniques, including placing cameramen on roller-skates and bicycles to create steady motion shots (Trimborn 112). They also experimented
with perspective, for instance digging deep trenches beneath Hitler’s speech platforms to create extremely low-angle shots. The historian Richard J. Evans classes *Triumph of the Will* as among the most important elements in establishing the “Hitler cult” and reads its images of “vast, disciplined masses moving in perfect co-ordination as if they were one body, not thousands” as serving to assert Rudolph Hess’s statement that “Hitler is Germany” (126). The film was edited for six months and released to great acclaim in March, 1935. It won not only the regime’s own National Film Prize, but also the Gold Medal at the Venice Film festival in 1935 and the Grand Prize of the Paris World’s Fair in 1937. As Michael Burleigh describes it, it was “a propagandistic exercise so definitive that it never needed to be repeated” (211). It is the only film made about Hitler in the Third Reich, and it served its propagandistic purpose well beyond 1934, being sent along with conquering German armies to Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland (Trimborn 120).

Though the first decade of the Soviet Union had been one of great cultural heterogeneity, when Stalin assumed sole leadership in 1929 he moved toward the formation of a totalitarian state along the lines described above by Goebbels. A key element in this movement was the formulation of the official state aesthetic, “Socialist Realism,” at the First All-Union Writer’s Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934. In the months leading up to the Congress, Stalin remarked that whereas the successful completion of the First Five-Year Plan had depended on the work of “mining engineers, construction engineers, electrical engineers, engineers to build blast furnaces,” the next step in the development of the Soviet Union would depend on “engineers who know how to build human souls.” As he continued, “[w]riters, you are the engineers who build human souls!” (qtd. in Huxley 309). Stalin’s words echoed throughout the speeches delivered at the Writers’ Congress. Andrei Zhdanov, in his opening address to the Congress, defined “Socialist Realism” as a style combining “truthfulness and historical concreteness” with “the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism” (21). In content, socialist realist art would be
unapologetically tendentious: “Yes,” Zhdanov said, “Soviet literature is tendencious [sic], for in an epoch of class struggle there is not and cannot be a literature which is not class literature, not tendencious [sic], allegedly apolitical” (21). Form would provide the artillery. Taking it as his premise that “[o]ne cannot be an engineer of human souls without knowing the technique of literary work” (20), he counseled the “army of Soviet writers,” “[y]ou have many different types of weapons. Soviet literature has every opportunity of employing these types of weapons (genres, styles, forms, and methods of literary creation) in their diversity and fullness” (22). Zhdanov’s remarks and the exactly contemporaneous production of The Triumph of the Will evince the increasing cooptation, both in the Soviet Union and Germany, of art and culture in the service of political domination—the shared realization by both the Stalinist and Nazi regimes that to control the way people act, they need also to control how they think; and to control the way people think, they need to control art. Imagined from the perspective of nineteen thirty-four, the dystopian world of George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four seems menacingly plausible—not fifty years off, but just around the corner.

Reverse Engineers; or, A Mighty Recasting of Literary Forms

If there can be art to prop up a totalitarian regime, however, there can also be art to bring one down. It was with the aim of discovering the latter that Walter Benjamin, a German Jew living in exile in Paris, addressed the Institute for the Study of Fascism on April 27, 1934. Though he spoke as a supporter of communism and opponent of Fascism, the paper he delivered, “The Author as Producer,” is remarkable for its proleptic rebuttals of the arguments advanced three months later at the First Soviet Writers’ Congress. Whereas Zhdanov made “tendentiousness” a necessary and defining characteristic of Socialist Realism, Benjamin begins by attacking such emphases on the political correctness of content. Citing the example of Plato’s expulsion of poets from his republic, Benjamin says, “[t]he question of the poet’s right to exist has not often, since then, been posed with the same emphasis; but it poses itself today.” In communist spheres in 1934, the “question of the
poet’s right to exist” hinges on his social commitment. “You believe that the present situation compels him to decide in whose service he is to place his activity,” Benjamin tells his audience: “His activity is now decided by what is useful to the proletariat in the class struggle. Such writing is commonly called *tendentious*” (768). Benjamin’s position, however, is that “political tendency [. . .] is a perfectly useless instrument of political literary criticism” (769). He proposes to evaluate a work not on its explicitly stated political positions, but on the political impact of the kind of thinking it elicits—which depends not on content but on form. As David Ayers summarizes, Benjamin “resists the claim of politically urgent times that a work must be judged by the author’s known or stated political position,” and instead insists upon “an assessment of the structure of a work in terms of its mode of insertion into reality and its effects on the reality around it; not least, its effect on consciousness” (*Modernism*, 116-7). In Benjamin’s words, “[r]ather than asking, ‘What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?’ I would like to ask, ‘What is its position in them?’” In his investigation into the kind of literature best able to counter Fascism, Benjamin shifts emphasis away from content and toward “the literary *technique* of works” (770).

The best-remembered debates about the politics of form among 1930s left-wing intellectuals turn on the relative merits of realism and modernism. Perhaps the most famous of these is the exchange between Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch excerpted in *Aesthetics and Politics* (Verso, 1977). While both Lukács and Bloch were opposed to Fascism, which they regarded as an extreme form of capitalism, they disagreed about which style was best suited to opposing it. Specifically, they produced very different political readings of early-twentieth century modernist movements like Expressionism and Surrealism. Lukács, defining literature as “a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected,” argued that only realist works could portray the truth of the capitalist system in its totality, and thus provide readers with the full understanding that would precede political action. Lukács dismissed fragmented, discontinuous modernist works—characterized for
him by techniques like abstraction and stream of conscious narration—as content “to confine [themselves] to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately on the surface” (33). For Bloch, the political value of modernist forms like Expressionism lay in their recognition of the fragmented, discontinuous nature of reality itself (Bloch asks Lukács, “[w]hat if authentic reality is also discontinuity”? (22)) and in the ability of such discontinuous forms to interrupt the grand narratives—as he puts it, to “[undermine] the schematic routines” (23)—on which capitalist systems depend.

Among the totalitarian regimes already discussed, the same distinction between modernism and realism underlay policies regarding the politics of form. Some credence is given to Bloch’s position by the fact that both the Soviets and the Nazis saw modernism as disruptive and dangerous. Hitler, himself a former painter of “painstakingly representational” works (Evans 16), was a vociferous opponent of modernist art in all its forms. Throughout the 1930s, exhibitions of so-called “degenerate” painting and music sought to classify modernism as Bolshevik, Jewish, and black, and thus total anathema. The formulation of “Socialist Realism” marked the end of modernism in the Soviet Union. In Karl Radek’s address to the First Writers’ Congress (1934), in a section titled “James Joyce or Socialist Realism,” he cited *Ulysses* as proof that “[t]he literature of dying capitalism has become stunted in ideas”: “All the great styles which were evolved by past bourgeois art [. . .]—realism, naturalism, romanticism—all this has suffered attrition and disintegration; all this exists only in fragments” (151). *Ulysses* itself—“a book of eight hundred pages, without any stops and without commas” (115)—Radek described as “[a] heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope” (153). Though radically dissimilar in political ideology, both totalitarian regimes opposed modernism to realism, demonizing the former and celebrating the latter.

“The Author as Producer,” however, moves past the modernism/realism controversy. Benjamin is interested here not in evaluating retroactively the politics of past modernist forms like
Expressionism, which by 1934 had already run its course, but rather in developing new modernist forms suited to the specific challenge of fighting Fascism. His concern is thus not as much with literary schools like modernism, realism, romanticism, etc., as with genre. Benjamin says,

we have to rethink our conceptions of literary forms or genres, in view of the technical factors affecting our present situation, if we are to identify the forms of expression that channel the literary energies of the present. There were not always novels in the past, and there will not always have to be; there have not always been tragedies or great epics. (771)

“We are in the midst of a mighty recasting of literary forms,” he continues, “a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been used to think may lose their force” (771). The particular opposition Benjamin feels new communist forms must address is that between author and reader. The passivity demanded of the spectator by Fascist art and propaganda, he suggests, must be countered with communist forms that inspire the reader’s active participation. Benjamin thus focuses on the newspaper, in which the reader becomes an author by printing letters to the editor, and Brecht’s Epic Theatre, which collapses the “fourth wall” and makes the audience a part of the spectacle. “Tendentiousness” is not enough: a work of art must not only espouse the right political views, but must also provide the formal means of bringing them to life. As Benjamin argues,

*An author who teaches writers nothing teaches no one.* What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able, first, to induce other producers to produce, and, second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers—that is, readers or spectators into collaborators. (777; emphasis in original)

For the purposes of this dissertation, what is significant in Benjamin’s “The Author as Producer” is not its specific political ambitions or the likelihood that the newspaper or the Epic Theatre was ideally suited to the task of transforming passive spectators into active collaborators. What is significant—and what is significant generally about the literary history of 1934—is his belief that a new literary form can “induce” a change in the way we think; and in changing the way we think, can bring about concrete political change.
What You Can Gather from Coincidence

On the one hand, 1934 was a year in which totalitarian regimes turned increasingly to artistic form as a means of consolidating power; on the other hand, as Benjamin demonstrates, it was also a year in which those opposed to such regimes began to understand totalitarianism in generic terms, and to formulate a response that would counter tyrannical genres with liberating ones. The latter is the subject of this dissertation, which begins from a seeming historical coincidence. In a twelve-month period beginning in December, 1933, three modernists wrote for the first time in new genres: Virginia Woolf wrote the “Ode to Cutbush,” her only poem; T. S. Eliot produced The Rock, his first completed play; and Wyndham Lewis published One-Way Song, his only collection of verse. Each of these, I argue, should be read an as experiment in generic hybridity: Woolf and Lewis produced poems that incorporate important elements of the novel, and Eliot combined various dramatic styles with lyric poetry. Each of these generic experiments, furthermore, should be read as responding to the political context of totalitarianism. There is an important difference, however, between what Woolf, Eliot, and Lewis wrote and what Benjamin theorized: whereas Benjamin wrote from the ideological perspective of Marxism and aligned himself against Fascism, I will argue that the works of Woolf, Eliot, and Lewis are best understood in the context of the struggle of democratic thought against all forms of totalitarianism, including both Stalinism and Nazism. But there is an important similarity between what Benjamin theorized and what Woolf, Eliot, and Lewis produced: though each was already an established “modernist” by 1934, none was convinced that their works, as they stood, were sufficient to the historical situation. They responded to 1934 not by producing more work along familiar lines, but by seeking new forms. This brief sketch of my argument, I realize, will raise a number of questions—not the least of which is how I can consider any modernist writer, much less Lewis or Eliot, in the context of democratic opposition to totalitarianism. I will attempt to address these questions in the course of the chapter-by-chapter summary that follows.
Chapters 1 & 2: Parameters

My first two chapters lay out the geographical, historical, and theoretical parameters of my argument, focusing respectively on the genre theory of Mikhail Bakhtin and Erich Auerbach, and on the debate concerning the “death of poetry” that erupted in England in the mid-1920s. The first chapter has two principal aims. First, it seeks to place the genre theory of Bakhtin and Auerbach into the historical context laid out in this introduction. It reads “Discourse in the Novel,” written in 1934-5 while Bakhtin was exiled to Kazakhstan, as a response to Stalinism; and Mimesis, written between 1942 and 1945 while Auerbach was in exile in Turkey, as a response to Nazism. Second, it uses their work to formulate an answer to one of this dissertation’s fundamental questions: how can literary form challenge totalitarianism and support democracy? Drawing on the work of Ken Hirschkop, I lay out the democratic case for Bakhtinian dialogism. This style encourages a democratic mindset by making readers responsible: it instantiates formally democratic processes of debate and engages the reader in them actively. I then go on to show how Bakhtin’s argument for the democratic value of the novel is supported by his argument that poetry is inherently authoritarian. If novelistic dialogism inspires active engagement and independent, responsible decision-making, poetic tropes like metaphor and rhythm, Bakhtin argues, encourage passivity and acquiescence. My next argument is that Bakhtin’s own critical style is non-dialogical, which leads me to an important lacuna in his genre theory: his absolute division of the generic universe into binary opposites of novel and poetry. Though he admits the existence of hybrid forms in a footnote, he does not evaluate the aesthetic politics of such forms. Drawing on Bakhtin’s early ethical theory, I conclude this section by arguing for the political promise of prose/poetic hybridity. My section on Mimesis argues that while Auerbach too searches for a democratic style, he is unable to locate it absolutely in any existent work. His analysis of Homeric and Biblical style looks at each in terms of their possible usefulness in defeating Fascism, but champions neither absolutely. His analysis of
Woolf is similarly nuanced: her techniques of multiperspectivalism and focus on the everyday are read as capable both of fighting and abetting Fascism. Throughout my analysis of *Mimesis*, I argue that Auerbach is an “honest” critic—that is, that unlike Bakhtin he writes in the polyphonic style he champions. It is a consequence of his critical honesty, I suggest, that he does settle on a single preferred style. But what survives from his many argumentative reversals, without being explicitly stated, is a tacit case for the democratic value of hybrid forms.

Another important question arises in my discussion of Bakhtin and Auerbach: what is “poetry?” It becomes clear in this first chapter that there can be no one authoritative definition of this term, for Bakhtin and Auerbach apply it to vastly different things. When Bakhtin says “poetry” he has in mind not concrete works—not poems—but an abstract counter to his dialogic ideal; for Bakhtin, “poetry” is the unanswerable voice of authority. Auerbach, ever reluctant to employ binarized terms, avoids using “poetry” at all; he makes only occasional recourse to the adjective “poetic” to describe passages that draw their reader into a world of comforting but illusive beauty. Rather than attempting to provide an all-encompassing definition of “poetry,” my procedure in this dissertation is to note and analyze the vast range of what poetry can “pass for” in the work of different writers. In other words, I treat “poetry” as “cultural keyword”: a site of contested meaning and ideological conflict more interesting for how it is used than for what its definition might be.

This is the approach of my second chapter, which begins with the “death of poetry” debate in England. Faced with the prospect of poetry’s extinction, the critics involved in this debate produced compelling—and compellingly various—accounts of poetry’s social significance. The first section traces the critical response to R. C. Trevelyan’s *Thamyris; or, Is There a Future for Poetry?* (1925). For Trevelyan, “poetry” was recognizable by its beauty and its arrangement according to a “fixed metrical base” (24), and by its social function of “humanizing” its content. Discussing the rise of modernist verse—which he read as jarring and lacking in metrical subtlety—Trevelyan asked
whether poetry was dying “an un lamented death in a bastard and graceless prose” (5). Herbert Read responds to Trevelyan by arguing that modernist verse wasn’t killing poetry off, but bringing it up to date. By incorporating the idioms of everyday life, Read argued, modernist verse was rewriting the old definition of poetry, making it more inclusive, more representative, and more democratic. For Robert Graves, the value of modernist poetry lay in its ability to break up the routines of industrial capitalism by revealing a “whole region of hidden association and implication behind phrases” (185). The American critic Edmund Wilson argued that the modern world had exploded the tired opposition of poetry and prose, and looked to Joyce’s Ulysses as an example of prose/poetic hybridity. The second section of my chapter considers the poetic “boom” in the 1930s in relation to these prescriptions of the 1920s. Analyzing Michael Roberts’s prefaces to the volumes that launched the “Thirties Poets”—New Signatures (1932) and New Country (1933)—I show how remote his conception of poetry is from that of writers like Read, Graves, and Wilson. Whereas they stressed the democratic value of modernist poetry and prose/poetic hybrids, Roberts, seeking to make poetry an effective vehicle for communist propaganda, emphasized generic purity. I read Cecil Day Lewis’s The Magnetic Mountain as a particularly pure specimen of Roberts’s favoured poetic form: the tribal, denotative epic. In Stephen Spender’s Vienna I find a more conflicted genre. Though Spender fails in his attempt to reconcile the “public” form of epic with the personal and “irresponsible” lyric, his failure provides an entryway for analysis of the contemporaneous experiments in hybridity of Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis.

This summary of my second chapter goes some way toward demonstrating why I must maintain a flexible and mobile conception of “generic hybridity.” As Alastair Fowler shows in Kinds of Literature, modernism presents a twofold difficulty to the taxonomist of genre. On the one hand, modernist writers were enthusiastic combiners of genres. While Fowler notes, “it would be wrong to suppose that generic transformation is peculiarly modern,” he recognizes modernists as particularly
susceptible to “the urge to go beyond existing literary genres” (32). On the other hand, modernist writers tended to avoid speaking of their work in explicitly generic terms: as Fowler argues, “the modernist movement, committed to a myth of ‘breaking the forms,’ avoided genre labels altogether for a time” (142). Fowler’s way of thinking about genre—for example, his careful terminology of “kind,” “subgenre,” “mode,” and “constructional type” (55)—must thus be contrasted with that of Woolf, Eliot, and Lewis, who pay less attention to fine distinctions between historical genres and modes and are more interested in broader, categorical terms like “prose,” “the novel,” “poetry,” and “drama.”4 Alastair Fowler’s major example of generic hybridity, for example, is the Shakespearean sonnet, which hybridizes the epigram and sonnet, two poetic genres (183-5). To take this approach to a work like *Ulysses*—which combines most if not all such historical genres, not to mention modes and subgenres—would be to risk *reductio ad absurdum.*5 It is precisely to avoid such reductiveness that Edmund Wilson analyzes *Ulysses* as a hybrid of the broader categories of novel and poetry. My own analysis of Woolf, Eliot, and Lewis will focus on their combinations of such broad generic categories. I will keep in mind, however, that the novelistic, poetic, and dramatic forms they seek to cross-pollinate are usually already, in Fowler’s terms, hybrids.6 When analyzing Day Lewis and Spender in chapter two, however, my terminology becomes more Fowlerian. Partly in reaction to the generic theory and practice of their modernist predecessors, these writers tended to think in terms of more discrete traditional genres: where Day Lewis seeks to resuscitate the epic genre in its pure form, Spender combines two poetic genres, epic and lyric.7

While the specific nature of the hybrid varies between writers and generations in the modernist period, my analysis focuses on one commonality between them: the sense that the combination of genres is a political act. As Fowler notes, “[e]ver since Cicero’s rather stiff interpretation of Aristotle put mixture of styles beyond the pale, their segregation [has] been related to political order” (185-6). In seeking to effect political change through the combination of genres,
furthermore, all the writers in this thesis demonstrate a further shared characteristic: the desire to communicate through form. Fowler repeatedly insists that genres “communicate”: that they establish a framework of interpretation without which it would be impossible for a reader to have a meaningful engagement with a work. The experiments in generic hybridity described in this dissertation are experiments in communication: my frequent employment of phrases like “active engagement” and “collaboration” reflects these writers’ shared sense that generic experimentation is a form of interaction and conversation with readers. Since this leads to the question of modernism’s notorious “elitism,” I will pursue this train of thought in the following summary.

*Chapters 3, 4 & 5: Triune in Disunion*

Leonard Diepeveen opens *The Difficulties of Modernism* (2004) by describing a lecture given by Randall Jarrell at Harvard in the early 1950s entitled “The Obscurity of the Poet.” In his lecture, Jarrell proposes as “a truism that it would be absurd to deny” that “the poetry of the first half of this century was too difficult.” Diepeveen agrees: “many of [Jarrell’s] ideas about difficulty would have been beyond argument to almost anyone in his audience” (ix-x). Thanks to recent modernist scholarship, this is no longer the case. While many might still agree with Jarrell, and do agree with Diepeveen, their perspective is no longer “beyond argument.” Some of the best recent arguments against such views—usually responding specifically to Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide* (1986), derived from Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984); and to John Carey’s *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992)—have come in analyses of the writers under discussion in this dissertation. The best way of responding to totalizing conceptions of modernist “difficulty” or “elitism” is by analyzing concrete examples of individual writers and their individual works, where such analyses reveal a more complicated picture. David Chinitz’s *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (2003) produces just such a picture. To Huyssen’s claim that “Modernists such as T. S. Eliot [. . .] emphasized time and again that it was their mission to salvage the purity of high art from the
encroachments of [. . .] modern mass culture” (67), Chinitz responds that the situation is not nearly so simple: Eliot, Chinitz writes, “is a multidimensional thinker and artist, whose approach to the modern popular [. . .] is supple, frequently insightful, and always deeply ambivalent” (5). In Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere (2003), Melba Cuddy-Keane cites Carey’s claim that “the denial of humanity to the masses became, in the early twentieth century, an important linguistic project of the intellectuals” (24-5), and responds by arguing that Carey “confuses the massive number of ordinary readers with those discourses that inscribe ordinary readers as an undifferentiated mass” (3). Cuddy-Keane describes Woolf’s project of connecting with ordinary readers (“Common Readers,” as Woolf called them) as one that aimed to “preserve the humanity” of such readers (3). Anne Quéma devotes a chapter of her study of Wyndham Lewis, The Agon of Modernism (1999), to refuting Huyssen and Bürger’s position that “the modernist critique of capitalism necessarily coincide[s] with an anti-democratic, elitist stance” (153). Drawing on Lewis’s tremendously varied output in a variety of genres and over a long career, Quéma argues that Lewis explodes the putative antitheses between elitist art and mass culture, modernism and the avant-garde. My reading of Eliot, Woolf, and Lewis participates in the project shared by Chinitz, Cuddy-Keane, and Quéma: to insist upon the “suppleness,” the variety and complexity, not only of these three modernists, but of modernism in general.

My reading of modernism differs in particular from that advanced in Diepeveen’s The Difficulties of Modernism. For Diepeveen, all modernist form is “difficult”; and this “difficult” form elicits a limited range of “predicable effects” (121) from its audience. “Difficulty is an odd aesthetic experience,” Diepeveen says; “using their whole bodies, people react viscerally to difficulty, often with anxiety, anger, and ridicule” (xiv). While these may be among the possible reactions to experimental modernist form (as I prefer to call it), Diepeveen’s list is not exhaustive. He excludes, for instance, the exhilaration that some readers experience when encountering stylistic alterity (my
own feeling when I first encountered Ulysses, for example, or Lewis’s Tarr)—and the sense of empowerment that others feel when they are asked to “complete” a text without a clear, predetermined meaning. One might respond to The Waste Land with anxiety, anger, or ridicule, for example; or one might respond to the absence of transitions and lack of authorial intervention by eagerly taking up a collaborative role. For Diepeveen, the stylistic “excesses” of The Waste Land “demand a response from the very beginning” (56; emphasis in original). But they can also be regarded as freeing the reader to respond to the text however she chooses. Diepeveen acknowledges that modernist form “destabilized entrenched modes of perception,” but argues that such cognitive instability is “an unsettling, high-stakes activity” that elicits “a classic ‘fight or flight’ reaction” (74). My reading of experimental modernist form focuses on the other possibility: that in “destabilizing entrenched modes of perception,” such forms open a window for active, responsible engagement with the text. Diepeveen argues that the “aesthetic responses” elicited by modernist texts have “very uncertain political consequences” (121). My reading of the experiments of Woolf, Eliot, and Lewis focuses on the democratic, anti-authoritarian potential of such liberating, interactive forms.

My grouping of Woolf, Eliot, and Lewis will seem counterintuitive to many. Efforts to broaden understanding of modernist practice have in fact often proceeded by setting these writers in opposition to one another. In Refiguring Modernism (1995), for example, Bonnie Kime Scott argues that the “Women of 1928”—Woolf, Djuna Barnes, and Rebecca West—“crossed the ‘cultural divide’ [. . . ] in terms of audience as well as political activism” (186), noting in particular their widely-read journalism and their shared opposition to Fascism. But Kime Scott’s positive case for the “Women of 1928” is supported by negative reading of the “Men of 1914”—Eliot, Lewis, Pound and Joyce—that sees the latter in Huyssen’s terms. Kime Scott decries the New Critics’ “male-dominated modernist canon that serves formalist models of unity, tension, irony, and paradox, ignoring personal and political considerations, including gender, class, and colonial marginalization” (80). She
is generally content, however, to class Eliot and Lewis among this spurious stream of modernism, arguing, for example, that “Lewis and Eliot built hard surfaces and monumental defences against feminine influences” (145). Without perhaps meaning to, however, Kime Scott provides compelling evidence for considering these writers together. She notes, for example, Woolf’s long friendship with Eliot; explores Eliot’s important role in the editing and publication of Barnes’s *Nightwood*; and notes the fact that Lewis included West’s “Indissoluble Matrimony” in the first issue of *Blast*. While I do not deny the presence of personal and artistic antipathy in the Woolf-Eliot-Lewis network, I do want to suggest 1934 as a moment of convergence between these three very different artists. Kime Scott sees the “Women of 1928” as participating in a shared project of generic mixing: in 1928, she says, “[t]he fiction of Woolf, West, and Barnes took on the qualities of poetry [. . .] as well as drama, travel writing, and, in Barnes’s case, even an almanac” (185). I propose the same shared project for Woolf, Eliot, and Lewis: in 1934, all three mixed fiction, poetry, and drama, for aims that were explicitly political. In 1934, they crossed the cultural divide by the same bridge. I therefore hold them together with the label “The Hybridizers of 1934”—a label that nonetheless acknowledges the “hybridity” and multiplicity of the grouping itself.

This leads to the final question I intend to address in this introduction: how can I consider this unlikely grouping of modernists in relation to the idea of “democracy”? The democratic credentials of Woolf, who I discuss in Chapter 3, are the most easily established of my three authors: she expressed specifically anti-Fascist sentiments in works like *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), and as a result was placed on a Nazi hit-list. The most likely objection to Woolf in the context of democracy is what some regard as her snobbish classism and stereotyped representations of working class characters. My chapter challenges this view of Woolf through a reading of her criticism and her hybrid poem, the “Ode to Cutbush.” I begin by showing how Woolf’s interest in hybrid prose/poetic forms— theorized in works like “Poetry, Fiction, and the
Future” (1927) and A Letter to a Young Poet (1932)—derived from her belief that such forms could best express the multiplicity and diversity of modern democratic society. I read the “Ode to Cutbush”—a “speculative biography” of a working-class butcher—as a poem about the potential of hybrid forms to cross social boundaries and instill democratic modes of thought. Through its combination of suggestive and rhythmic poetic language with the novelistic technique of free indirect discourse, I argue, the “Ode” inculcates in its reader a mindset in which the discordancies of modernity can be harmonized without being resolved—a mindset I read as conducive to democracy.

I am not so bold, in Chapter 4, as to suggest that Eliot was an explicit defender of democracy. Eliot was, in fact, an explicit antagonist of a contemporary world “worm-eaten with Liberalism” (After Strange Gods, 13) and had in 1934, as he does today, a reputation as a political reactionary. What this chapter aims to do, instead, is to complicate the picture of Eliot as an opponent of democracy and endorser of fascist ideology. I begin by looking at Eliot’s editorial practice in The Criterion, which I argue was strongly “liberal” in the sense of mediating genuine dialogue and competition of perspectives. I show, for example, how in the years leading up to publication of The Rock, Eliot fostered debate on the merits of a variety of political ideologies, such as Fascism, communism, and democracy, without allowing any one to prevail absolutely. Next, looking at Eliot’s increasing interest in verse drama in the 1920s and 30s, I argue that he was attracted by the idea of “collaboration” between artist and audience. As with his editorial practice, such collaboration served to engage the spectator actively in the production of meaning rather than to impose a predetermined position. I conclude with a reading of The Rock. While it is often regarded as a work of single-voiced religious propaganda, I present it—setting aside the question of Eliot’s specific intention—as a genuinely dialogic work, in which a variety of discourses and ideologies confront one another without being resolved.
Chapter 5 deals with Wyndham Lewis, who in the 1930s admittedly wrote numerous political works supportive of Fascism. My chapter begins, however, by placing Lewis’s nationalist writings in the context of his support—both early in his career and in the 1940s and 50s—for democracy and internationalism. While much of Lewis’s writing of the 1930s is crudely monologic, I argue that such writing represents a marked departure from the polyvalent thinking and polyvocal style characteristic of most of his work. Lewis, as I seek to demonstrate, is indeed a remarkably perceptive theorist of the relationship between dialogic style and active, critical modes of thought. I read One-Way Song (1933)—a hybrid of poetic, novelistic, and dramatic styles—as representing an escape from the increasingly monologic style Lewis employed in his political works of that period. While it is anachronistic to speak of it as a direct contribution to the cause of democracy in 1934, I read One-Way Song in the context of Lewis’s earlier opposition to totalitarianism and later championing of democracy, and suggest that its formal maneuvers are consistent with both. In my Conclusion I shift the scene ahead to the period of the London Blitz to see what impact these politically-motivated generic experiments of 1934 had during wartime.

I see my dissertation as presenting four main contributions to the discussion of modernist literature. First, by reading the work of Bakhtin and Auerbach as intervening in the political context of 1934, I hope to draw attention to the historical “uses” of narrative theory. I read Bakhtin and Auerbach in their context to show how they challenge their context, as well as to draw out the challenges their ideas continue to pose today. Second, in taking a transnational approach to the literary history of 1934—in tracking the arguments about the politics of genre from Russia and Germany to Britain, North America, and beyond—I present the modernist period as one of lively intercontinental debate and discussion. In Chapter 2, for example, where I discuss the dissemination in England of the proceedings of the First Soviet Writers’ Congress, I show how the work of the Thirties Poets developed in important ways through transcontinental dialogue. Elsewhere I employ
my historical vantage point to imagine conversations that ought to have taken place but did not—for example, the discussion between Bakhtin, Auerbach, and Woolf, which political, geographic, and linguistic factors prevented. Third, by considering Woolf alongside Eliot and Lewis, and by complicating received views of their politics, I hope to contribute to the continued examination of modernism’s variety and multiplicity, and to present a positive reading of the politics of modernist form. My fourth contribution is one of critical style, and requires for explanation its own section.

A Note to the Reader

In my second chapter, I take Bakhtin to task for failing to write in the style he endorses, and I praise Auerbach for employing a multi-voiced critical style in a work that advocates polyphony. I have tried myself to be an “honest” critic. Since this is a critical rather than a literary work, I have not gone so far as to write a hybrid novel/poem. Instead, I have tried to adopt the critical styles I most admire. In his autobiography Rude Assignment (1954), Wyndham Lewis describes the argument of The Art of Being Ruled (1926) as “burst[ing] out into manifold byways”:

It was my idea at the outset—inspired by the Hegelian dialectic, with its thesis and antithesis—to state, here and there, both sides of the question to be debated, and allow these opposites to struggle in the reader’s mind for the ascendancy and there to find their synthesis. (183)

This describes broadly the critical style adopted by Auerbach in Mimesis and by Woolf in her essays, both of which are characterized by dialectical (and dialogic) reversal. (Eliot’s critical style, with its endless equivocations, achieves a similar effect in a less compelling way.) It is their style I have tried to employ here, as much as is possible within the confines of an academic discussion. While I must at some points state explicitly where my argument is heading in order to prevent misunderstanding, I prefer to allow my discussion to proceed more naturally—to explore one side of a particular question, to watch as that position breaks down through its onesidedness, and then to explore the other side, and so on. This critical style demands a different sort of attention than is perhaps
normally expected of the reader of a dissertation: it requires his or her participation, to a greater extent, in the production of meaning. It calls on the reader also to make certain connections that I prefer not to state explicitly but rather to suggest through the use of unconventional dissertation devices such as motif, characterization, and foreshadowing. (To state one example, Stephen Spender functions here in all three ways.) I see my thesis, in fact, as a hybrid of two prose genres: the dissertation and the novel. In this scenario, I regard this rather explicit introductory chapter as a sort of Author’s Preface or Editor’s Introduction, helping to guide the reader through what follows, and suggesting strategies for exploring its “manifold byways.” This critical style, I believe, is not only more suited to my own aesthetic and critical tastes, but also, by cultivating more active attention, enriches the reading experience, and to some extent enacts the democratic effect I describe in my analysis. It is my small contribution to democracy in the year 2011.

1 As Lewis Siegelbaum notes, “the Congress of Victors turned out to be a congress of victims. Over the next four years,

2 In the period of the New Economic Policy, artists of varying media such as Mayakovsky, Malevich, and Shostakovich had been allowed to pursue their work with little interference from the state. See also Chapter 9 of Ronald Hingley’s Russian Writers and Soviet Society 1917-1978. Hingley notes that the 1920s “witnessed[d] the proliferation of competing literary movements and theories so numerous that their detailed workings can be of interest only to the specialist” (189). He focuses on Imagism and Futurism, and notes their disappearance with the single approved state aesthetic of Socialist Realism.

3 Woolf also wrote poems for Isa for Between the Acts, many of which were not included in the finished novel. Lewis began his career as a poet but quickly abandoned verse for prose and drama. Alan Munton includes some juvenilia (very unlike One-Way Song) in the Collected Poems and Plays. Murder in the Cathedral (1935) is often referred to as Eliot’s first completed play, on the grounds that The Rock was a collaborative work (see the opening pages of Chapter 4 of this dissertation). If one were to follow this shaky logic, the equally collaborative The Waste Land would have to be removed from the Eliot canon. For a discussion of “Sweeney Agonistes,” which was to have been Wanna Go Home, Baby, see Chapter 4.

4 Fowler does occasionally speak in terms of “poetic kinds, dramatic kinds, and prose kinds” (5) but does not emphasize these broad divisions. He quotes Malcolm Bradbury’s remark that “[th]e novel is not a traditional literary genre, like tragedy or comedy, but a general, varied, categorically distinctive form like poetry and drama” (120).

5 Fowler discusses Ulysses as a generically coherent “antinovel” (177-8).

6 According to Fowler’s generic scheme, the Woolfian novel should be regarded as an “elegiac modulation” of the novel; To The Lighthouse, he says, “takes the modification about as far as is feasible without dissolving the form of the novel altogether” (211).

7 Because the Thirties Poets tended to speak in terms of genres like epic and lyric, their generic terminology was in turn picked up by the older modernists who were engaging with and responding to their work. See, for example, my discussion of epic in Woolf in Chapter 3.

8 My positive political reading of modernist form differs from that of Theodor Adorno. David Ayers summarizes Adorno’s views as follows: “it is no longer relevant to comment on the ideology of an art-work, as if the art-work
contained ideas that influenced society, somehow, from the outside. Rather, it is shown to be essential to analyze the overall process of art-works” (122). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the “culture industry” of capitalist countries is no less totalizing than that in Nazi Germany or Stalin’s USSR: “Films, radio, and magazines,” they say, “make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part” (120). Adorno argues elsewhere that “high art” is distinct from the “culture industry” but unable to counter it because it was itself beholden to capitalism—he called the two cultural spheres “torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up” (“Letters” 123). The modernist writers I discuss shared Adorno’s fears regarding the potentially totalizing influence of cultural ideology in capitalist countries (see esp. my discussion of Lewis in Chapter 5), but they still felt that art-works had an important role to play in “influencing society,” not just through “ideas,” but primarily through form—as indeed Benjamin argues in “Author as Producer.” I agree with these modernist writers and with Benjamin.

9 Virginia Woolf (along with Leonard Woolf, Stephen Spender, E. M. Forster, Aldous Huxley, H. G. Wells, and others) was included in the so-called “Black Book” of undesirables to be arrested upon successful Nazi invasion of Britain. See Schellenberg 147-148.

10 In his address at the First Writer’ Congress, Karl Radek spoke of the “fascist tones” of *The Criterion* and the “fascist declarations” of Eliot himself (115).
Chapter One
Mikhail Bakhtin and Erich Auerbach:
The Case Against Poetry and the Case for Hybridity

The Agricultural Theorist from Kazakhstan

If one were in the unlikely position of having to extrapolate early Soviet history from a short bibliography, one could do far worse than to work from that of Mikhail Bakhtin. Its first entry, from 1919, is “Art and Answerability,” a terse and gnomic one-page essay in ethical and aesthetic Neo-Kantian philosophy published in a local journal in the provincial western Russian town of Nevel. Next is Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art, a book of literary criticism published in 1929 in Leningrad. Finally, published in 1934, is “Experience Based on a Study of Demand among Kolkhoz Workers,” written some 2,500 kilometers from Leningrad in Kustanai, Kazakhstan and published in the journal Soviet Trade. One could infer much from these names, dates, and places: an initial crisis had sent the academic philosopher into the countryside and away from the universities; this had abated, drawing him back to the capital, and allowing a change of disciplines; then a second, even larger crisis turned the urban literary critic, with a truly unlikely leap, into a Kazakhstani agricultural theorist. To give them their proper names, dates, and places: The October Revolution, the New Economic Policy, Stalinism; 1917-1934; the Soviet Union.

The period spanned by these three texts is most succinctly described as the defeat of liberalism and the triumph of totalitarianism in the USSR. At the time of Lenin’s illness in 1922, it would have been possible to imagine oneself in the midst of a golden age: the old order had been eliminated, social mobility was a sudden possibility, some degree of political pluralism was tolerated, and the economic liberalism of the New Economic Policy was in place. After Stalin’s gradual rise to power and his implementation of the First Five Year Plan (1928-1932)—with its far-left, top-down policies of collectivized agriculture and forced industrialization—the situation was almost unrecognizable. Collectivization began suddenly in 1929, and by February of 1930, 60 percent of
peasant households had been collectivized, with 11 million joining collectives in the first two months of that year alone (Kenez 85). After the bad harvest of 1932-33, the bold experiment showed its flaws: a famine, particularly acute in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, killed between five and seven million people. Peasants fleeing the disaster in the countryside contributed greatly to the related phenomenon of forced industrialization, which saw the industrial labour force double from three to six million in the period of the First Five Year Plan, and the urban population grow from 26 million in 1926 to 38.8 million in 1932 (Kenez 93).

Forced industrialization and collectivization were both symptoms of a hard ideological turn to the left in the Soviet Union, and this ideological turn also produced more directly ideological effects. With characteristic illogic, the grand projects were preceded by purges of the engineers and planners necessary for their success. Suspected of foreign connections and useful to the regime as scapegoats, these intellectuals were forced to confess to sabotage during show trials that provided a foretaste of what was to come in the later 1930s. Intellectuals of a different caste were targeted as part of the “cultural revolution,” which rejected bourgeois art and demanded a proletarianization of culture. Writers and film directors who did not produce work immediately comprehensible to a mass audience were denounced. Indeed, it was a period remarkable for the great number of enemies it produced: the peasants who resisted collectivization, labeled “kulaks”; the double-agent “saboteurs” of the great Stalinist projects; and the “elitist” cultural intelligentsia. The response to this surplus of enemies was the creation of the extensive network of prison-labour camps known as “Gulags,” all the most infamous of which were established before 1934. On January 1, 1930, 179,000 prisoners were recorded in the system; by 1934 the figure was 510,307. In the year 1933, 67,297 or 15.3% of all inmate-workers died in their camps (Applebaum 579-83).

All Russians alive during this period would, of course, have been affected by these upheavals. But it is difficult to imagine a biography more comprehensively involved in them (without being
killed by them) than that of Bakhtin. Though he did not hold an academic post, Bakhtin was nevertheless conspicuous as an intellectual at precisely the wrong time. He was arrested on January 7, 1929, on a set of typical charges: his name was reportedly found on a list of counter-revolutionaries discovered in Paris; he was accused of membership in the Brotherhood of Saint Serafim, an underground religious order; and he was charged with “corrupting the youth” in the course of private lectures. It was on the latter Socratic charge that he was eventually convicted and sentenced to ten years’ prison labour at the notorious Solovetsky Island camp, remembered by survivors as the “first camp of the Gulag” and by historians as the testing-ground for the subsequently ubiquitous Soviet model of slave labour for profit. Bakhtin, who suffered from acute osteomyelitis in his leg, would surely have died there. With the intervention of several well-placed friends, however, who were able to elicit letters from Gorky himself petitioning on his behalf (Clark and Holquist 143), his sentence was changed to six years’ exile in Kustanai, Kazakhstan. Bakhtin traveled there with his wife in early 1930, just in time to witness first-hand the horrors of collectivization. In February of that year, the Communist Party issued a directive for increased toughness in forcing collectivization among recalcitrant Kazakhs. In the fall, facing a shortage of manufactured goods to exchange with Kazakh kolkhozes, the Party significantly increased the quota of agricultural products to be forcibly extracted (Ertz 6). When a poor crop ensued in 1932-33 and these quotas were not substantially reduced, disaster resulted in the form of 1.5 million deaths (Ertz 1). Bakhtin was not merely a passive witness to this famine, but played a role in the collectivization effort. Using skills learned from his banker father, he worked from April 1931 as a bookkeeper for the District Consumers’ Cooperative, calculating figures relating to the fulfillment of the Party’s economic plan. It is important to keep in mind, given the often blindly hagiographical accounts of Bakhtin’s life, that he was employed in calculating the very quotas that millions of Kazakhstanis died trying to meet.
Placed in its historical and biographical context, Bakhtin’s bibliographical trajectory comes into clearer focus. “Art and Answerability,” written in Nevel because there was no food in the capital after the Revolution, was nonetheless a product of the relative intellectual freedom of the first decade of Soviet history; Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art was produced in a climate of growing anti-intellectualism; and the kolkhoz essay was a politically-commissioned product of forced exile—written under duress and thus easily dismissed from the Bakhtin canon. Given his constrained intellectual position in 1934, it would stand to reason that if we were to look for evidence of the effects of contemporaneous political upheavals on his thought, we would need to look beyond his published work. Fortunately, 1934 was the year in which Bakhtin began the essay upon which his reputation rests in the West: “Discourse in the Novel,” the first fruit of a decade-long engagement with the theory of the novel. But while it is much closer than the kolkhoz essay to something one might have expected from the pre-exilic Bakhtin, it is not the direct excoriation of Stalinism one might expect to find in the private notebooks of a political exile. While it is combative, passionate, and militant in ways not approached in his earlier works, the target of his polemical vitriol is not Stalin or communism or authoritarianism in general but—poetry.

An Aesthetic for Democracy

Since it was Stalinism that arrested, convicted, and exiled Bakhtin for his intellectual views, what could possibly have motivated him to respond by attacking a helpless and seemingly innocent literary genre? Three possible answers present themselves: either (a) Bakhtin’s personal/political/historical predicament is irrelevant to the arguments advanced in “Discourse in the Novel”; (b) Bakhtin, whatever the impact of his experience, was actively uninterested in politics; or (c) the apparent attack on poetry is in fact a disguised attack on Stalinism. The first of these possibilities must, within the confines of this dissertation, be dismissed a priori as absurd and impossible. The second finds some support. In an interview, Bakhtin recalled that in the height of the revolutionary
fervour of February 1917, he “sat at home and read, and went to the library when the heating was on” (qtd. in Hirschkop 145). Though in the 1920s he had promised a chapter on “the ethics of politics,” it was apparently never written, and he never addressed politics directly. As Ken Hirschkop concludes, “Bakhtin was virtually worthless as a political thinker in the strict sense” (274). The third possibility, that Bakhtin is himself a sort of poet cleverly using poetry as a metonymy of the Stalinist state, finds wide tacit acceptance among Bakhtin scholars. When Hirschkop, for example, refers to “the repressive poetics of the official, centralizing state” (67) or argues that in “Discourse in the Novel” “the authority of the poet turns out to be the authority of the centralized state” (21), the logic is clearly metonymic. Since Stalin did not write briefings or deliver speeches in verse, and since the state-sanctioned literary form was not poetry but the socialist realist novel, no attack on poetry could be construed literally as an attack on the Stalinist state. Bakhtin’s most passionate denunciations of poetic language in “Discourse in the Novel” do often seem like thinly veiled attacks on authoritarian Stalinist prose discourse. His description of the tyrannical attachment to truth in poetic language, which “realizes itself as something about which there can be no doubt, something that cannot be disputed, something all-encompassing” (286), attains a vehemence that seems out of place when considering poetry, but entirely apt if poetry stands for Stalin.

As with most of the either/or choices encountered in this dissertation, however, the choice between an apolitical, poetry-hating Bakhtin and a deeply political Bakhtin for whom “poetry” acts as a code-word for Stalin, presents a false dichotomy. For if we take seriously the politically affective dimension of aesthetic form—for instance, if reading a poem can make one more vulnerable to acquiescence under a totalitarian state or reading a novel can encourage modes of thought that lead causally to its overthrow—Bakhtin’s decision to attack poetry would be a perfectly rational response to political crisis. Ken Hirschkop advances precisely this synthetic view in his suggestively titled

*Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy.* For Hirschkop, “democracy” means more than
procedures like elections, fair trials, and legally-protected rights and freedoms; democracy, he argues, “needs the depth that culture has to offer” (58). From his perspective, Bakhtinian dialogism is precisely what culture must add to mere procedure to produce a thriving democratic society.

Hirschkop argues, “a dialogical culture means not just letting everyone have their say but also a peculiar form of expression” (58). The form of expression that produces this “dialogical culture” is Bakhtinian dialogism—a form that sees language as the site not of fixed, given meanings but as an arena for the interaction and competition of differentiated voices, each of which not only speaks in a unique style but also speaks for a social ideology. Since dialogism is an element of novelistic and not poetic discourse, this makes novels, in Hirschkop’s reading of Bakhtin, necessary to democracy.

Novelistic discourse produces democratic subjects, Hirschkop argues, by making its readers responsible. In Hirschkop’s assessment, Bakhtin from his earliest works was engaged with defeating “theoretism”: the increasing autonomy in modernity of the sphere of culture from the real world of everyday ethical decision-making—the “uncoupling,” as Hirschkop puts it, of culture from “the ‘contemporary act’ which it was meant to guide” and the concomitant transformation of culture into “a string of silent monuments, which impress us but do not obligate us” (50). Bakhtin champions dialogic novelistic discourse, Hirschkop argues, because it is the preeminent obligating, anti-theoreticist form. By staging rather than settling debates, by exposing every opinion and narrative to the ridicule and objections of its rivals, and by advancing as its only value the promotion of debate itself, the style of the novel prepares its reader for active participation in democratic life. It teaches the lesson of intersubjectivity by demonstrating that meanings in language are created communally through debate. Through this, it promotes a historical mindset: if we create meanings socially, then we not only create our own history, but are also therefore responsible for it. As individuals, novels tell us narratives which crucially serve as “templates for a life worth living” (243) and empower us to create and become responsible for the narratives of our own lives. As Hirschkop says, “[w]e read
novels [. . .] and witness other narratives because they supply the conviction that our actions lead somewhere, and that our lives or parts of our lives can constitute wholes which we can enjoy aesthetically” (295). This emphasis on narrative leads readers away from the past, where all is ordered, grand, and given, and orients them into the everyday world of the present (“the present as confusion, conditionality, opinion, and subjective decision—the cut and thrust of a democratic public sphere” (278)) from whose materials they must engineer their futures. Finally, dialogism’s ritual deflation of all discourses that claim absolute truth promotes the soberly ironic mindset of the democratic citizen. Whatever the intention of the novelist, and whatever the subject of the novel, the very style of the dialogic novel, Hirschkop argues, promotes democratic modes of thought. As he concludes, “[d]ebate and discussion, experiment and evidence, and all the communicative means for them would imply that people had a right and an obligation to determine the course of their history, not just an opportunity to tag along to a narrative already in place” (298). Understood in such a light, the fact that Bakhtin responded to the crisis of Stalinism by theorizing about genre seems far saner, and casts his championing of the novel as outright dissent. Thankfully, it also begins to explain the otherwise incomprehensible vehemence of his attack on poetic discourse.

*An Aesthetic for Tyranny*

Hirschkop, in his reading of Bakhtin, names dialogism as the stylistic feature unique to novelistic prose that makes it amenable to the promotion of democracy, and argues that it accomplishes this by empowering its readership to responsible action. He does not, however, look for the obverse: the stylistic features unique to poetic discourse that align it with authoritarianism. Bakhtin himself, however, spends much of “Discourse in the Novel” doing just that. Consistent with Hirschkop’s thesis, Bakhtin produces poetry’s most lauded attributes, metaphor and rhythm, as concrete examples of a sinister poetic politics of form that produces a passive readership by robbing it of any opportunity for responsible engagement with the text. Prose, for Bakhtin, is an honest form
because it acknowledges and reproduces the natural dialogism of language. In Bakhtin’s conception of representation, “[t]he word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group” (276). It is this complex, qualified, and contested route of word to object that occupies the novelist: “the prose writer confronts a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness,” and so in novelistic prose “the object reveals first of all precisely the socially heteroglot multiplicity of its names, definitions and value judgments” (278). Though the poetic word also “must break through to its object, penetrate the alien word in which the object is entangled” (331), it takes no pride in the journey. It cuts through opinion and debate to arrive at the object itself in all its silent, uncontested uniqueness—“plunges into the inexhaustible wealth and contradictory multiplicity of the object itself, with its ‘virginal,’ still ‘unuttered’ nature” (278)—and then does its best to erase all evidence of the struggle. In poetry, Bakhtin argues, “the records of the passage remain in the slag of the creative process, which is then cleared away (as scaffolding is cleared away once construction is finished), so that the work may rise as unitary speech” (331). “The prose art,” by contrast,

presumes a deliberate feeling for the historical and social concreteness of living discourse, as well as its relativity, a feeling for its participation in historical becoming and in social struggle; it deals with discourse that is still warm from that struggle and hostility, as yet unresolved and still fraught with hostile intentions and accents. (331)

If dialogism is the name of the stylistic feature that keeps discourse warm from struggle, Bakhtin names metaphor as the cooling trope poured over it. He writes, “the very movement of the poetic symbol (for example, the unfolding of a metaphor) presumes precisely this unity of language, an unmediated correspondence with its object” (297-8). The use of metaphor, he continues, is specifically incompatible with dialogism: “Social diversity of speech, were it to arise in the [poetic] work and stratify its language, would make impossible both the normal development and the activity
of symbols within it” (298). Bakhtin is clearest in stating why this is the case when he addresses the relationship between prose dialogism and poetic ambiguity. While the poetic word can possess “a double, even a multiple, meaning,” the difference is that “the poetic word is a trope, requiring a precise feeling for the two meanings contained in it.” He continues,

no matter how one understands the interrelationship of meanings in a poetic symbol (a trope), this interrelationship is never of the dialogic sort: it is impossible to imagine a trope (say, a metaphor) being unfolded into the two exchanges of a dialogue, that is, two meanings parcelled out between two separate voices. (328)

There is no “risk” implicit in the trope of metaphor, in other words. A metaphor “requires a precise feeling for the two meanings contained within it,” and so these meanings are not contested, mutable, or open. This “requirement,” moreover, is placed upon the reader, who is thereby relieved of personal interpretive responsibility and given the more passive task of grasping the author’s premeditated meanings. Where dialogism trains readers for democracy by demonstrating their active role in the production of meaning, metaphor enacts what Bakhtin regards as the general tendency of poetic discourse to mask the fraught social nature of language, and so makes its reader a passive observer.

In his analysis of rhythm in poetic language, Bakhtin makes this point more explicitly. For Bakhtin, poetry’s organized patterns of rhythm amount to a conspiracy to strip language of its natural diversity. As he states with characteristic vigour, “Rhythm, by creating an unmediated involvement in every aspect of the accentual system of the whole [. . .] destroys in embryo those social worlds of speech and of persons that are potentially embedded in the word.” He continues, “[a]s a result of this work—stripping all aspects of language of the accents and intentions of other people, destroying all traces of social heteroglossia and diversity of language—a tension-filled unity of language is achieved in the poetic work” (298). Poetic discourse, Bakhtin charges, is not only mimetically false but also actively dishonest, for its patterns of rhythm reduce the stratified linguistic universe to a common denominator. Though poetry is only one language among a limitless number, it compulsively
translates every discourse of social heteroglossia into its own; so that, for example, “low speech”
loses its natural rhythms and becomes stylized “low speech as represented by poetry.” It is this
formal characteristic of poetry that Bakhtin finds most odious, and it is in his analysis of it that the
connection between poetic style and authoritarianism becomes most explicit. The prose writer
“welcomes the heteroglossia and language diversity of the literary and extraliterary language into his
work not only not weakening but even intensifying them”; he indeed paradoxically “constructs his
style” from this heterogeneous assemblage. “The prose writer does not”—and so by implication the
poet does—“purge words of intentions that are alien to him, he does not destroy the seeds of
heteroglossia embedded in words, he does not eliminate those language characteristics and
mannerisms glimmering behind the words and forms” (298). A performer of purges, a narcissistic
destroyer of difference, a humourless and charmless despiser of glimmer, the poet for Bakhtin is a
tyrant, a fixer of meanings, and a semantic profiteer. “The language of the poet is his language,” he
argues, “he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each
expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning” (285). Giving full force to his later
use of the term “poetic absolutism” (315), he makes clearest the association between rhythmic
poetic discourse and political hegemony when he states, “[t]he poet must assume a complete single-
personed hegemony over his own language, he must assume equal responsibility for each one of its
aspects and subordinate them to his own, and only his own, intentions” (297). Hirschkop is
perceptive in recognizing “responsibility” as a central and valorized term in Bakhtin’s political
stylistics; but, as Bakhtin argues very clearly, style is only democratic when it endows responsibility
upon the reader—not when it is the exclusive domain of the hegemonic author.

Responsibility to Whom?

It is not because Stalin spoke in verse, then, but because poetic discourse fails to engage with
and elicit the response of its readers that Bakhtin uses the terms “poetic discourse” and
“authoritarian discourse” interchangeably. For Bakhtin, active understanding is a natural condition of speech. “In the actual life of speech,” he writes, “every concrete act of understanding is active.” Response is not simply a reaction to an utterance, but an integral part of it: response “creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the response” (282). Any act of understanding must therefore necessarily take into account the original utterance as well as the reader’s or listener’s “rejoinder.” “One cannot excise the rejoinder,” Bakhtin argues, “from this combined context made up of one’s own words and the words of another without losing its sense and tone” (284). Every act of speech, Bakhtin argues, should serve to remind its speaker of the fact of his active engagement in creating his own language. “The word in language,” he argues, “is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (294). Poetic style, however, forbids and preempts the rejoinder, and so perverts this natural condition of language. “In genres that are poetic in the narrow sense, the natural dialogism of the word is not put to artistic use,” he argues:

any sense of the boundedness, the historicity, the social determination and specificity of one’s language (as merely one of many languages in a heteroglot world) is alien to poetic style—as is a related phenomenon, the incomplete commitment of oneself, of one’s meaning, to a given language. (285)

It is here that Bakhtin moves decisively from an analysis of the one-sidedness of poetic style toward a directly political statement: poetic style, by failing to engage the reader’s active participation in the production of its meaning, produces the state of “complete commitment of oneself to a given language” required by authoritarianism.

Because the reader of poetry is left no space in which to insert his rejoinder, none of the ontological preconditions for democracy listed by Hirschkop—a historical, ironic mindset, an orientation into the future, and a sense of the intersubjectivity of meaning—are met. The sense of
personal responsibility and opportunity for ethical action engendered by novelistic style, Bakhtin insists, is lost in the “authoritative discourse” of poetry, which forbids any engagement or appropriation:

> It is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the word itself that authoritative discourse seeks to elicit from us; rather, it demands our unconditional allegiance. [. . .] It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact, indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. (345)

Though he seems to leave temporarily the world of poets, metaphors, and rhythm when he states that such discourse “is indissolubly fused with its authority—with political power, an institution, a person—and it stands and falls together with that authority,” his analysis of poetic and authoritarian discourse is nonetheless identical. “The language in a poetic work realizes itself as something about which there can be no doubt, something that cannot be disputed, something all encompassing” (286), he argues; as for authoritarian discourse, “one cannot divide it up—agree with one part, accept but not completely another part, reject utterly a third part” (343). Because authoritarian discourse comes pre-formed and pre-digested, it offers no choices to its readers, and thus leaves them with no opportunity for ethical action and no ability to forge narratives. Through its use of metaphor, it sidesteps the social contestations of language to demand a predetermined understanding from its readers; with its employment of rhythm, it masks the natural heteroglossia of language and makes the author solely responsible for his words. Poetic discourse thus trains its readers to be deferential, passive, and blindly committed to a single language.

Poetic language doesn’t simply exhibit or manifest certain “authoritarian” traits, however; Bakhtin actually insists that such language “accomplishes” political centralization. “Languages of heteroglossia,” he argues,

like mirrors that face each other, each reflecting in its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to grasp for a world behind their mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-levelled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror. (415)
Like Hirschkop, Bakhtin argues that dialogic language, by virtue of its very style, actually forces its participants into a different perception of the world—one whose breadth, liberality, and openness most of us would recognize as congenial to democracy. Bakhtin also insists on the opposite: that poetic discourse actually forces its listeners into a narrower view of the world, and makes them more willing subjects of authoritarianism. He thus lists poetic language as among “the forces that serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world” (270) and proposes that “a unitary language gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization” (271). These claims having been made, Bakhtin is confident enough in them to casually transform this “vital connection” into a relationship of efficient causality in the course of his historical account of the rise of the novel:

At the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, national and political centralization of the verbal-ideological levels, on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all “languages” and dialects. (273)

The claim that poetry could single-handedly “accomplish” such tasks is very bold indeed. Given his analysis of metaphor and rhythm, Bakhtin seems to mean it literally; and given Hirschkop’s account of dialogism and democracy, Bakhtin’s argument is to some degree plausible. It is therefore surprising that Bakhtin’s case against poetry has received so little serious attention.

**Shoddy Scaffolding**

Bakhtin scholarship in the West has, from the time of his “discovery,” been quick to seize upon the libratory political charge of novelistic style and dialogism in Bakhtin’s work.¹ It has demonstrated considerable embarrassment, however, at the fact that the case for the novel is entirely supported by the case against poetry—that dialogism is not simply an independently desirable stylistic feature of the novel, but is in fact the antithesis of its evil siblings metaphor and rhythm. To
save themselves and Bakhtin from this embarrassment, many of Bakhtin’s critics have gone to great lengths to devise means of either denying that Bakhtin really meant what he said about the politics of poetic form or of explaining it away based on contextual considerations. In the first of these camps there is a fundamental methodological absurdity at work. It attempts, in short, to rescue poetry from Bakhtin by means of a Bakhtinian theory of dialogism predicated on its utter rejection. In “Bakhtin on Poetry,” for example, Michael Eskin argues that “far from being relegated to the realm of discursive and, by extension, sociopolitical monologicity, poetry may plausibly be construed as the dialogically and sociopolitically exemplary mode of discourse in Bakhtin’s writing” (379). Mara Scanlon makes a similar case in “Ethics and the Lyric,” arguing that only Bakhtin himself can show us how thoroughly wrong he got poetry: she will “counter Bakhtin’s contention that all poetry is necessarily monologic and therefore unethical” by counterintuitively “employing Bakhtin’s own theories of dialogue” (1). In Bakhtin and the Social Moorings of Poetry, Donald Wesling, caught between his love of poetry and his belief in dialogism, is particularly forthright in recognizing the dilemma. If he is to show that “poetry as a form of utterance should be reckoned into [Bakhtin’s] account of speech genres,” then he must first “rescue poetry from Bakhtin’s stingy and grumbling description of it” (17). Such are the lengths to which writers on Bakhtin and poetry must go to avoid having to engage seriously with his politically-motivated rejection of poetic form.

The various historical explanations of Bakhtin’s case against poetry present another series of evasions, seeking not to justify or correct but simply to absolve him. Prominent among these is the view that Bakhtin championed prose over poetry because the novel was, in 1934, a genre so devalued in Soviet literary criticism that it stood no chance of spreading its democratic formal charge. Bakhtin’s rhetorical target was thus not poetry per se, but rather its monopoly of the literary sphere. Hirschkop phrases this view very succinctly when he says “‘Discourse in the Novel’ is in essence one claim—‘the novel is an artistic genre’—justified and explained for more than 150 pages” (77). Yet
Galin Tihanov has shown that the novel was by no means a neglected genre in Russian literary discourse of the time. He notes specifically the prominent and well-publicized “Moscow debate about the novel” that took place between December 20, 1934 and January 3, 1935 in response to Georg Lukács’s entry on the novel in the first Soviet literary encyclopedia. Lukács defined the novel as a fallen descendant of the epic, and prophesied the glorious return of the latter and radiant transfiguration of the former under Soviet communism. This outraged the Soviet literary intelligentsia, which had developed a mature theory of the novel as an independent literary genre. As Tihanov concludes in *The Master and the Slave*, “by the time Bakhtin wrote the first of his essays on the novel (1934-5), there was already a well-established tradition of theorizing about the novel in Russia.” This tradition’s three main ideas—“the continuity of the genre; its versatile, flexible, and unstable identity; and, last but not least, the idea of the novel’s strong affinity for everyday speech and life phenomena” (139)—are entirely consonant with the work of Bakhtin, who authored a “Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse”; who later argued that the novel “is, by its very nature, not canonie” (“Epic and Novel,” 39); and who claimed that the novel developed its language “on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles” (DN 273).

Another evasion explains Bakhtin’s case against poetry as a disguised attack on yet another contemporary phenomenon: the formulation of Socialist Realism, outlined in my introduction. This is, again, counterintuitive. As Katerina Clark notes in her tellingly titled study of Socialist Realism, *The Soviet Novel*, “the novel is the privileged genre of Soviet Socialist Realism” (xiii); as the Soviet journal *Literary Critic* noted in their report on the First Writers’ Congress, “Soviet poetry […] was justly subjected to severe criticism at the congress” (11). Since the novel was the officially sanctioned form of Socialist Realism and poetry was officially condemned, Katerina Clark—this time in the guise of co-biographer of Bakhtin, along with Michael Holquist—employs a familiar logic of substitution to transform the novel-loving, poetry-hating “Discourse in the Novel” into a
critique of Socialist Realism. She argues, quite simply, that when Bakhtin says “poetry” or “epic,” he in fact means “Socialist Realism”: “Although Bakhtin maintains that the spirit of the novel is irreconcilable with the spirit of the epic,” she writes, “he describes the epic in terms that are patently applicable to the socialist realist novel” (274). Her argument rests primarily on a thematic similarity between the socialist realist novel and the epic: their demand for heroes. Proposing that the “cornerstone of the socialist realist tradition is the positive hero [. . .] who stands at the novel’s end as an emblem of Bolshevik virtue” and noting Bakhtin’s repeated criticism of the figure of the epic hero, she somewhat equivocally concludes that “[s]uch remarks are presumably intended as critiques of socialist realism” (273). Lost in the course of these crude substitutions of poetic for prose genres is Bakhtin’s most original contribution: the crucial question of the politics of style. Bakhtin’s rejection of poetic form on the basis of its use of metaphor and regular rhythm have no place in Clark’s substitutive scenario—could not possibly be construed as veiled attacks on the socialist realist novel—and so Clark simply ignores them.

The promulgators of these methods of evasion must be censured both for their failure to take seriously Bakhtin’s proposed connection between poetic discourse and authoritarian modes of thought and for their lack of courage in confronting directly an argument they all implicitly recognize as embarrassing. But their arguments do have two virtues. First, and whatever the validity of their findings, Clark’s and Tihanov’s readings of “Discourse in the Novel” in its context make it very clear that Bakhtin was not alone in taking seriously the political importance of language styles. The attention that the Moscow debate on the novel and Writers’ Congress attracted both from the Stalinist regime who organized them and the Soviet public who read about them in widely-distributed journals are clear evidence of a political system that understood the need to control language as a means of controlling its populace. Second, however, these critics are correct in their implication about Bakhtin’s argument itself. The elaborate rhetorical and historical apparatuses they
are forced to construct in order to mask the weakness of Bakhtin’s argument only make it more obvious that there is something to hide. There is in fact something very wrong with Bakhtin’s case against poetry. And despite the many strategies of evasion proposed to lead us away from it, this weakness manifests itself very clearly and compactly. It comes in the form of a footnote.

_The Bathetic Existence of Numerous Hybrids of Various Generic Types_

“Discourse in the Novel,” so critical of poetic tropes, ultimately succumbs to one. In an exemplary demonstration of bathos, just as its political argument against poetry approaches its zenith, it overshoots the mark and falls awkwardly to its nadir. Just as Bakhtin finally and definitively states that “the language of poetic genres, when they approach their stylistic limit, often becomes authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative, sealing itself off from the influence of extraliterary social dialects” (287), he deflates this rhetorical crescendo by appending the following footnote:

> It goes without saying that we continually advance as typical the extreme to which poetic genres aspire; in concrete examples of poetic works it is possible to find features fundamental to prose, and numerous hybrids of various generic types exist. (287n12)

The problems here are many and serious. If Bakhtin is generally recognized as the arch-theorist of dialogue, he nonetheless admits here to numerous transgressions of his own code. “Poetry” is in “Discourse in the Novel” a sort of straw man: an ideal type seldom encountered in “concrete examples of poetic work,” because actual poetry necessarily combines elements of “poetry” with prose. Bakhtin is not alone in this thesis in working with an idiosyncratic definition of “poetry”; as I argued in my introduction, one of the most remarkable features of genre theory in 1934 is the tremendous variety of what “poetry” can “pass for.” Bakhtin’s operating definition of poetry, however, is contradictory in the context of his own argument. Bakhtin at one point attacks single-voiced poetic language on the grounds that it “is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological formulations that fill it” (288). But this is also how Bakhtin himself deals with poetry in “Discourse in the Novel”: while he quotes
novels extensively, he does not provide concrete examples of what he means by “poetry.” In other works Bakhtin indicates that he has Homeric epic in mind when he mentions “poetry”; in “Discourse in the Novel,” however, as the footnote admits, “poetry” is treated as an abstract, non-concrete phenomenon. That he can admit this only in a footnote, furthermore, demonstrates that while “Discourse in the Novel” may champion a dialogic prose style, it does not practice it. Dialogic prose is a site of contested meanings incomplete without its provoked rejoinders—but here contestations and rejoinders are relegated to paratexts, tucked safely away from the monologic movement of Bakhtin’s argument. Most importantly, however, this footnote reveals a major critical lacuna in Bakhtin’s analysis of the relationship between genre and politics: that while novelistic prose may be conducive to the formation of democratic subjects and poetic discourse conducive to the formation of the subjects of authoritarianism, in the real world there exist innumerable hybrid forms combining elements of prose and poetry, none of whose politics Bakhtin examines. “Discourse in the Novel,” then, is self-consciously predicated on an absolute binary division whose two poles are—within the body of the essay—spuriously forbidden interaction. Placed into the history of his intellectual development, this is surely the most surprising thing about Bakhtin’s 1934 text.

Bakhtin’s formidable and absolute binary opposition between poetry and prose is neatly illustrated through his classification of the two along astronomical lines. “The novel,” he writes, “is the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language” (366). Poetic discourse, on the other hand, presents “a unitary and singular and Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing else exists and nothing else is needed” (286). Though Bakhtin celebrates novelistic language for its openness and readiness to engage in dialogue, his metaphor is revealing, for the modern, scientifically-correct Galilean conception of the cosmos replaced and invalidated the arbitrary and conventional Ptolemaic one; it did not engage in dialogue with it, but superseded it. Just as it would be cruel and unnecessary to stage a scientific debate
between Galileo and Ptolemy, which would only result in poor Ptolemy’s humiliation, “Discourse in the Novel” fails to stage any debate between its stylistic poles. There could be no more radical departure from Bakhtin’s account in his early career of the inter-animating and co-creating nature of dualities.

The argument of Bakhtin’s first major work, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” (written in the early 1920s and outlined in 1919’s “Art and Answerability”), can be summarized as follows: though they are separate and cannot be combined, terms such as art and life, author and hero, self and other, must be acknowledged as mutually dependent and inter-animating. The paradigmatic illustration is presented through what Bakhtin calls the “excess of seeing”: the situation in which, when contemplating another person,

I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the world behind his back, and whole series of objects and relations, which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him. (23)

This everyday situation—whose reversibility must be stressed, for just as I have an excess of vision with respect to another, so too does he have an excess of vision with respect to me—forms the basis of two key Bakhtinian concepts. First, it presupposes “outsideness”: both parties must be distinct in order for the one to see what the other cannot. Second, it necessitates dialogue—a process through which self and other can share their respective excesses of seeing, which Bakhtin calls “consummation.” In Bakhtin’s major analogy of this relationship, this is the role of the author with respect to the hero: to “collect and concentrate all of the hero, who, from within himself, is diffused and dispersed in the projected world” and to “complete him to the point where he forms a whole by supplying all those moments which are inaccessible to the hero from within himself” (14). The authorial act as such is marked by its horizontality and is presented as generous; the bestowal of completeness is a gift rather than an imposition. Further, as part of his rejection of “theoretism,” Bakhtin argues that art and life must be recognized and treated as interactive binaries. As elsewhere,
this leads to the assumption of responsibility or “answerability” by the reader: in the words of “Art and Answerability,” “I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art [. . .] Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself—in the unity of my answerability” (1-2). Opposition, in these early writings, is true friendship.

Though at first sight Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art seems to apply the model of inter-animating binaries to the relationship between an actual author and his actual heroes, the situation is in fact rather different. Bakhtin’s basic argument about Dostoevsky—that he granted his heroes ideological independence and placed them in free conversation with themselves, other characters, and their authors—is entirely in line with the argument of “Author and Hero.” Dostoevsky’s “discovery” of polyphony, Bakhtin argues, serves to demonstrate that “truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person” but rather “is born between people collectively searching for the truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (110). The similarities, however, end there. In “Author and Hero,” the author was posited as he who “consummates” or “completes” the hero by means of his “excess of vision”; but in Problems all mention of completion, consummation, and finalization becomes anathema. “What the author used to do is now done by the hero,” Bakhtin argues, “who illuminates himself from all possible points of view; the author no longer illuminates the hero’s reality, but the hero’s self-consciousness” (49; emphasis added).15 While the Dostoevskian novel is still figured as a dialogue between author and hero, any hint of authority or asymmetry is vehemently repudiated. “In Dostoevsky’s novels,” he writes, “the author’s discourse about a character is organized as discourse about someone actually present, someone who hears him (the author) and is capable of answering him” (63). What is truly new in Dostoevsky’s novels, Bakhtin argues, is the “peculiar ‘revolt’ of the hero against his literary finalization” (58). This fraught relationship is a far cry from the peaceful, generous mutual co-creation of self and other in “Author and Hero”—but it does stop well short of opposition-without-dialogue at the heart of “Discourse in the Novel.” While
there is the sense in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art* that the hero is under threat from above and that his rights need to be protected as vigorously as possible, it is his right to speak—to *answer* the author—that is defended. In “Discourse in the Novel,” poetry is never allowed a word. Diametrically opposed to prose, the language of poetry is denied any “excess of vision” with respect to its interlocutor, and its utter defeat is championed.

*The Case Against the Case Against Poetry*

The vast majority of “Discourse in the Novel” is spent drawing lines between poetry and prose; even when Bakhtin discusses encounters between the two, they never enter into conversation. “Hybrid” is the adjective I use to describe discourse that combines generic elements from poetry and prose; when Bakhtin uses the same term, however, it means something else. His initial definition of “the novelistic hybrid” is very promising: he describes it as “an artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another” (24). This sounds very much like a generic version of the relationship of self and other as described in “Author and Hero”: interlocutors with unlike ways of speaking interact, none takes precedence over the other, and each learns something from and teaches something to the other. But this situation can, for Bakhtin, only take place in the novel, and most certainly not between the novel and poetry. This is because, in Bakhtin’s terminology, poetry is both a “language” and a “genre”: it is both a unique way of speaking—a rhythmic, metaphor-rich, “extrahistorical language, a language far removed from the petty rounds of everyday life, a language of the gods” (331)—and also a literary genre with forms, traditions, and conventions. The novel, however, is not a language; it is only a genre. Its generic role, moreover, is to mediate a conversation between languages: to introduce them to one another, to let them talk and quarrel, and to assure that none gets the upper hand. “It is precisely thanks to the novel that languages are able to illuminate each other mutually,” Bakhtin argues; “literary language becomes a dialogue of languages that know about
and understand each other” (400). But because poetry is a language predicated on a rejection of all other languages, a “pure language of the gods,” it cannot possibly agree to the terms of the debate mediated by the novel. Bakhtin argues that “the novel permits the incorporation of various genres” (320) and lists lyrical songs and poems among them; but this “incorporation” is necessarily one-sided. Just as low speech becomes stylized “low speech” when it enters a poem, poetry does not enter the novel on its own terms but as a weakened object of parody and derision. Bakhtin argues that “the important activity” in novelistic hybrids is “not only (in fact not so much) the mixing of linguistic forms [. . .] as it is the collision between different points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms” (360). Odious as the poetic point of view may be, the social aim of novelistic hybrids cannot take place in a form in which one side sits down at the table already weakened and reduced.

The interactions of poetry and prose detailed in “Discourse in the Novel” are better described not as “hybridity” but, as Bakhtin himself calls it, “prosification of the poetic symbol” (329). Bakhtin introduces this term in the course of his analysis of Pushkin’s “novel in verse” Eugene Onegin. Rather than seeing the text as staging a conversation between poetry and the novel, he sees it as the novelistic scene of the mortification of poetic language. Seeming to ignore the fact that the entire work is written in the hyper-regular poetic metre of the “Onegin stanza,” Bakhtin reads the text as a confrontation between Pushkin’s narrator (who represents novelistic prose) and his characters Lensky and Onegin (who represent poetry). Investigating Pushkin’s insertion into the text of a Byronic lyric written by the character Lensky, Bakhtin points out that all Lensky’s lyric can hope to achieve is poetic ambiguity, whereas Pushkin mediates a conversation of discourses and so creates prose double-voicedness:

the poetic symbols of [Lensky’s lyric] are organized simultaneously at two levels: the level of Lensky’s lyrics themselves—in the semantic and expressive system of the “Göttigen Geist”—and on the level of Pushkin’s speech, for whom the “Göttigen Geist” with its
language of poetics is merely an instantiation of the literary heteroglossia of the epoch. (329)\textsuperscript{16}

As Bakhtin elaborates in “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse,” the context created by Pushkin’s narrator deflates the discourse of the poet. In his hands, the song must “be taken into intonational quotation marks” and is interesting not on its own merits but as a self-parody of poetic discourse: it “characteriz[es] itself, in its own language, in its own poetic manner” (44). The relationship of the prose-narrator to the poet-character is therefore one of condescension:

the author is far from neutral in his relationship to [the] image: to a certain extent he even polemizes with this language, argues with it, agrees with it (although with conditions), interrogates it, eavesdrops on it, but also ridicules it, parodically exaggerates it and so forth. (46)

Bakhtin goes on to conclude that the author is “conversing” with his characters and that “such a conversation is the fundamental constitutive element of all novelistic style” (46). As a conversation, however, it is decidedly lopsided. Gone is the horizontality of the author/hero relationship promoted in “Author and Hero” and Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art: here it is not for the poetic speaker to agree with, eavesdrop on, polemicize, or ridicule; this is the exclusive province of the prose speaker, who uses the occasion thoroughly to humiliate Ptolemaic poetry. “Prosification” is not a conversation in which each genre learns something from the other, then, but simply a case of prose correcting poetry’s many faults, and emerging from the process quite unchanged.\textsuperscript{17}

Michael Holquist, in his introduction to The Dialogic Imagination, characterizes the novel as a universally beneficent metageneric force: “‘novel’ is the name Bakhtin gives to whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that system” (xxxii). This fundamentally productive depiction of inter-generic interaction represents the most positive light in which to view “prosification”: as a process, however painful, of sharing discursive means for avoiding one-sidedness. The negative case is presented by Galin Tihanov in The Master and the Slave. For him, the novel is not a vague “force” but simply a genre—and one with territorial ambitions. It
is, paradoxically, “an outsider to literature” (147)—“the living Other of literature placed within literature itself” (148)—which approaches other genres “either as a destroyer or a colonizer” (147). In relation to poetry, the novel is at best “an enlightened colonizer, supposedly stimulating the entire process of literary production” (146). In either Holquist’s optimistic or Tihanov’s more pessimistic reading of Bakhtin, however, “prosification” is a one-way street: whether it is a “force” or a genre, and whether it does so as a destroyer or an enlightened colonizer, the novel approaches poetry with its sword drawn and its ears stopped.

“Discourse in the Novel” is a brilliant, important, and flawed work—and each of these aspects is bound up in its emergence from and reaction to its context. In a period of massive political upheaval that saw the destruction of any seeds of Soviet liberalism, Bakhtin responded with genre theory not because he was mad, apolitical, or wished to disguise his true critique of Stalin—but simply because he believed that language and politics were inseparable; that certain modes of discourse could enslave and others liberate. In 1934, the year in which Socialist Realism was formulated and in which Lukács drafted his entry on the novel, this was by no means an idiosyncratic viewpoint: the questions of which genres could produce a servile populace and which genres would greet the workers at the gates of their paradise were being investigated at the very highest levels of power. In response to them, Bakhtin’s championing of novelistic prose was certainly brave; as Hirschkop has argued, by celebrating forms of discourse that empower their readers and shift responsibility into their hands, it most certainly represented a rejection of authoritarianism and an embrace of democracy. The embrace, however, was perhaps too tight. Though his arguments for associating novelistic prose with democracy and poetry with authoritarianism are convincing to a point, his analysis self-consciously lacks relevance to the poetry of his own time. He admits that no “pure” poetry exists in the world, but he never examines the political valence of the forms that do exist: the “poetic works” in which “it is possible to find
features fundamental to prose, and numerous hybrids of various generic types.” Hinted at but unanalyzed, such hybrid forms hold the promise of staging a genuine sharing of the “excesses of vision” of poetry with those of prose—of allowing rhythm and metaphor, outside of Bakhtin’s work the most valued formal properties of poetry, to enter into conversation with dialogic prose. If dialogue is what makes novelistic prose “an aesthetic for democracy,” might not such forms—which have inter-generic dialogue at their core—be still more democratic?

The German Jewish Romance Philologist from Istanbul

If the image of the exiled Bakhtin of 1934 is one of heroic forbearance—the victim of the early Stalinist intellectual purges writing “Discourse in the Novel” in spare moments away from the Kustanai Co-Operative—the image of Erich Auerbach in 1934 is that of tragic inevitability. For the moment, he held the chair in Romance Philology at Marburg University, and in this academic enclave lived, as he told Walter Benjamin in a letter written the following year, “among honourable people, who [. . .] all think as I do” (748). But outside the gates of the university, the conditions of Auerbach’s own exile were already in place. The central political event in Germany in 1934, the internal purge of the Brownshirts in the “Night of the Long Knives,” had further consequences than those laid out in the introduction. Hitler not only took the opportunity to declare himself Führer and intensify the propaganda campaign, but also increasingly targeted German Jews as scapegoats. This led in particular to increasingly strict enforcement of the April 1933 ban on Jewish membership in the civil service. As Auerbach concluded in his letter to Walter Benjamin, it was nice to be among like-minded people in Marburg—but this group was wildly unrepresentative. “[I]t conduces to foolishness,” he wrote: “it leads to the belief that there is something on which one could build—while the opinion of individuals, even if there are many of them, doesn’t matter at all” (748). Indeed, 1934 was to be his last full year in the chair of Romance Philology. He was dismissed from his
position on October 16, 1935, and left with his family in 1936 for Istanbul. Exiled like Bakhtin, he chose also to respond to the political crisis that displaced him by theorizing about genre.

Many parallels, indeed, tempt the critic of Bakhtin and Auerbach. Though written nearly a decade later than “Discourse in the Novel,” *Mimesis* (1942-1945) is the product of political exile from an authoritarian state, and is a work that attempts to discover a linguistic style to fight totalitarianism. While many early reviewers of *Mimesis* “saw Auerbach’s exile more as an impediment than challenge to his project” (Lerer, “Introduction,” 6) and thus sought to efface the work’s history, recent scholarship has seized upon Auerbach’s own claim that *Mimesis* is “quite consciously a book that a certain man, in a certain situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s” (qtd. in Lerer, “Philology and Collaboration,” 90). For Geoffrey Green, *Mimesis* is inextricable from its context of political aggression, racism, and world war: it is, he says, “the only work Erich Auerbach could have written from his situation and historical perspective” (72). Like Green, Paul Bové sees *Mimesis* as a work not merely “challenged” by its historical context but also meant to challenge it; he calls Auerbach’s historical account of the development of realism “an engaged history of the present meant to intervene authoritatively in modernity” (89). Like Bakhtin, Auerbach engaged in fighting the totalitarianism that exiled him; and like Bakhtin he looked for a linguistic style to carry out the attack. There is, however, a crucial difference between them: while Bakhtin was able to locate this ethical and political force in a single, existent style—the dialogic novel—Auerbach was not.

This upsets the most tempting of all apparent similarities between *Mimesis* and “Discourse in the Novel”: the division of the generic universe into two absolutely opposed camps, one of which represents democracy, and the other of which represents authoritarianism. Many critics, indeed, have fallen into the trap of assuming that just as Bakhtin opposes prose dialogism to poetic style, Auerbach wishes to call Old Testament style democratic and Homeric style authoritarian. The famous opening chapter of *Mimesis*, “Odysseus’s Scar,” does deliberately create an opposition
between the clear, “uniformly illuminated” Homeric and the mysterious, fraught Old Testament styles. At times, the opposition appears in the nature of a binary; indeed, Auerbach goes so far as to state, “[i]t would be difficult [. . .] to imagine styles more contrasted than those of these two equally ancient and equally epic texts” (11). In “Comparative Literature in Exile,” Paul Reitter proposes the political overtone to this apparent binary: “If we were to push a little, we might say that [. . .] Mimesis casts the Third Reich as being the catastrophic realization of Greek mimesis” (28-29). Geoffrey Green makes the argument with less equivocation. Arguing that the opening chapter of Mimesis assigns to the Homeric style the “nonliterary characteristics” of “static, hierarchical, [. . .] superficial and elitist,” Green finds the opposite in Auerbach’s characterization of Old Testament style: “a movement of events, personalities, and social classes; a profound conception of life and existence; and the basis for a demotic human movement founded on the equality of all men” (41). Though he stops short of arguing that Auerbach “equates” the two, Green does suggest that Homer’s mythology is not so different from the new mythology of the Thousand-Year Reich and its Volkstaat. The fates of individuals that are ignored and the changes in personal fortune carelessly induced by the elitist Greeks are related to the oppressive measures against peoples in Germany, not the least of which is causing a learned professor of Romance philology to be writing in Istanbul without books, journals, sources, or an adequate library. (43)

The readings of Bakhtin that argue “poetry” is merely a code word for “Stalin” are crudes ones; but Bakhtin does genuinely believe that poetic discourse is necessarily connected with totalitarianism, and for this reason proposes to counter it with novelistic prose. With Auerbach there is no need for code words: he is living not in a remote colony of Nazi Germany, but in a country where he is free to write as he pleases. The challenge when reading Mimesis is thus not to discover a latent meaning, but simply to understand the one that is manifest. Green gets this admittedly complex meaning wrong. For while Auerbach’s ultimate political aim is, indeed, the resistance to Fascism, his aesthetic means of achieving this is not a Bakhtinian championing of one form absolutely over another, but a mixing of them. He does not want to propose Biblical style as an antidote to Homeric style, nor
does he believe that either represents a “pure,” unmixed form. Instead, he wants to discover a hybrid form that would sidestep the shortcomings of both and stand as a truly democratic style.

The Honest Critic at Work

Auerbach twice makes explicit reference to the Nazis in *Mimesis,* placed in the first and last chapters, these references stand as argumentative bookends and serve to tie the question of linguistic style to the concrete contemporary phenomenon of Fascism. The first reference comes in the course of Auerbach’s comparison of Homeric and Old Testament style on the grounds that “Homer remains within the legendary with all his material whereas the material of the Old Testament comes closer and closer to history as the narrative proceeds” (19). His definition of legend immediately precedes the Nazi reference, and seems designed to prepare the way for a definite association of Homeric style with Nazi propaganda:

Legend arranges its material in a simple and straightforward way; it detaches it from its contemporary historical context, so that the latter will not confuse it; it knows only clearly outlined men who act from few and simple motives and the continuity of whose feelings and actions remain uninterrupted. (19)

When the reference comes, however, it implicitly recognizes that Goebbels had neither *The Odyssey* nor the Old Testament open on his desk as he composed his slogans:

Let the reader think of the history which we are ourselves witnessing: anyone who, for example, evaluates the behavior of individual men and groups of men at the time of the rise of National Socialism in Germany, or the behavior of individual peoples and states during the last war, will feel how difficult it is to represent historical themes in general, and how unfit they are for legend; the historical comprises a great number of contradictory motives in each individual, a hesitation and an ambiguous groping on the part of groups; only seldom (as in the last war) does a more or less plain situation, comparatively simple to describe, arise, and even such a situation is subject to division below the surface, is indeed almost constantly in danger of losing its simplicity; and the motives of all the interested parties are so complex that the slogans of propaganda can be composed only through the crudest simplification—with the result that friend and foe alike can often employ the same ones. To write history is so difficult that most historians are forced to make concessions to the technique of legend. (19-20)
There may be certain analogues between Homeric legend and propaganda (though not just of the Nazis; “of friend and foe alike”); and the historical mode is certainly cast as preferable to legend, even if the truth of contemporaneity overwhelms it. But Auerbach has no interest in aligning the Nazis with either pole of the literary tradition, for the Nazis and their propaganda are definitively outside of this tradition. Auerbach is rather, as Bové implies, a presentist: he is interested not in whether Homer or the Old Testament influenced the Nazis, but in what either of them can help us to do in the present to fight—or at least explain—Fascism. And in this his message is characteristically balanced: neither Homer’s legendary technique nor an entirely historical one is sufficient for the task. The representation of modern reality, for better or worse, requires a mixed form.

The concluding section of “Odysseus’ Scar” carries a similar message: in a contemporary world torn apart by divisions and dogmatism, what Auerbach highlights in the Homeric and Biblical styles are the social implications of their mixed styles. Homeric style, though “not afraid to let the realism of daily life enter into the sublime and tragic,” is yet contrasted with the more thoroughly mixed form of the Old Testament:

For the great and sublime events in the Homeric poems take place far more exclusively and unmistakably among the members of a ruling class; and these are far more untouched in their heroic elevation than are the Old Testament figures, who can fall much lower in dignity [. . . T]he representation of daily life, remains in Homer in the peaceful realm of the idyllic, whereas, from the very first, in the Old Testament stories, the sublime, tragic, and problematic take shape precisely in the domestic and commonplace. (22)

Existing prior to “the rule of the separation of styles,” both Homer and the Old Testament boldly apply high style to low subjects, tragic forms to everyday subject matter. The Old Testament goes much further than Homer, not merely juxtaposing the everyday and the sublime, but placing the two in metonymic relation:

the perpetually smouldering jealousy and the connection between the domestic and the spiritual, between the paternal blessing and the divine blessing, lead to daily life being permeated with the stuff of conflict, often with poison. The sublime influence of God here
reaches so deeply into the everyday that the two realms of the sublime and the everyday are not only actually unseparated but basically inseparable. (22-23)

This hybrid Old Testament style, in which the tragic is located in the everyday and the heroic in the commonplace, might seem an apotheosis of democratic style: a formal means of bringing difference into contact and dialogue, a stylistic manifestation of equality and inclusion. Auerbach’s own critical style, however, forbids such apotheoses. Though it is tempting to take the chapter’s conclusion as definitive, to do so would be to assume a teleological argument, when in fact the chapter’s movement is discontinuous, fragmentary, and deliberately self-contradictory. 22

There are certain constants in the stylistic analyses of “Odysseus’ Scar”: always keeping contemporary political considerations in mind, Auerbach favours the difficult over the simple, the mixed over the pure, and that which requires interpretation over the self-evident. But he twists and turns insistently in articulating these values, requiring the same dexterity of his readers as demanded by his favoured styles. The first movement of the chapter disparages the Homeric style on the Bakhtinian grounds that it fails to provoke the reader’s “rejoinder.” Homer’s discourse, Auerbach argues, comes pre-digested: the aim of his “clearly outlined, brightly and uniformly illuminated” style is simply to pacify and “relax” its readership, whereas the difficult and opaque Biblical style “startles” its readers and places the interpretive burden in their hands. Auerbach quickly twists this thesis, however. If Homeric discourse arrives “pre-digested,” the Old Testament surreptitiously slips in an enzyme tablet to prevent any interpretive indigestion. Namely, it provides an all-encompassing narrative into which to place all its uncertainties—a narrative that represents itself as the only narrative, and as true. Homer’s story coexists happily with others: “before it, beside it, after it, other complexes of events, which do not depend on it, can be conceived without difficulty” (16). The Biblical narrative, however, presents “universal history”:

The Bible’s claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer’s, it is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims. The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to
be a historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy. (14-15)

“Autocracy” and “tyranny” are hardly the epithets one would expect to find attached to the style that Auerbach, at the beginning and ending of the chapter, seems to champion. He twists again, however, this time on the once-again-Bakhtinian grounds that the Old Testament is better equipped to instill in its readers a historical mindset. Because it employs the techniques of history, the Old Testament is free of Homer’s simple characters and populated instead with conflicted decision-makers. “What a road, what a fate,” Auerbach exclaims, “lie between the Jacob who cheated his father out of the blessing and the old man whose favorite son has been torn to pieces by a wild beast!” Stories like that of Jacob, Auerbach argues, provide the reader with what Hirschkop calls “templates for a life worth living”:

The old man, of whom we know how he has become what he is, is more of an individual than the young man; for it is only during the course of an eventful life that men are differentiated into full individuality; and it is this history of a personality which the Old Testament presents us as the formation undergone by those whom God has chosen to be examples. (18)

What a road, what a fate, lies between the various valuations of the word “historical” in this opening chapter! In its claims to historical truth, the Bible is tyrannical; in its historical representation of personal narratives, it is realistic and empowering; the historian attempting to document the rise of Fascism without resorting to the anti-historical techniques of legend does so in vain. These various inflections of the term are contradictory, but none takes precedence over the others.

Likewise, Auerbach’s praise of the mixed and rejoinder-provoking Old Testament style exists alongside and does not trump his denunciation of its “autocratic” metanarrative. While this may seem illogical and inconsistent, it in fact makes Auerbach far more consistent than Bakhtin. For if one aggregates the various stylistic elements that Auerbach chooses seemingly à-la-carte from Homer and the Elohist, one gets something very much like his own style: something difficult and ambiguous, something which emphasizes “becoming” over fixed endpoints, something open to
opposing opinions and willing to regard its argumentative positions ironically. Unlike Bakhtin, then, Auerbach is an “honest critic”: he writes in the style that he champions. He makes no claims to stylistic innovation, however. When we come to his analysis of Woolf in “The Brown Stocking,” the final chapter of Mimesis, Auerbach makes it clear that he is the member of a movement.

* A Frustrated Apotheosis—and Another—and Another —

In “The Brown Stocking,” Auerbach seems to have found in the novels of Virginia Woolf—and, to a lesser extent, of Marcel Proust—a democratic style capable of answering the phenomenon of authoritarianism that led him to write Mimesis. Two stylistic features of Woolfian modernism give it this capacity: its heteroglossian “multipersonal representation of consciousness” (536) whereby “the writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished; [and] almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae” (534); and its interest in representing “minor, unimpressive, random events” (546). By focusing on the random and everyday, modernist writers step away from the grand, tyrannical, “crudely simplified” meta-narratives destroying Europe; and by dethroning the author as the arbiter of meaning, writers like Woolf and Proust give voice to a wider social spectrum of characters, and allow for a competition of differentiated voices whose interactions preclude reduction to a single monolithic truth. The reader of a modernist novel is thus confronted with “not one order and interpretation, but many,” whose mutual “overlapping, complementing, and contradiction” both tempt and frustrate the reader’s desire to make sense. In Auerbach’s pointedly contradictory phrase, which serves to remind us that he is describing his own method, modernist style “yield[s] something that we might call a synthesized cosmic view or at least a challenge to the reader’s will to interpretive synthesis” (549). These narratives—synthetic but resistant to synthesis—teach their readers the skills necessary to survive and intervene in the modern world. “There is always going on within us a process of formulation and interpretation whose subject matter is our own life,” Auerbach writes:
We are constantly endeavoring to give meaning and order to our lives in the past, the present, and the future, to our surroundings, the world in which we live; with the result that our lives appear in our own conception as total entities—which to be sure are always changing, more or less radically, more or less rapidly, depending on the extent to which we are obliged, inclined, and able to assimilate the onrush of new experience. (549)

“These are the forms of order and interpretation the modern writers here under discussion attempt to grasp in the random moment,” he concludes. Staging the interaction of multiple, contradictory narratives irreducible to a single truth, the style of such novels trains its readers to reject the spuriously coherent narratives of autocrats and totalitarians while also teaching them to construct narratives of their own—flexible, robust narratives which can give meaning to their lives and can also survive new inputs.

Just as the Woolfian novel begins to come into focus as the triumphant teleological realization of the prophecy of “Odysseus’ Scar,” however, Auerbach subjects his analysis to another twist—one carried out by means of a demonic reading of the very stylistic features upon which he builds his positive account: modernist orientation toward the everyday and multipersonal representation. Reading the development of the latter technique historically, he concludes that multiperspectivalism is not an innovation or an intervention but simply a symptom of modernity. The modern era, he argues, was characterized by the destruction of traditional ways of understanding the world and by the “violent clash of the most heterogeneous ways of life and endeavour” (549). Modernist polyvocality simply mirrors this:

At the time of the first World War and after—in a Europe unsure of itself, overflowing with unsettled ideologies and ways of life, and pregnant with disaster—certain writers distinguished by instinct and insight find a method which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness. That this method should have been developed at this time is not hard to understand. (551)

For its part, the modernist focus on the everyday begins to look like quietism. Like a stubborn historian who refuses to condescend to the techniques of legend in representing modernity, modern novelists are now accused of dealing only with the narrow slice of reality that can be represented
honestly: they “prefer the exploitation of random everyday events, contained within a few hours and
days, to the complete and chronological representation of a total exterior continuum [. . . ] they
hesitate to impose upon life, which is their subject, an order which it does not possess in itself”
(548). Woolf’s style by no means “fascist”: multiplicity of perspective and the rejection of totalizing
narratives ensures this. But what Auerbach comes to see is that concern for the everyday sequesters
it from the public sphere where Fascism is running amok, and multiperspectivalism actually abets
the rise of Fascism. Auerbach’s second reference to the Nazis, indeed, makes this last point directly.

In the chaos of competing ideologies that characterized the early twentieth century, Auerbach argues,

The temptation to entrust oneself to a sect which solves all problems with a single formula,
whose power of suggestion imposed solidarity, and which ostracized everything that would
not fit in and submit—this temptation was so great that, with many people, fascism hardly
had to employ force when the time came for it to spread through the countries of old
European culture, absorbing the smaller sects. (550)

Modernism is entirely exempt from these fascist techniques of cliché, hypnosis, and directed
interpretation. But if the role of Fascism is to quell the interpretive unease of modernity, then
modernism serves to increase the confusion that Fascism employs as a pretext for control. In
Auerbach’s pessimistic reading, it reproduces in its readers the very ontological state that made
Mussolini’s and Hitler’s rise to power so effortless.

Auerbach attempts to twist out of this gloomy reading of modernism, but becomes mired in
it. A paragraph beginning, “[b]ut the method is not only a symptom of the confusion and
helplessness, nor only a mirror of decline” promises a prolepsis but delivers a paralepsis. There is in
much modernist work “a certain atmosphere of universal doom”; “something confusing, something
hazy about them, something hostile to the reality they represent”; a hypocritical “hatred of culture
and civilization brought out by the subtlest stylistic devices which culture and civilization have
developed”; “often a radical and fanatical urge to destroy.” There is some hope when he turns again
to Virginia Woolf. In an apostrophe whose enthusiasm matches that of the exclamation on Jacob’s
rich life, he says “what realistic depth is achieved in every individual occurrence, for example the measuring of the stocking!” Woolf’s emphasis on the everyday suddenly loses its associations with quietism and functions briefly as a stylistic Jerusalem. Her focus on the random, everyday particular—free from the grand narratives and hierarchies of contemporary history—attains a utopian social promise:

In this unprejudiced and exploratory representation we cannot but see to what an extent—below the surface conflicts—the differences between men’s ways of life and forms of thought have already lessened. The strata of societies and their different ways of life have already become inextricably mingled. [. . .] It is still a long way to a common life of mankind on earth, but the goal begins to be visible. And it is most concretely visible now in the unprejudiced, precise, interior and exterior representation of the random moment in the lives of different people. (552)

It is yet another false apotheosis. In her mixed style, Woolf seems to provide a “concrete” picture of a world devoid of the ravages and enmities of Europe during World War II and thus also seems to promise an escape from it. But without taking a breath or even inserting a paragraph break, Auerbach makes his final twist. He achieves it by revaluating the idea of “a common life of mankind on earth.” Losing the associations with horizontality and democracy of the previous sentence, this idea comes now to mean monologia, autocracy, “crude simplification”:

So the complicated process of dissolution which led to fragmentation of the exterior action, to reflection of consciousness, and to stratification of time seems to be tending toward a very simple solution. Perhaps it will be too simple to please those who, despite all its dangers and catastrophes, admire and love our epoch for the sake of its abundance of life and the incomparable historical vantage point which it affords. But they are few in number, and probably will not live to see much more than the first forewarnings of the approaching unification and simplification. (552-3)

Thus ends Mimesis. Praised as an antidote to the simplifications of Fascism, then maligned as a reproducer of the chaos that empowers Fascism, then praised as a style that overcomes the divisions of contemporary history, Woolfian novelistic style is finally charged with complicity in the simplifying project of Fascism. In the end, the unrepresentable chaos of the present is all that is left and all that is valued, and even its demise is seen as imminent.
Auerbach’s ambivalent reading of modernism amounts to an ambivalent reading of his own style. In “Odysseus’ Scar,” Auerbach’s critical style offers an implicit solution to the equally unsatisfactory stylistic poles of Homer and the Elohist. In its twists and turns and constantly shifting valuations of the two styles, Auerbach avoids both the Homeric sin of disenfranchising his reader and the Biblical one of producing semantic openness susceptible to tyrannical appropriation. *Mimesis* requires a reader both willing to engage actively in the production of meaning, yet also able to accept that its message is not reducible to a single truth. This style, as he admits in “The Brown Stocking,” is modernist. 23 “It is possible,” he coyly writes, “to compare the technique of modern writers with that of certain modern philologists”:

Indeed, the present book may be cited as an illustration. I could never have written anything in the nature of a history of European realism; the material would have swamped me. [ . . . ] As opposed to this I see the possibility of success and profit in letting myself be guided by a few motifs which I have worked out gradually and without a specific purpose. (548)

*Mimesis* is modernist not only in its focus on random particulars and its rejection of overarching narratives but also in its “multipersonal,” multivoiced, “twist and turn” style. But though this style seems to provide an answer to the simplifications and distortions of Nazi propaganda in its visions of a common life of mankind, the “atmosphere of doom” that overcomes modernist style overcomes Auerbach himself. Though Auerbach’s style teaches us not to value any particular movement of his argument over another, it is nonetheless impossible not to be moved by the fact that *Mimesis* comes to rest where it does: the modern novel and *Mimesis* itself, Auerbach concludes, might in theory be capable of opposing Fascism, but just as plausibly can be seen as implicated in it, and in any case were unsuccessful in preventing or halting its advance.

*What Poetry Passes For*

There are, however, those two rocks amidst the swirling waters of *Mimesis*: a political opposition to Fascism and an aesthetic commitment to the mixture of styles. These survive even the
abrupt concluding twist: when Auerbach praises Woolf, it is for a mixture of styles that makes fascist factionalism seem fragile; and when he denounces modernism, it is for a complicit impetus to unification and simplification. But what, exactly, does Auerbach mean by “mixture of styles”—and does it bear any resemblance to the hybridity of poetry and prose that Bakhtin fails so pointedly to account for? An answer to the first question can be found in “Odysseus’ Scar,” where Auerbach concludes that both Homer and the Elohist are exempt from (because prior to) “the rule of the separation of styles which was later almost universally accepted and which specified that the realistic depiction of daily life was incompatible with the sublime and had a place only in comedy or, carefully stylized, in idyll” (22). “Mixture of styles” is a rebellion against this law: a willingness to apply “high,” “sublime” style to the “low,” “common” matter of the everyday, and a refusal to match only certain genres to certain types of experience. As Auerbach phrases it in his analysis of Flaubert, the mixture of styles is “[t]he serious treatment of everyday reality” (491). As for the second question, Auerbach pays little attention to the distinction between poetic and prose genres. Though “Odysseus’ Scar” is structured on a contrast between two styles, he mostly ignores the fact that one is in verse. “Poetry” functions as a factual noun unworthy of further comment: in discussing the “Homeric poems” he uses expressions such as “a series of verses” (4) or “two verses earlier” but makes no more of it. The word “prose” is never used. Indeed, although he refers throughout to “epic poetry” and “epic poet[s]” (5), Auerbach shows just how little heed he pays to the question of metrical arrangement when, in a rare expression of commonality between Homeric and Old Testament Styles, he calls them “equally ancient and equally epic texts” (11).24

When he uses “poetic” as an adjective, however, Auerbach gives more away. In the course of his reading of To the Lighthouse, Auerbach describes a switch in style between consecutive paragraphs thus: “the level of tone descends slightly, from the poetic and the non-real to the practical and earthly” (532). This manifests a characteristic disregard for metre: the passage is
patterned—employing repetition (it begins and ends with the phrase “Never did anybody look so sad”), parallelism (“a tear formed; a tear fell”), and alliteration (“Bitter and black, half-way down in the darkness”)—but is not in verse. Far more telling, however, is Auerbach’s alignment of poetry with “the non-real” and its opposition to the “practical and earthly.” In a work entitled *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* whose only consistent aesthetic value is the serious representation of the practical and earthly, this is as damning a condemnation of poetry as is found anywhere in Bakhtin.

Because he treats poetry with such icy silence, there is no equivalent in *Mimesis* to Bakhtin’s politically-inflected rejection of metaphor and rhythm. If poetry stands for the “non-real,” however, then every stylistic analysis he conducts serves to condemn it. The elements of Homeric style Auerbach focuses upon, his “descriptive adjectives and digressions,” are dismissed because they draw attention away from reality—they “prevent the reader from concentrating exclusively on a present crisis” (11). The technique of legend is criticized for the same reason: it “arranges its material in a simple and straightforward way” in order to “detach it from its contemporary historical context” (19). When Auerbach praises Old Testament style, it is because it establishes a vertical correspondence between the earthly and the divine, making “the two realms of the sublime and the everyday [. . .] basically inseparable” (22-23); when he criticizes it, it is because this vertical correspondence is maintained at the cost of distorting “reality,” which is always for Auerbach the privileged term. Homer’s style is hopelessly horizontal, stuck in the plane of the “non-real”: Homer “seeks merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours”; the “‘real’ world into which we are lured, exists for itself, contains nothing but itself” (13).

In Auerbach’s reading of modernism, his sympathy for the real, the practical, and the earthly—the “non-poetic”—is still clearer. However “chaotic” its effects and origins, when Auerbach praises modernism’s polyvocality it is because it aggregates subjective viewpoints in order
to generate as true a picture of reality as possible: “important in the modern technique,” he writes, is “[t]he design of a close approach to objective reality by means of numerous subjective impressions received by various individuals (and at various times)” (536). Woolf’s use of digressions and excurses—the time-shifts and temporal leaps of To the Lighthouse that occupy so much of Auerbach’s analysis in “The Brown Stocking”—are also singled out as particularly “realistic.” Whereas Homer’s excurses transport the reader from one “clear and luminous present” to another and serve to quell interpretive anxiety, Woolf’s excurses are temporally unclear and discontinuous; they “have no common and externally coherent development, as have the episodes of Odysseus’ youth” (539). Most importantly, these excurses proceed according to a “metonymic” logic that is nonetheless curiously “horizontal.” Instead of pointing to heaven, the everyday incidents with which Woolf concerns herself unleash earthly democratic debate and discussion. The times and places to which a Woolfian excursus transports its reader “serve only the polyphonic treatment of the image which releases it” (540). The initial image is not mortified in the process, Auerbach argues, but enriched: “It is as though an apparently simple text revealed its proper content only in the commentary upon it, a simple musical theme only in the development section” (541). These excurses, shot through with the ethic of the public sphere, represent a clearly “democratic” element of style. But they are in no sense “poetic.” Homeric style is horizontal in the poetic plane; Biblical style often forces a vertical correspondence of the prosaic with the poetic. Woolf’s style is a horizontality of prose, enacting the dialogue of the world with itself.

What poetry “passes for” in Mimesis is the “non-real,” and this makes it the enemy in Auerbach’s generic universe. Woolf’s “poetic” paragraph is criticized for “transport[ing] us to an undefinable scene beyond the realm of reality” (532)—away from the world, where we are called upon to act. Auerbach, like Bakhtin, can thus be read as an “opponent” of poetry. The word “poetry” stands for something very different in Mimesis than in “Discourse in the Novel,” however. For
Bakhtin, “poetry” is an ideal type: it is the name for an abstract, totally malign antithesis to the
democratic, multiperspectival, open-ended, rejoinder-provoking dialogic novel. For Auerbach,
“poetic” is an adjective to describe writing that distracts its readers from their commitments and
obligations in the world. Defining “poetry” as he does, Bakhtin theorizes his ideal dialogic style in
direct opposition to poetry; Auerbach simply excludes poetry from the conversation about
democratic form: he discusses no modernist poets and (no idle consideration for so honest a critic)
writes *Mimesis* entirely in prose. But if we take a step back, remove Auerbach’s use of “poetic” from
its complex ideological context, and compare it to the necessarily reductive and simplistic dictionary
definitions of poetry and prose, we can begin to see how the democratic mixed style championed in
*Mimesis* might, with a different vocabulary, be described as a prose/poetic hybrid.

The *OED*, to cite one example, notes that “poetry” is “[t]raditionally associated with explicit
formal departure from the patterns of ordinary speech or prose, e.g. in the use of elevated diction,
figurative language, and syntactical reordering” (Def. 2a). “Poetic” is defined as “elevated or sublime
in expression” (3b). The *OED* defines “prose” as a form of language possessing “no deliberate
metrical structure (in contrast with verse of poetry)” and characterized by “the avoidance of
elaboration and of metaphorical language, and factual or informative rather than imaginative content”
(1a). In another sense, it is “[t]hat which is plain, simple, or matter-of fact; (often with negative
connotations) that which is dull or commonplace” (1b). The usage of “poetry” in the English
language, then, is every bit as structured on a binary opposition to prose as it is in “Discourse in the
Novel” and *Mimesis*. The bases of the opposition are not along strict lines of monologia/
heteroglossia or non-real/real, however, but can mapped as follows: imaginative vs. factual;
elaborate and patterned vs. plain; elevated and sublime vs. commonplace; figurative vs. literal;
irregular vs. syntactically regular. Consider, with this in mind, Auerbach’s summary of Homeric and
Biblical style at the conclusion of “Odysseus’ Scar”:
The two styles, in their opposition, represent basic types: on the one hand fully externalized descriptions, uniform illumination, uninterrupted connection, free expression, all events in the foreground, displaying unmistakable meanings, few elements of historical development and of psychological perspective; on the other hand, certain parts brought into high relief, others left obscure, abruptness, suggestive influence of the unexpressed, “background” quality, multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation, universal-historical claims, development of the concept of the historically becoming and preoccupation with the problematic. (23)

In this account, the “non-real” Homeric poems sound much more like what the *OED* calls prose, and the “realistic” Old Testament style much more like poetry. Homer is simple, unmistakable, syntactically irreproachable; the Bible suggestive, difficult, abrupt. Of course Homer is also “imaginative” and his style elevated, and the Bible often factual, and much more involved in the everyday. Auerbach does not want “poetry” as the *OED* defines it; but he does not want “prose” either. What he is grasping for, without formulating it thus, is a form that collapses these tired oppositions: a modern form that combines the factual and imaginative, the plain and the elaborate, the commonplace and the sublime, the literal and the figurative, the continuous and the disruptive.26

Auerbach knows that modernity needs a “mixed” form, in other words, but does not describe this somewhat vague “mixture” in the same terms as the critics discussed in the next chapter: as a mixture specifically of poetry and prose. He does come tantalizingly close, however, in his description of Mr. Bankes from *To the Lighthouse*, who is struggling with the “problem” of Mrs. Ramsay’s beauty:

There is always something strange about her, something that does not quite go with her beauty (as for instance telephoning); she has no awareness of her beauty, or at most only a childish awareness; her dress and her actions show this at times. She is constantly getting involved in everyday realities which are hard to reconcile with the harmony of her face. In his methodical way he tries to explain her incongruities to himself. He puts forward some conjectures but cannot make up his mind. Meanwhile his momentary impressions of the work on the new building keep crowding in. Finally he gives it up. With the somewhat impatient, determined matter-of-factness of a methodical and scientific worker (which he is) he shakes off the insoluble problem “Mrs. Ramsay.” He knows no solution (the repetition of “he did not know” symbolizes his impatient shaking it off). He has to get back to his work. (533)
The “problem” of Mrs. Ramsay, which Mr. Bankes cannot articulate, is that she escapes representation in either poetry or prose. The “harmony of her face,” her transcendent beauty—these can be captured independently, but not “reconciled” with the “everyday realities” of telephoning, cleaning, or knitting stockings. Auerbach himself is much like Bankes: he is methodical; he makes conjectures; he is distracted by history, which crowds in; and yet he cannot solve the generic problem that modernity poses. “He knows no solution”—even though it’s staring him in the face, speaking to him in poetic repetition.

In England the problem was recognized. Bakhtin and Auerbach, with their direct involvement in the political crises that gave the year 1934 its shape, express with unrivaled clarity and immediacy the connections between linguistic style, totalitarianism, and democracy. But their readings are deformed by the intensity of the struggle. Both attempt to theorize an ideal democratic style, and both make the same mistake: they fail to take poetry seriously and thus overlook the political possibilities of a prose/poetic hybrid. In England in the 1920s and early 1930s, on the other hand, poetry was at the forefront of the debate over the politics of literary form.

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1 This view is so widespread as to be difficult to locate in a single work. Any work by Holquist, however, presents a clear manifestation; particularly the biography. For a compact and lively debate on the topic, see the exchange of letters between Hirschkop and Gary Saul Morson in PMLA 109.1.

2 Eskin argues that poetic speech is “metalinguistically more significant than novelistic discourse” for Bakhtin, on the grounds that the poet must take responsibility for each utterance—“because it turns a person’s indelible existential answerability for his or her acts (including speech acts) into one of its artistically constitutive moments” (388). Eskin misses or overlooks the crucial point that responsibility is only positive for Bakhtin when the responsibility is the reader’s rather than the poet’s.

3 Scanlon addresses this counter-argument. “To use Bakhtin’s theories of dialogicity in discussing a genre for which he sometimes vehemently denied dialogic potential,” she argues, “is not to contradict or forcibly mutate Bakhtin’s own philosophy but to embrace it” (5).

4 Tihanov shows that Bakhtin followed this debate: “Both [Lukács’s] paper and the comments upon it were available to Bakhtin, who made a conspectus of them. Traces of the arguments can be identified in his own writings on the novel” (Tihanov, “Epic, Novel, and Modernity,” 35).

5 Lukács wanted to define the novel in accordance with the views of his Theory of the Novel (1920), which saw the novel as a fallen contemporary descendant of classical epic—“the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given” (54). Though this clashed with the prevailing Russian view of the novel as a distinct literary genre with distinctive traits and an independent history, Lukács’s account can hardly be described as anti-Soviet; indeed, he argued that under Soviet communism the novel would cast off its fallen form and return to the perfection
of the epic. Tihanov contends, then, that Bakhtin’s pro-novel polemic represents a reaction against Lukács’s view of the novel as “an inferior heir to the epic [whose] entire development is subordinated to the anticipated glorious return of the epic in the upcoming second (and final) kingdom of freedom and classlessness.” (“Epic, Novel, and Modernity,” 40). He further argues that Bakhtin’s absolute split between novelistic prose and epic poetry and implicit rejection of Lukács’s epic/novelistic synthesis should be read as a small act of defiance against the obsessively unifying spirit of the Stalinist state, which sought “to abolish differences between village and town, on the one hand, and manual and intellectual labour, on the other” (37). Tihanov’s analysis, however, fails to explain why Bakhtin would respond to Lukács by attacking poetry. Lukács, after all, was not endorsing poetry or offering advice to poets; he was endorsing and encouraging the radiant transfiguration of the novel. If Bakhtin’s denunciation of poetry is to be explained away as a response to Lukács, then, it must be accepted as an unsuccessful one.

6 Bukharin condemned Soviet poets for their tame and “sometimes elementary” (256) verse, exhorting them with his closing slogan, “We must dare, comrades!” (258).

7 Clark’s other basis of comparison is temporality. She argues for a commonality between Bakhtin’s “absolute past” of epic and the Stalinist “absolute future.” See Mikhail Bakhtin 274. See Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of Bakhtin and the figure of the epic hero.

8 The First Writers’ Congress was broadcast on radio, and the proceedings widely published in journals such as Literary Critic.

9 Bukharin recognized the hybrid nature of modernist Russian verse in his address to the First Writers’ Congress, where he praised Mayakovsky’s “great, long, hairy arm” for having “reached down to the very depths of shattered life, and dragged up from thence paradoxical prosaic details, which suddenly started to poetic life in his audacious verse” (221).

10 Bakhtin’s discussion of Eugene Onegin is an analysis not of “poetry,” but of the novelization of poetry. See below.

11 Bakhtin discusses the Iliad on p. 32 of “Epic and Novel.” This is the “epic” he seems to have in mind. I have been able to locate only one essay on a contemporary poet, “On Mayakovsky” (circa 1940-45), which has not been translated into English.

12 This may explain Bakhtin’s frequent use of the phrase “poetic discourse” rather than “poetry.”

13 This remains, in “Author and Hero,” an analogy; it is not a work of literary criticism.

14 The hero also impacts the author, by providing an outside perspective on the self; see the following discussion of Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics.

15 Hirschkop summarizes the difference from the early philosophical works thus: “Registering a complete turnaround even in the lexical details, Bakhtin now congratulates Dostoevsky for having discovered an artistic method capable of representing heroes as ‘unconsummated,’ as if heroes could never have wanted to be anything but” (74).

16 “Göttingen Geist” appears to refer to the “spirit” of a school of classical late-eighteenth century German poets, including Johann Heinrich Voss, who translated the Iliad and Odyssey. The specific reference is less important than the idea that Bakhtin is referring to a particular set of poetic conventions.

17 I would propose the following mathematical notation of Bakhtinian “prosification”:

\[
\lim_{\text{novelization}} \rightarrow \text{prose} = \text{the novel}
\]

18 See Evans 538 and 544-45.

19 In “The Critic in Exile” Erik Linstrum complains, “To this day, the fact of Auerbach’s emigration and exile has influenced the interpretation of his work almost to the point of overshadowing it” (150). He continues, “most educated people know only one thing about [Mimesis]: that it was written by a German Jew in Istanbul during the worst years of the Holocaust” (151).

20 Note that Auerbach’s statement of difference is characteristically also a statement of similarity (“equally ancient and equally epic.”)

21 Reitter dismisses his own argument. “This line of analysis does not really work” (29), he argues, because Auerbach indeed spends much of “Odysseus’s Scar” praising Homer.

22 Linstrum argues in “The Critic in Exile” that Mimesis should be read as proceeding teleologically: “It might be said that Mimesis is the lit-crit version of Whig history, with the realist novels of the nineteenth century positioned as the climactic endpoint of a two-thousand-year, largely cumulative series of developments” (155). Linstrum appears not to have read the final chapter of Mimesis, on twentieth-century writers. He later says, “Mimesis begins with the Odyssey and ends with a nineteenth-century novel by Edmond and Jules Goncourt” (151).

23 This fact has been widely recognized. Lindenberger writes:
Auerbach openly identifies his own habit of choosing what he calls random realistic texts with the modernist’s exploitation of random everyday events. Moreover, Auerbach uses the same word, “random” (*beliebig*), to characterize the way that the modernists choose seemingly inconsequential events to organize their books as well as the way that he himself chose the texts around which his own book is organized. (198)

25 Any element that doesn’t fit into the Biblical meta-narrative, Auerbach argues, “must be so interpreted that it can find a place.” It is thus that “interpretation in a determined direction becomes a general method of comprehending reality” (16).

26 See Hayden White on the “setting aside” of the distinctions between fiction and history:

modernism is to be seen as setting aside [. . .] the long-standing distinction between “history” and “fiction,” not in order to collapse one into the other, but in order to image a historical reality purged of such “grand narratives” as Fate, Providence, Geist, Progress, the Dialectic, and even the myth of the final realization of Realism itself. (138)
Chapter Two
The Death and Rebirth of Poetry, 1925-1934

Poor Cock Robin

The fate of poetry in England in the 1920s can be inferred from the markedly different inflections of two similarly titled books: Osbert Sitwell’s *Who Killed Cock Robin?* (1921) and Edward John Thompson’s *Cock Robin’s Decease* (1928). In both titles Cock Robin stands for poetry; Sitwell’s book, however, discusses enthusiastically the death of a particular poetic school, whereas Thompson’s laments the death of poetry itself. In Sitwell’s argument Cock Robin designates a strain of the tame, clichéd, Victorian verse that he regards as destined for creative destruction and replacement by a vigorous modernist poetics. “Toward the end of the 19th century,” Sitwell writes, “the flame-of-life was gradually being ground out of English poetry. Poetry was buried beneath wreaths of roses, crosses of lilies, and sickly bouquets of strong-smelling flowers” (17). The moribund corpse of such diluted-romantic nature poetry was kept spuriously alive by philistine conservative reviewers; insisting that “‘True Poetry’ is a maidenly and innocuous prattle of larks, and green trees” (20), they maintained interest in a dead nineteenth century poetic idiom and failed to create an audience for Sitwell’s “true poetry”: the iconoclastic, cliché-loathing, and difficult poetics of modernism. “All lasting poetry is intensely a poetry of its age,” Sitwell argues; “[y]ou cannot write well in the idiom of the day before yesterday.” By discovering beauty in the modern industrial world (“We still see beauty in natural objects and can express it. But we can also perceive the beauty in a clock-work bird” (14)) and by soliciting the active involvement of its readership through its disruptive form (“Poetry cannot be entirely the work of the poet. It must be, or should be, in part the conception of the reader” (5)), modernist poetry, Sitwell argues, was already proving its worth in the face of the attacks of the poetry-reviewing prigs. Far from pronouncing the death of poetry in *Who Killed Cock Robin?*, then, Sitwell is in fact announcing its imminent salvation in modernism.
In Thompson’s work, conversely, Cock Robin stands for all poetry, and his death neither requires encouragement nor merits enthusiasm. *Cock Robin’s Decease*, written seven years after Sitwell’s book, presents a bleak materialist account of the impossible situation of poetry in the modern world. Through chapters with names such as “The Fact of the Murder Established,” “The Accused,” and “Resuscitation Measures,” Thompson argues that the publication of poetry is no longer a viable trade. New books of poetry are not being published or reviewed: “Every publisher knows that poetry was never in a worse slough of neglect than at present”; “there is at the present moment no publisher who would at his own expense publish a new poet” (10); “no new poetic reputation has been made for some years” (12). The few tired and cliché-ridden books of poetry that do manage to enter the marketplace receive puzzlingly exultant reviews: “Most reviews are flaccid and meaningless, and the writers ought to be caned for the tags and thin-worn phrases that they use” (48). As for the public, Thompson writes, “[n]o; people […] do not like poetry” (20). Of the poetry itself he says, “[d]uring the last dozen years a great deal of work has passed as poetry which is only carpentry” (48). In its writing, reading, publishing, and reviewing, Thompson concludes, poetry is definitively dead. The members of the tribe of poets who remain alive are being forced to join the opposing camp: “men who could write—in some cases, have written—poetry full of beauty […] must write prose […] because they could not afford to write verse” (67).

For this death Thompson provides both an explanation and a forecast of consequences: poetry is dying because it is unsuited to the modern world; and the modern world which has killed poetry off will suffer for its act. “Things are bad in the book business, and are going to get worse,” Thompson writes. Film and radio—“two institutions that in conjunction are going to prove not less revolutionary of mankind’s mental habits and outlook than the printing press, the discovery of America, or the industrialization of the West by machinery”—bear some of the responsibility (25). Quoting the pessimistic (though nevertheless Marvellian and Eliotic) remark of “a lady” that the
world “is daily being tied by radio and all that sort of thing into a nasty, tight little ball,” Thompson sees the restlessness of the modern media landscape as inimical to the formation of a “poetic” philosophy: “The plain truth is, we haven’t a philosophy that will carry a great poem” (66-7). The very noisiness of the modern world also presents a challenge: “our world is so amazingly rowdier than any world in which poets have lived before,” he says: “I do not think we have begun to suspect how obtuse and hardened our sense of sound values has become” (55). Where Bakhtin might have cheered the death of Cock Robin, however, Thompson mourns it. It means a loss of historical self-consciousness, since “every writer whose work is really alive has something to say which is for his own contemporaries and for no one else” (68). It means also the death of a whole range of thought and emotion: “Just as certain movements of the mind cry out for music as their satisfaction, so others cry out for poetry” (49). These movements of the mind, Thompson implies, are becoming extinct. It is a point that returns implicitly in Nineteen Eighty-Four: in Orwell’s dystopia, the “the death of poor Cock Robin” appears as a fragment of a “forgotten rhyme” that Mr. Charrington must “drag[. . .] out of the corners of his memory” (125).

The pervading sense that poetry was dying in the modern world, and that the modern world would suffer for its loss, gave rise to a period of frenetic theorizing about genre, in which political concerns were never far beneath the surface. The impending death of poetry precipitated a widespread attempt to understand what exactly was being lost, what the world would be like without poetry, and what use it had served. The answers to these questions, in the ten years 1925-1934, were remarkably varied even among members of particular schools; it was a truly “heteroglossic” critical moment, rich in opinions and bold forecasts but entirely unsure of outcomes. This chapter will look at two scenes of debate. First it will examine the discussion about modernist poetry—beloved of Sitwell, ignored by Bakhtin and Auerbach—that stemmed from R. C. Trevelyan’s Thamyris; or, Is There a Future for Poetry? Modernist poetry’s detractors called the obscure, difficult, disruptive genre a
suicide. But its practitioners and theorists, though a various and multi-voiced group, advanced their thoroughly un-Bakhtinian defences in very Bakhtinian terms. The virtue of modernist poetry was that, in an industrial, instrumentalist society increasingly ruled by stock responses, it required the active engagement of its reader. The paradox of modernist difficulty—that it was a barrier to social usefulness, but also its source—was acknowledged, and means of making modernist poetry more interesting and accessible to a broad audience were vigorously and variously sought.

It was the opposite approach, however, that brought poetry back from the grave. This is the focus of the next part of the chapter. Tracing its critical elaboration from *New Signatures* through *New Country* to *A Hope for Poetry*, I will argue that the kind of poetry advocated by Michael Roberts and practiced by Cecil Day Lewis revived the genre in a form that justified Bakhtin’s deepest pessimism and wildest paranoia. Looking at the epic turn of the explicitly Communist *The Magnetic Mountain*, I will argue that this was a poetics that asked the reader not to engage, but to obey. Day Lewis’s generation, however, was perhaps even more various and conflicted than that of the modernist theorists. Spender’s *Vienna* will be read as an attempt at reconciling epic and belief in Communism with lyric and belief in the modernist project of active reading. I will propose it as an “honest” attempt: one that admits failure and calls for further self-reflection, further theorizing about genre, and a re-evaluation of the politics of modernist poetry.

*A Much Lamented Death*

Like the trams that set out in all directions from Nelson’s Pillar at the start of the “Aeolus” chapter of *Ulysses*, many of the best analyses, prescriptions, and eulogies relating to the enfeebled state of poetry in 1920s England came from a common, somewhat depressing point of origin: R. C. Trevelyan’s *Thamyris; or, Is there a Future for Poetry?* (1925). Published as part of Kegan Paul’s popular “To-day and To-morrow” series, *Thamyris* was widely read and reviewed, and swiftly condemned by the modernists and their associates. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Herbert Read called *Thamyris* “a
very depressing pamphlet” written with “an uneasy pedantry” and exhibiting “all the air and a little of the anguish of a museum catalogue” (573).\footnote{Vita Sackville-West, dismissing \textit{Thamyris} in \textit{The Nation} as a “bewildering [. . .] muddle,” wrote meiotically, “I venture to doubt whether his sympathy with the modern spirit is very receptive or very profound”; she added, “I put it mildly.”} Robert Graves, whose contribution to the Hogarth Essays series, \textit{Another Future for Poetry}, was a direct response to \textit{Thamyris}, found Trevelyan’s “judgments for the most part so parochial, and his style so unadventurous, that in spite of the applause he has won from the elder critics, I am not deterred from signing a minority report at variance with his” (163). Applauding \textit{Thamyris} on the grounds of its quiet conservatism, the praise of the “elder critics” was indeed damning. In \textit{The New Statesman}, Desmond MacCarthy found himself “surprised that \textit{Thamyris} had not been better reviewed” and ventured to explain that Trevelyan, being “temperamentally a Conservative poet,” had let his essay slip “into the hands of the poets of another school”: “He says a good word for the experimenters, but he does not care for them” (176). John St. Loe Strachey’s description of Trevelyan in \textit{The Spectator} as “an anti-rhyme, or, at any rate, a Blank Verse Votary,” stops several steps short of assigning Trevelyan the title of Metrical Anarchist; indeed, he decides that \textit{Thamyris} is “a very charming piece of work” (370).

Of course, the gathering together on a common theme of such a varied and distinguished group of reviewers was an achievement in itself, and signals the chief success of \textit{Thamyris}: that it generated debate.\footnote{In addition to achieving this democratic end, it also set the terms of the debate, directing it toward the question of the relevance of poetry—particularly of modernist poetry—to a modern, democratic society. Part of a series of more than one hundred books on the “futures” of everything from morals to machines, Trevelyan’s is the only one to have asked the question “is there a future?” What had imperiled poetry’s future, Trevelyan argued, was the advent of jarring, tuneless, inaccessible modernism. \textit{Thamyris} begins with an apologue that illustrates this point. Expanding upon}
the legendary tradition of the Muses’ yearly entertainment of the heavenly host on All Saints’ Day, Trevelyan tells of a recent occasion when “several of the more literary archangels expressed a desire to hear some examples of post-classical poetry” (2). Satan, happening to be in the vicinity, produces an oral anthology of English verse whose steady retreat from music and rhythm increasingly agitates the angels. “When Satan finally jerked out the latest jewel of American vers libre,” Trevelyan concludes, “he was greeted, as once before in hell, with a dismal universal hiss, the sign of public scorn” (4). Though modernist poetry offends the aristocratic heavenly host, the story leaves somewhat open its utility to the English mass audience. Trevelyan asks:

Has the history of poetry been merely a deplorable tale of decadence, a progressive impoverishment and deterioration, through senility and second-childishness, towards an un lamented death in a bastard and graceless prose? Or on the contrary has the gradual divorce of poetry from music and intoning meant its liberation for subtler and more rational, but no less truly poetic purposes? (5)

In light of Trevelyan’s more general assertion that “poetry has ceased to be a great popular and social art” (30) and of the responses Thamyris evoked, its central question can be rephrased: is increasingly prosaic, decreasingly metrical modernist poetry the confirming last step in poetry’s path to irrelevance in the modern world, or does it hold potential for reaching out to and including a whole new audience?

However “parochial” and tame his specific recommendations may have been, Trevelyan provided his interlocutors with three points of argument in response to this question. The first is that the question of poetry’s survival would depend on its ability to adopt the idioms and rhythms of modern life. Though Trevelyan is opposed to modernist verse, he argues that poetry must be in touch with contemporaneity both in form and content. Indeed, he sees the one as leading to the other: “The mind of even the most detached artist,” he says, “is part of the world into which he was born, and his matter must to a large extent be a reflection of his environment” (47); “social and intellectual changes create demands,” he continues, “in satisfying which an intelligent artist will find
his most genial inspiration, and will modify his technique until it becomes a fit instrument for expressing his new material” (48). Trevelyan, however—in answer to his own question—finds modernist technique wanting. “Poets whose idiom is not universal, but calculated for a cultured private coterie,” he writes, “write with the risk of swift oblivion.” In a clear reference to The Waste Land, he continues, “the most frequent fault is obscurity, due either to an Alexandrine love of recondite allusions, or more often to apparently studied neglect of transitions” (72). While cautioning against the complete abandonment of “rhetoric” in poetry, he nonetheless advises that it “is the simpler, homelier words and idioms of everyday speech that carry with them most poetic suggestion” (77). On the question of rhythm, Trevelyan is similarly opposed to the “experimenters” and their use of vers libre. Holding that “the main function of verse is deliberately, by its structure, to regularize rhythm, and so to create emotion artificially” (18), and viewing it as “necessary that this [rhythmical] framework should be definite and constant” (23-24), Trevelyan sees the abandonment of a “fixed metrical base” (24) as an abdication of poetry’s role: “Whatever advantages there may be in emancipation from regularity, we should not forget the price that has to be paid for it in the loss or diminution of this power of moulding and vivifying language” (24). Alienating its audience both in its idiom and its rhythms, Trevelyan argues that modernist poetics compound poetry’s irrelevance.

Trevelyan’s second contribution is to have insisted that poetry must expand its generic range—that the lyric was too cloistered, too self-involved, and too limited in its audience. He complains that “the tendency of the moment seems to be towards poems on a small scale, of a somewhat anæmic delicacy, or else an artful and piquant quaintness” (50). He goes on to call for a return to the public, popular genres of comic, tragic, dramatic, philosophical, satirical, and—most promisingly—narrative poetry: “except for two short stories in blank verse by Wordsworth, and Byron’s Don Juan,” he writes, “there has scarcely been any narrative, dealing with modern life and of first-rate poetic quality” (57). The third contribution of Thamyris was to posit an antagonism of values between
Hammond poetry and industrial modernity. He is consistent in grouping prose with industrial society, and in opposing its “utilitarian” (17) and “purely instrumental” values to those of poetry. Such a society suppresses emotion and beauty, Trevelyansays, whereas poetry’s role is to draw them out:

[poetry is] a means of discourse, of which the content should be neither science nor history nor speculation in their abstract purity, but all these and much else besides, enveloped and humanized by emotion, and presented with all the moving pathos and beauty which is inherent in them, but which the less imaginative prosaic medium cannot so effectually reveal. (86)

Quaint as his diction may often be, and though he provides no concrete examples of how poetry produces this effect on its reader, one takes from Thamyris the sense—as he indeed phrases it himself—that, for the reader, “the disappearance of poetry [. . .] would be a real disaster” (87).

This sense of the imminence and social direness of the death of poetry was not universally shared among his reviewers. St. Loe Strachey, taking it all in stride, used his review as an occasion to air his own backward-looking, anti-Sitwellian opinions about the trajectory of verse. His review emphatically endorses Trevelyan’s pro-rhetoric passages and exploits the conservative dimension of Thamyris’s call for an expanded poetic scope: “WANTED,” he cries, “a new ‘Hind and Panther,’ a new ‘Absalom and Achitophel,’ or a new set of ‘Moral Essays’” (370). Vita Sackville-West, from an opposite aesthetic inclination, attributed Trevelyan’s pessimism to his failure to see modernism’s potential. While she agrees that there is “some justice” to his complaints about the modern tendency toward small-scale lyric, she objects to what she identifies as his main argument:

So far as I can see, his contention is that the existence of poetry is in danger: (a) because poetry has ceased to be “a great popular and social art” [. . .]; and (b) because “we are entering upon an era of science and prose, and may as well at once frankly put away poetry along with other childish things.”

Sackville-West dismisses both contentions: poetry was never “part of a great popular and social art in England,” she writes; and in the current age of instrumentalism and prose, poetry is more useful than ever, as a means of escape: “Will not the calm lakes of poetry,” she asks, “rather provide a grateful retreat from the world of materialism and speed?” Her conclusion, like that of Osbert
Sitwell, is that bad poetry is dying—not modernist poetry: “Possibly [Trevelyan’s] pessimism as to the future of poetry may be due to his refusal to shelter a certain section of verse, as written to-day, under the wing of that august denomination?” Desmond MacCarthy, reviewing *Thamyris* along with two recent appearances in the Hogarth Essays’ first series—Edith Sitwell’s *Poetry and Criticism* and Robert Graves’s *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry*—again singled out for praise Trevelyan’s opposition to the modernist obsession with lyric:

He touches upon the fact that poetry has become less and less the expression of corporate common emotion, and more and more the medium through which the inner personal life finds expression. He sees something to regret in this. He wants poets to write in a universal idiom. I should be exceedingly surprised if Miss Sitwell did. … Mr. Graves believe [sic] it is quite right and proper to explore the beauty of emotions and impressions which are idiosyncratic. (176)

To judge from these three reactions, it would seem that the “death” of poetry was no more than a temporary disruption brought about by the priggish, detached techniques of modernist verse. None of them sees poetry itself as at risk; only particular species of it. For the more serious responses to *Thamyris*, such as that of “Mr. Graves,” the genus itself was in peril.

For Robert Graves, the impact and import of *Thamyris* was great. Not only did it provoke his contribution to the second series of the Hogarth Essays, *Another Future for Poetry*; it also caused him to abandon the position of his earlier contribution. The argument of *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry: A Political Analogy* was that every political faction in England had its own poetics: Conservatives preferred Cock Robinish, mellifluous verse; the “Left Wingers” were anti-rhythm, opposed to “the ethical system with which the orderly use of rhyme is associated” (35), and against the fixed associations of words, standing instead for a syntax as irregular and disruptive as possible; the Liberals were somewhere in between, and universally bland. In *Another Future for Poetry* this vision of a harmonious poetic continuum, in which each party finds its own proper mode of expression, was replaced with the assertion that political life in modern England is anathema to all poetry. That the masses show no interest in reading poetry, he argues, is a product of their education: “This is the
public created by elementary education; elementary education has been a product of industrialism, and is aimed not at a humaner culture, but at raising the industrial and civic efficiency of the masses” (181). It is not that the dull and toiling masses seek “narcotic” entertainments to escape their condition; “[o]n the contrary,” Graves writes, “the daily round is so routine-ridden that [. . .] any stimulant to thought of an adventurous kind is welcome” (184). While short stories, crossword puzzles, and home-made radio sets have been able to exploit this demand, “[t]he poetry sense has not been correspondingly cultivated with these other new senses largely because poetry is like to make demands at variance with the utilitarian system of education and life” (184). The “mechanical advantages of poetry over prose” (184) for Graves are, first, “its rhythms, rhymes, and texture [which] have an actual toxic effect on the central nervous system”; and, second, its “awareness of a whole region of hidden association and implication behind phrases that in prose would be accepted at their face value” (185). These virtues of transport and association, in a society of “materialism and speed,” quickly become vices, and the targets of a program of deliberate eradication—a program which, in England, was proving very successful. Graves concludes that a revolution would be necessary to make the appreciation of poetry “appear in a wide circle of readers.” “I cannot see any immediate social or political change that would produce it,” he says: “if there is ever to be a widespread poetry-sense some economic solution should first appear, ending the financial obsession which colours all human relations and qualities to-day” (186-7). This vaguely communist poetic utopia is very far off, however—which makes all the more tragic the fact that genuinely exciting and important poetry is being written (and neglected) in his own time. Cognate with poetic modernism, Graves’s “New Poetic Relativity”—Protean in structure, disdainful of grammar, demanding of readers—“has indeed begun to make as great a revolution in the technique of poetry as, for instance, the one that came shortly after the Norman Conquest” (188). It is a revolution, however, without a
public. Though the poetic “Traditionalists” are scandalized,\(^5\) the people its techniques would engage and enlighten are simply indifferent.

Herbert Read’s five-column leading article in the 1,234\(^{th}\) *Times Literary Supplement*, titled “The Future of Poetry,” represents the most serious response to Trevelyan’s comments on rhythm and idiom. It shares with Graves both belief in the usefulness of modernism to the mass public and lack of faith in its likelihood of success. Repeatedly critical of the blandly cynical tone of *Thamyris*, Read does admit that in one respect “Mr. Trevelyan’s despair is justified”: “of the new conceptions which promise to be distinctive of the twentieth century,” he says, “we find little sign in poetry” (574b). Read phrases the “crux of the modern situation” as a question: “have we any assurance that modern poetry has arrived at [an] intimate sympathy with the pace and rhythm of contemporary life which is the condition of all vigorous art?” (573c). The answer in “popular” poetry is “no”; but in “unpopular” modernist verse, the situation is more promising.\(^6\) At once in line with Bakhtin’s arguments about heteroglossia and yet presenting an effective rebuttal to Bakhtin’s narrow conception of rhythm, Read argues that the virtue of modernist verse is a rhythmic flexibility that makes possible the democratic incorporation of everyday idioms. Taking as his starting point that “[a] man from Newcastle and a man from Hull speak in entirely different *temps*,” Read labels such modes of speech “idioms”—the “live organisms of speech,” as he calls them, “instinct with rhythm” (574a-b).

“Idioms,” he continues,

arise out of the contacts of daily life. They are the response of the human organism to the elements around it. They reflect the speed of life, the pressure of life, its very essence. Idioms are the vocal chimings-in of man in the rhythm of life, and have their parallels in the beating of drums and the dancing of limbs. (574b)

Against Bakhtin’s conception of the destructive, normalizing effect of rhythm in poetic genres, Read reads free verse as a technical innovation capable of preserving and deploying idiom, and thus of bringing poetry fully into contact with modern life. “Free verse,” he argues, “which includes the slightest as well as the widest divergence from regular pattern, is but the free use of these idioms”
If Read doubts that this technical innovation will succeed in breathing life back into poetry—“when we have found the rhythm we are only at the beginning of our art,” he says: “We have found no more than the instruments of art” (574b)—it is nonetheless presented as the only hope. “The sickness of nearly all modern poetry,” he concludes, is that “it rings false in the actual turmoil of existence” (574b). To employ free verse as a means of building poetry from the “rhythms in the raw” of idiomatic speech would be to make it more democratically inclusive and thus more relevant.

The American critic Edmund Wilson’s response to Thamyris exhibited the same sense as Graves and Read that modernism was already making poetry more akin to the modern world and relevant to its inhabitants. The question of genre, however, was what interested him most. He opens his review by stating that Trevelyan’s “discussion of the future possibilities of comic, satiric, didactic, and narrative poetry only serves to call attention to the fact that there is nobody of any importance attempting any of them” (279). Wilson then retorts—the review is called “James Joyce as Poet”—that Trevelyan’s failure to discover poetry outside of the lyric is due to a mistaken binary conception of poetry and prose. In Joyce, Wilson argues, the distinction is rendered meaningless:

The kind of definitive propriety, intensity and economy of language which the great poets have attained and which Flaubert and Joyce aim at, has indeed remained so alien to the novel that many readers, accustomed to prose fiction, have not hesitated to declare Ulysses unintelligible—though its language departs nowhere more widely, I believe, from the language of ordinary prose than the language of much familiar poetry does. (280)

In Wilson’s later Axel’s Castle (1931), this Trevelyan-derived insight becomes a central argument. Agreeing that “we are coming to use poetry for fewer and fewer literary purposes”—and indeed going so far as to propose that “verse as a technique of literary expression is being abandoned by humanity altogether” (120)—Axel’s Castle attributes the “death of poetry” to a spuriously narrow conception of just what “poetry” is. It is a view Wilson assigns in the modernist period to the criticism of T. S. Eliot. The “real effect” of Eliot’s criticism, he writes, “is to impose upon us a
conception of poetry as some sort of pure and rare aesthetic essence with no relation to any of the practical human uses for which, for some reason never explained, only the technique of prose is appropriate” (119). This stark binary opposition between poetry and prose—poetry beautiful, transcendent, impractical; prose plain, useful, material—represents, Wilson argues, a corruption of tradition. “The tendency to keep verse isolated from prose and to confine it to certain highly specialized functions,” he holds, is a recent phenomenon (120); the “natural language of poetry” is mixed (14). The separation of poetry from prose is particularly catastrophic in the modern age.

Arguing that “dualisms of good and evil, mind and matter, flesh and spirit, instinct and reason” have broken down, Wilson calls for a post-dualistic form to match a post-dualistic era. Here, repeating the argument of the Thamyris review, Wilson proposes that it is Joyce—whose “prose works have an artistic intensity, a definitive beauty of surface and of form, which make him comparable to the great poets rather than to the great novelists”—who provides this hybrid form. Joyce, Wilson says, “is indeed really the great poet of a new phase of the human consciousness” (221). Wilson thus answers with a pointed no Trevelyan’s question of whether poetry was dying “an unlamented death in a bastard and graceless prose.” It was not that poetry had died and, in dying, had become prose; rather, poetry and prose needed to cross-pollinate in order to assure their mutual survival—both needed to die, in effect, to begin a new life in a hybrid form.

Despite the tremendous variety of opinion among the serious respondents to Trevelyan, all shared a conception of poetry as a “political exile” from the modern world. Trevelyan’s interlocutors saw an uncongenial modern English culture as having driven poetry into the wilderness. They agreed unanimously that poetry and modern culture needed to be brought back together; but they disagreed on the question of whether poetry would have to embark upon a process of democratic self-improvement as a first step toward re-naturalization as a welcome citizen of the modern world—or if there would need to be a revolution in the modern world as a precondition for the return of
poetry. For Trevelyan, the onus was on poetry: the modern world had use for its humanizing form, but modernism was leading it away from the rhythms and idioms that would make it useful and popular. For Graves, modernism was precisely what the proletariat needed: its disruptive form, suggestivity, and visceral pleasure could bring colour and activity to dreary, mechanized industrial life—but even these changes would mean nothing without a revolution in the heart of the modern world, for instrumental, money-obsessed modernity was openly opposed to the effects of such a poetics. For Read modernism was synonymous with the process of poetry’s democratization; its inclusion of voices and speech manners from all social spheres was a step toward the reintegration of aristocratic poetry into a democratic world, though the writer had yet to appear to capitalize upon this potential. For Wilson the choice itself was at fault: the modern world was not prosaic, and poetry was not exiled from it. The modern world, in fact, had moved beyond such dichotomies of poetry and prose; thus the most productive response of poetry was not a sullen and petulant exile but an engagement in dialogue. Art would only be useful and popular in the modern world when it had become akin to it, which necessitated aesthetic hybridity. This vague but promising Wilsonian proposition, derived from the debate commenced by Trevelyan, was a possible way forward for the modernists who survived the 1920s and approached middle age and the 1930s—but, however attractive it was as a theory, it would not prove to be the historically successful strategy for resuscitating poetry. Though the exile Poetry did return in the 1930s, its resurrection was due to none of the strategies outlined above. The rescuers of poetry decided that a revolution needed to take place in modern culture—but they decided to team up with the army of a third party, and to make the promotion of this extrapoetic revolution their poetic aim. Two roads diverged…

_The Return of the Hero_

Putting an end to the long series of gloomily-titled books about poetry, Cecil Day Lewis published in the fall of 1934 his first critical work, _A Hope for Poetry_. Much had changed since Cock
Robin’s prophesied decease in 1928; indeed, to say that poetry had “a hope” in 1934 was to engage the poetic trope of meiosis. The more accurate depiction—in striking contrast to the economic climate—was of, as Day Lewis phrased it, “a boom in poetry” (25). From death to boom—what occasioned this unlikely return to life and instantaneous ascension? Though those responsible for rebirthing poetry loudly opposed themselves to the techniques and attitudes of the 1920s generation, critics like Read, Graves, Wilson, and even Trevelyan would have grounds for claiming an influence. Introduced to the reading public in the 1932 collection *New Signatures* and confirmed the following year in *New Country*, the members of the “new poetic generation” centred around Auden, Spender, and Day Lewis (the “Thirties Poets”; the “Auden Group”) were represented as rebels against rather than pragmatic disciples of their forebears. Michael Roberts, who edited both volumes, sought in his preface to *New Signatures* to establish a clean generational break. “New knowledge and new circumstances,” he wrote, “have compelled us to think and feel in ways not expressible in the old languages at all” (7). Included in such “old languages” was poetic modernism: “the poetry of the machine age,” Roberts wrote, “has seemed, even to intelligent, conscientious critics, abrupt, discordant, intellectual” (8); “the poet [. . .] became aloof from ordinary affairs and produced esoteric work which was frivolously decorative or elaborately crudite” (9). “The poems in this book,” Roberts concluded, “represent a clear reaction against esoteric poetry in which it is necessary for the reader to catch each recondite allusion” (12).

If these criticisms of modernist poetry seem familiar, it is perhaps because they are close to those of the 1920 critics themselves, who shared an identical aim: in Roberts’s phrasing, to make English poetry “a popular, elegant, contemporary art” (20). The specific technical solutions Roberts’s poets devised to this problem, though differing in certain respects, are largely the same as those of the previous generation. One of the clearest accomplishments of the *New Signatures* poets, the seamless integration of poetic imagery and the modern world, was a conscious aim of Sitwell,
Trevelyen, Graves, and others. Roberts, however, claims his exclusively as “the generation which found that seaplanes and mountains, derricks, greyhounds, and Jessamine, all excited in them the same lyrical enthusiasm” (18). As Day Lewis says in A Hope for Poetry, “to-day we do not most of us feel, to use a common idiom, that a railway ‘spoils the view’: we have learned to understand it in relation to its environment. So the poet is able to use it for metaphor” (62). Where Herbert Read had championed the heteroglossic potential of free verse, Roberts argued that while “the return of the Vers-librists to irregular cadence served a useful purpose,” the use of a “fixed metrical base” elicited stronger reactions from a wider audience: “free verse offers none of the possibilities of counterpointed rhythm which has been one of the technical delights of English verse” (16). With one modernist critic Day Lewis’s generation were happy to align themselves: Edmund Wilson. In an explicit reference to the discussion of the Metaphysical poets in Axel’s Castle (though ignoring the discussion of Eliot’s criticism and of Joyce’s method), Day Lewis argues that the “constant alternation of the magniloquent and the colloquial” (60) is a distinctive quality of his cohort’s poetry.

This new generation was not naïve enough, however, to believe that their metre or their mixed and modern imagery was alone responsible for precipitating the poetic “boom.” Their Communist politics—lent enormous credence during the Great Depression and rise of Hitler by the expanding Soviet economy and Soviet anti-Fascism—were responsible for that. In the 1932 preface to New Signatures, Roberts’s political position is stated mildly. Though he defines his writers as possessing “the communist attitude”—“the recognition that oneself is no more important than a flower in a field; that it may be good to sacrifice one’s own welfare that others may benefit” (19)—this attitude is in line with the preface’s primary preoccupation: formal prescriptions for engaging a diverse audience on an equal plane. In the preface to the next year’s New Country, however, all question of including, involving, and engaging the reading public is absent; the aim now is simply to
recruit. The preface is shocking for its instrumentality. “If our sympathies turn toward revolutionary change,” Roberts writes, “it is not because of our pity for the unemployed or the underpaid but because we see at last that our interests are theirs” (16). The concern is unabashedly political rather than literary, except insofar as literature can serve as an instrument for achieving political aims. “I think,” Roberts wrote, “and the writers in this book obviously agree, that there is only one way of life for us: to renounce that system [industrial capitalism] now and to live by fighting against it” (13). Roberts speaks not as a poet but as a “revolutionary”: “To a revolutionary,” he continues, writers’ “lingering prestige and their technical ability as organizers and propagandists can be of immense value” (12). The value of the working classes, to a “revolutionary,” is as subject matter: the artist will find in them “the clearest symbols of those passions and activities he values” (16). For formal experimentation there is an explicit distaste: “Perhaps ‘literary’ writing is tolerable at a time of stable tradition, but it is not tolerable at present,” Roberts says: “The writers in this book are trying to make something, to say something as clearly as may be, to express an attitude” (17). What they were engaged in “making” was decidedly outside the text. In an extended soccer analogy, Roberts describes his writers as spectators at a soccer match: “Nearly all of us want one team rather than another to win” (16).

Day Lewis was among the prime cheerleaders. Both New Signatures and New Country included poems from his expressly Communist Magnetic Mountain. New Country also printed his “Letter to a Young Revolutionary,” which contains some of the clearest evidence of the shift from engaging readers to recruiting them: “the prime essential for the revolutionary,” Day Lewis writes, is “faith: an absolute belief in revolution as the way to, and the form of, a new life” (27). But while Day Lewis’s 1934 A Hope for Poetry retains his Communist politics, it contains a number of stinging criticisms—both explicit and implicit—of the sort of poetry that had excited so much interest. In the chapter on communism and poetry, he identifies himself as a member of the movement and
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reminds “the bourgeois critic [. . .] that there is no reason why poetry should not also be propaganda” (49). But the dominant tone is skeptical. “English revolutionary verse of to-day,” he writes, is too often neither poetry nor effective propaganda for the cause it is intended to support. Its vague cri-de-coeur for a new world, its undirected and undisciplined attack upon the whole world-broad front of the status-quo, are apt to produce work which makes the neutral reader wonder whether it is aimed to win him for the communist or the fascist state. (55-56)

The popularity of this weak half-poetry, half-propaganda, moreover, is the result of fashion: “In estimating the social importance of this movement,” Day Lewis writes, “we must be careful to discount the temporary and fictitious impetus it received from the economic slump of the period” (53). As that slump begins to reverse, he continues, the death of poetry may be allowed to resume. A year after the millennial pronouncements of Michael Roberts in New Country, Day Lewis writes in 1934, “[a]lready, as the slump shows signs in England of another feverish rise to another temporary boom, we note a slackening of Communist enthusiasm in poetry” (53).

The poetic “boom,” Day Lewis concedes, was—like most booms—a “superficial” one. “The renewal of interest in poetry proceeds,” he says, largely from an interest in the social connection to be found in much ‘left-wing’ work; that it is the communist or fascist tendencies, the up-to-dateness of the imagery, the preoccupation with specifically modern problems which attracts, and not the poetry itself. (28)

And yet while Day Lewis is eager to defend “the poetry itself”—eager to say that there is much more to his poetic cohort than their interest in politics, Fascist or Communist; that there is something new also in their poetic technique—his formal defence is troubling. Tacitly agreeing with Robert Graves’s argument for the anti-instrumentalist value of associative poetic discourse, for example, Day Lewis nonetheless sees in his colleagues the opposite quality of a “pruning of the associational luxuriance of words” (70):

The majority of post-war poets [as Day Lewis calls his generation], keenly aware of [the] exhaustion of language, tend to employ words in their denotative rather than their connotative use. The texture of their verse in consequence is apt to be too rigid and uncompromising, a hard concrete surface that gives no resilience, no echo, no sense of depths below. (68)
While he does exempt Auden from this classification, it is readily applicable to his own productions of the period. This deliberate limiting of the associational multiplicity of the poetic image is a formal instantiation of the move away from promoting responsible readerly engagement.

As Day Lewis goes on to argue, this semantic “pruning” has a generic basis: his generation’s move from lyric to epic. If Trevelyan and his textual interlocutors were eager in their call for expansion of the “artificially restricted field of verse” beyond the lyric, Day Lewis was more than happy to oblige. “Behind lyrical poetry,” he writes,

we feel always a certain irresponsibility: the lyric is the form of poetry, more than any other, within which the poet is answerable to nothing but its own laws and the experience of his senses. In a state of society where it is unusually difficult for him not to be aware of the large tracts of experience outside his immediate environment and to feel that these demand some attitude from him, as a man, the lyric irresponsibility of the artist is hard to achieve. (67)

The much-maligned lyric, to a Communist, is anathema: it is too private, too ethically autonomous, too self-contained. Day Lewis’s alternative, however, is not an expanded generic range, but simply a different genre. Faced with an “environment which seems to the poet antagonistic and wicked,” Day Lewis argues, the poet of his generation “will either go mad or turn to didactic writing.” “Post-war poets have for the most part adopted the second alternative,” he continues, “and consequently we find the lyrical impulse in their work following tortuously and with difficulty, often forced underground, carrying a large amount of alluvial deposit with it” (68). While he does not specify the generic stream he sees as rising to preeminence among the poets of his generation, he gives some very strong hints in his concluding chapter. Noting the “ancestor-worship” amongst his cohort—their “creating and drawing energy from the superhuman”—he produces a catalogue of their own superhuman heroes: “Warner’s engineer, ‘Colonel Humphries’; Auden’s ‘Captain Ferguson’ or his ‘Gerhart Meyer from the sea, the truly strong man’” (76). “We do not suggest,” he concludes imperiously, “that these characters are immortal, but they are vivid and illuminating; they represent something essential in humanity magnified to heroic proportions; and they may be the
forerunners of a new Achilles, a new Job, a new Othello” (76). Michael Roberts, seizing upon this passage, titled his review of *A Hope for Poetry* “The Return of the Hero.” Expanding upon Day Lewis, Roberts wrote that such figures “represent the answer to doubt, uncertainty and indecision, and the reintegration of divided personalities” (72). Day Lewis’s generation had found its form: the denotative, tribal, didactic epic.

*A Bakhtinian Nightmare, In His Own Back Yard; or, Cock Robin Rises Phoenix-like as Wystan Kestrel*

Though Bakhtin’s attack on poetry in “Discourse in the Novel” is broad—its criticism of rhythm and metaphor so abstract as mostly to ignore specific distinctions of lyric, elegy, and ode—it contains the seeds of Bakhtin’s more focused future attacks on the epic. He objects in “Discourse in the Novel” to the figure of the epic hero, who, already “completed,” fails as a template for responsible decision-making. “The idea of testing the hero,” he writes,

> of testing his discourse, may very well be the most fundamental organizing idea in the novel, one that radically distinguishes it from the epic. From the very beginning the epic hero has stood on the other side of trial; in the epic world, an atmosphere of doubt surrounding the hero’s heroism is unthinkable. (388)

The unified and incontestable hero embodies in epic a unified and incontestable ideological world, and serves as a metonymy of monologism. “In epic,” Bakhtin writes, “there is one unitary and singular belief system. In the novel there are many such belief systems, with the hero generally acting within his *own system*” (334). These remarks are expanded upon and developed in Bakhtin’s 1941 essay “Epic and Novel,” which summarizes in compressed and emphatic form his work on the novel. The essay uses a temporal argument to establish epic as the standard-bearer for all poetry. Whereas the novel maintains “a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)” (7), Bakhtin argues that the world of epic is sequestered from the alterable contemporary moment in what he calls the “absolute past” (14). The argument is a familiar one: locked away in this remote and fixed “world of fathers, of beginnings, of peak times” (11), the world
of the epic is one that forbids readerly engagement and promotes passive, thoughtless awe. “One can only accept the epic world with reverence,” he writes; “it is impossible to really touch it, for it is beyond the realm of human activity, the realm in which everything humans touch is altered and rethought” (17). “There is no place in the epic world,” he concludes, “for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy” (16)—and so it is populated with its fully complete, fully determined heroes.

Bakhtin’s vehement opposition to the epic and the heroic is, once again, explicable in its context. For all the untenability of Katerina Clark’s argument that “poetry” functions in “Discourse in the Novel” as a code-word for the contemporaneously-formulated doctrine of “Socialist Realism,” Bakhtin’s antipathy to heroes no doubt derived in part from the Stalinist enthusiasm for them. In her article “Socialist Realism in Soviet Literature” Clark argues that the primary function of the Soviet Socialist Realist author “was to provide legitimizing myths to the state, to ‘show the country its heroes.’” Thus developed the cornerstone of Socialist Realism: “the ‘positive hero,’ an emblematic figure whose biography was to function as a model for readers to emulate” (176). The proceedings of the 1934 First Writers’ Union Congress, to which Bakhtin had access, demonstrate clearly that this obsession with heroes and with epic was present from the first formulation of Socialist Realism. Andrei Zhdanov’s speech, which would become Socialist Realism’s canonical document, described the real-life Stalinist megaprojects—“the life experience of the men and women of Dnieprostroy, of Magnitostroy”—as “heroic epics” (20). Karl Radek, in his address on world literature, mocked modernism through the lack of heroes in Joyce’s Ulysses: “His basic feature,” Radek said, “is the conviction that there is nothing big in life—no big events, no big people, no big ideas” (153). Mikhail Bukharin, in his address on poetry, found models for Socialist Realism in The Gilgamesh Epic, the Iliad and Odyssey, and the Aeneid, “all mighty levers of a peculiar social pedagogy, forming people in accordance with their commandments and canons” (198). While Bukharin also
asserted “Socialist realism is not anti-lyrical” (255), the preponderance of evidence is against him; far more typical is Radek’s statement “[w]e must turn the artist away from his ‘inside,’ turn his eyes to these great facts of reality which threaten to crash down upon our heads” (179). As Literary Critic summarized the Congress, “a heroic epoch gives birth to a heroic literature; heroic people call into being heroic artists” (12). Like the writers of Day Lewis’s generation with whom they ostensibly shared an ideology, the focus of the formulators of Socialist Realism was public, pedagogical, and heroic.

There is no better example of the congruence of aims between these English writers and Soviet theorists than Day Lewis’s 1933 poem The Magnetic Mountain. Excerpted in both the revivifying volumes New Signatures and New Country, Day Lewis’s long poem presents a sort of Bakhtinian nightmare scenario: unlike socialist realist novels, it is in verse, with all the attendant disenfranchising (from Bakhtin’s idiosyncratic perspective) qualities of rhythmic and metaphorical language; and like those novels, it is populated with indubitable (though highly dubious) heroes. The work consists of thirty-six linked poems divided into four parts. The first part introduces the epic adventure plot: the speaker and his heroic companions “Wystan and Rex” (4; Auden and Rex Warner) are leaving on a railway journey to a distant place, the eponymous Magnetic Mountain. Parts Two and Three consist of dialogues between the poet and a series of “Defendants” and “Enemies” who seek to dissuade the speaker from making his journey. In Part Two a Mother, Schoolmaster, Priest, and Wife do the dissuading; in Part Three the Wife speaks again, joined by a Pressman, a Lyric Poet, and a religion-appropriating Social Scientist. Each, in turn, is rebuked and dismissed by the poem’s speaker. Having overcome these adversaries, the fourth section presents the confident justification of his departure from England and his impassioned appeal to his countrymen to follow him.
*The Magnetic Mountain* qualifies as “epic” in the conventional sense: it is a long narrative poem; its subject is serious; and the actions of its heroic speaker are of world-historic consequence. The speaker’s journey “Somewhere beyond the railheads / Of reason, south or north,” guided only by “Iron in the soul, / Spirit steeled in fire, / Needle trembling on truth” (3) is a search for a promised land (or, as the speaker ironically calls it, “that promising land” (4)). Following the Bakhtinian reading of the epic world as the “world of fathers,” Day Lewis’s speaker congratulates himself and his colleagues as “begetters” and “beginners” (25) of this “home for heroes” (29). The speaker and his friends accomplish this heroic work of establishment through their poetry: with a nod to Shelley, the speaker describes his generation as the throats through which the revolutionary wind will blow:

```
Make us a wind
To shake the world out of this sleepy sickness
Where flesh has dwindled and brightness waned!
...
Oppression’s passion, a full organ swell
Through our throats welling wild
Of angers in unison arise
And hunger haunted with a million sighs,
Make us a wind to shake the world! (31)
```

Not content to allow the hard language and public sentiments of such passages to stand as implicitly antithetical to lyric, the section positing the Lyric Poet as an “Enemy” makes the point directly. The Poet’s is a siren song, seeking to seduce the speaker with a vision of poetry as “intimate / Of breeding earth and brooding sky, / Irresponsible, remote” and beckoning him, “Seek not to turn the winter tide / But to temperate deserts fly” (23). The speaker’s answer, directed not toward the insignificant Poet but to his own public, is clear: “Comrades, my tongue can speak / No comfortable words, / Calls to a forlorn hope, / Gives work and not rewards” (24). In this time of crisis, public, didactic epic is the “responsible” poet’s form.
The Magnetic Mountain also meets most of requirements for what Bakhtin means by “epic”; namely, it is a nearly perfect antithesis to the dialogic novel. While the poem orchestrates many “voices,” the polyphony is a meticulously managed sham. In a proceeding rather like a show trial, the Defendants of Part Two do not defend themselves at all, but simply confess their sins. The voice of the Schoolmaster, for example, is engineered for easy rebuttal:

Let us now praise famous men,
Not your earth-shakers, not the dynamiters,
But who in the Home Countries or the Khyber,
Trimming their nails to meet an ill wind,
Facing the adversary with a clean collar,
Justified the system. (9)

The real heroes here, quite clearly, are the earth-shakers and not the squares. The Priest foregoes self-defence entirely: in a reversal of priestly roles, he goes directly into the confessional mode, saying of the Communists, “That harvest of Faith, not without blood ripened, / They have ploughed in; their dynamos chant / Canticles of new power: my holy land is blasted, / The crust crumbles, the veins run vinegar” (11). As the “chanting dynamos” of this passage make clear, the defendants’ confessions are not delivered in their own language, but conform conspicuously to that of Day Lewis. When the Schoolmaster confesses “Here is no savage discipline / Of peregrine swooping, of fire destroying, / But a civil code” (9), the desirability of revolutionary avian swooping has already been well established: the famous “kestrel” who introduces the work and who is later identified with Auden hovers menacingly throughout the work. If there remains any doubt that its “conversation” sections are simply rituals of mortification, The Magnetic Mountain helpfully appends summaries to each, delivered by the speaker: the first states, “Consider. These are they / Who have a stake in earth / But risk no wing on air” (15); the second says, more bluntly, “Consider these, for we have condemned them” (25).

The technique of humiliation extends also to verse forms. The Defendants and Enemies speak in Day Lewis’s version of bad verse—unrhymed, unadventurous, but still metred—while the
speaker is allowed all the techniques of internal rhyme, assonance, and accentual metre that he praises in *A Hope for Poetry.* While the Lyric Poet is permitted rhyme, his dreamy and anesthetized verse employs weak, often half-rhymes ("See the pink sierras call, / The ever-ever land of dew, / Magic basements, fairy coal" (23; my emphasis)) and stands in stark contrast to the certain, precise language of the response ("Tempt me no more; for I / Have known the lightning’s hour, / The poet’s inward pride, / The certainty of power" (24)). When the Pressman employs his highly rhythmic (however wrongheaded) language in Part Three ("Read about the rector’s girls / Duke’s disease synthetic pearls / Latest sinners tasty dinners / Plucky dogs shot Sinn Feiners" (19)) the response is not dismissal but appropriation:

> Fireman and farmer, father and flapper,
> I’m speaking to you, sir, please drop that paper;
> ...
> They’re selling you the dummy, for God’s sake don’t buy it!
> Baby, that bottle’s not clean, don’t try it! (20)

Enjoying the princely prerogative of taking what he likes, the speaker here recognizes a form with possible mass appeal and, outdueling his straw man, borrows his rhythm.

The poem’s imagery, however, is perhaps more “nightmarish” still. Its images, all contained in the extended metaphor of the voyage to the “magnetic mountain,” exhibit all the “up-to-dateness” we would expect from a poet of Day Lewis’s generation. They are the images of industry: iron, steel, trains, factories, mining:

> Come on, make haste and start
> Coupling-rod and wheel
> Welded of patient steel,
> Piston that will not stir
> Beyond the cylinder
> To take in its stride
> A teeming countryside. (5)

These dominant images, however, are deceptively literal; for the “fairer land, / Whose furrows are of fire, / Whose hills are a pure metal” refers to an actual place. The mysterious “magnetic mountain”
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is in fact the drearily real Stalinist-megaproject steel factory Magnitogorsk (literally, “Magnetic Mountain City”), a near neighbour to Bakhtin’s Kustanai. Begun in 1926, it had started producing steel in 1932, the year Day Lewis’s poem began to appear. When the speaker says, “Near that miraculous mountain / Compass and clock must fail, / For space stands on its head there / And time chases its tail” (3), he is mixing the miraculous with the factual: for the very real mountain of iron ore around which the factory was built did indeed divert the needles of compasses. When he says, “No line is laid so far. / Ties rusting in a stack / And sleepers—dead men’s bones— / Mark a defeated track” (3), he is playing on documentable truths: the railway line to Magnitogorsk was still under construction in 1932. Albert Gelpi refers to The Magnetic Mountain as “an industrialized, electrified utopia” (62). It is in fact a topos in both senses: a real place and a cliché of Stalinist rhetoric. Zhdanov was entirely typical, in the passage cited above, in seeing the “Magnitostroy” project as a real-life “heroic epic”; in his book on Magnitogorsk, Stephen Kotkin argues, “[n]owhere was the euphoric sense of the revolution’s renewed possibilities in the 1930s more in evidence that at Magnetic Mountain” (18). When Day Lewis’s narrator explains at the beginning of Part Four, “But see! Not far, not fiction, a real one [“untrodden territory”], / Vibrates like heat-haze full in the sun’s face / Filling the heart” (26), he is to be taken in earnest.

Bakhtin’s analysis of poetry in “Discourse and the Novel” is so extreme and one-sided that it is of little use in analyzing most actual poems; applied to Day Lewis’s extreme and one-sided Magnetic Mountain, however, it provides an excellent vocabulary for understanding the poem’s stylistic offenses. It is particularly useful in analyzing Day Lewis’s use of metaphor. Bakhtin attacked the trope of metaphor on the ground of its single-voicedness, noting in particular that poetic “ambiguity” was not genuine heteroglossia since it implied no “risk”: the reader was not confronted with a multitude of meanings with which to engage actively, but rather asked to recover the poet’s predetermined meanings. In the imagery of The Magnetic Mountain, there is very little “risk.” The
contemporaneous reader, much better aware of the existence of Magnitogorsk and the propaganda surrounding it than we are today, is not asked to engage with Day Lewis's meanings but simply to recover them. Such passivity, openly espoused in his “Letter to a Young Revolutionary,” is integral to Day Lewis’s vision of the Communist state and to his revolutionary poem, as is especially evident in the triumphant Part Four, which contains such visions of the Communist future as the following:

As needle to north, as wheel in wheel turning,
Men shall know their masters and women their need.
Mating and submitting, not dividing and defying,
Force shall fertilize, mass shall breed. (29)

Later the narrator says, “We can tell you a secret, offer a tonic; only / Submit to the visiting angel, the strange new healer” (32). The closing lines of The Magnetic Mountain, repeating a phrase from the previous stanza, are, “This is your day: so turn, my comrades, turn / Like infants’ eyes like sunflowers to the light” (36). Day Lewis’s poetics are entirely consistent with this avowed passivity. In its “sham polyphony” in which no true dialogue takes place and no rhythmic diversity goes unaccounted, and in the predetermined meaning of its metaphors, his poetics and his political theory are harmonious: both emphasize and instantiate submission. What Bakhtin deplored in poetry and the epic as totalitarian and undemocratic Day Lewis put to use in promoting a totalitarian and undemocratic state. That poetry should have been “reborn” for such purposes must, for the critics of the 1920s, have been very depressing indeed.

I Choose the Wholly Dead

To present The Magnetic Mountain as a representative text of the “Thirties Poets,” however, is to risk engaging in one of that text’s own sins: the setting up of straw men. Relying too much on the prefaces of Michael Roberts to define the aims of that generation presents the same problem. Though the group owed much of its popularity to Roberts’s dogmatic promotional assertions of its Communist mission, very few poems crystallized these ambitions like The Magnetic Mountain.
Geoffrey Grigson noted this in his review of *New Country* and *The Magnetic Mountain* for the May, 1933 issue of *New Verse*, where he condemned what he called *New Country*'s “union clamping disunion” and asked “[w]hat joins these writers except paper?” (15). “Roberts,” he says, “in a long preface ‘usses’ and ‘ours’ as though he were a G.O.C. a new Salvation Army or a cardinal presiding over a Propaganda” (15). Comparing the contributions of Auden, Spender, and Day Lewis “prove[s] it stupid to keep in fancy these three as triune” (16). “Auden’s system,” Grigson says, “is being created by Auden” (16). Day Lewis is allowing his verse to be deformed by excessive attachment to the Communist system: his commitment to “a vague foregone state [. . .] lessens his power of being sensuously affected” (16). In between these two extremes, Grigson proposes, is the poet to whom Day Lewis ought to look: Stephen Spender, the *New Signatures* poet most consciously involved in reconciling his attachment to Communism and his aversion to system, and the one most percipient in recognizing this as the struggle of epic and lyric.

Spender book-ended 1934 with a pair of essays on the problem of Communist poetry. The essay Grigson holds up for particular praise, “Poetry and Revolution,” published in 1933 in *New Country*, is a bravely defiant contribution. Despite its Robertsian title, its defiance lies in its rejection of Robertsian dogmatism and its depiction of “propagandistic poetry” as a logical absurdity. The essays begins, “[o]f human activities, writing poetry is one of the least revolutionary,” and goes on to explain, “[a] work of art cannot reach out into everyday life and tell us whom to vote for and what kind of factories to build, because injunctions how to act in a world that has nothing to do with the poem destroy the poem’s unity” (62). Spender wants political change, and wants the Communist state to be realized; but, coming closer to a Bakhtinian/Auerbachian causality than any other writer of his generation, he suggests both that such political change must have a formal basis, and that the effect of form must be to empower readers as decision makers. Declaring that “[a] kind of poetry must be written which is complementary to action” (63), he produces a modest solution. “People
sometimes talk of poetry as though it were dead,” he writes: “If this be true, it is surely a disaster, because as long as we can speak and feel poetry should remain a most important function of speech and of emotion” (69). Nodding to Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry” rather than to his “Ode to the West Wind,” Spender argues that the role of poetry is largely to clarify thought and to crystallize new meanings. “Poetry is a function of language,” he writes: “it records the changing uses of words and fixes their meaning, it preserves certain words in their pure and historic meaning, it saves the language from degenerating into looseness” (69). Spender does not suggest that this is poetry’s only role, nor does he propose that the poet’s social function begins and ends with form. But the didactic role Spender assigns is directly analogous to the formal: it is to clarify social issues for the reader as a prologue to independent decision-making, not to tell him what to do. Echoing Auden’s contemporaneous “making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear” (329), Spender concludes his essay with a hopeful prophecy of the artist’s role: “by making clear the causes of our present frustration, they may prepare the way for a new kind of society” (71).

After a turbulent 1934, Spender’s “Writers and Manifestoes” appeared in the February, 1935 fifth number of *The Left Review*. This essay was published in a literary and historical context even more dogmatic than that of *New Country*. Since the appearance of the latter, the events in Germany had added urgency to debates about the need for Communist propaganda, and *The Left Review* had sprung up as the official voice of the newly formed British Writers’ International. Spender’s essay goes further, this time, in submitting to its dogmatic milieu. It specifically endorses communism as a just political theory (“We live in an age when we have become conscious of great social injustice, of the oppression of one class by another, of nationalities by other nations. Communism, or socialism in its completed form, offers a just world” (146)) and adopts it as the basis of the “new kind of society” whose image poetry must seek to convey. “The socialist artist,” he writes, “is concerned with realizing in his work the ideas of a classless society: that is to say, applying those ideas to the life
around him, and giving them their reality. He is concerned with a change of heart” (146). Spender again stops well short of accepting poetry as an instrument of Communist propaganda, however.

The article, in fact, is a response to Max Eastman’s *Artists in Uniform*, published shortly before. Spender cites in full Eastman’s summary of the resolutions of the 1930 Kharkov Congress organized by the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers:

1. *Art is a class weapon*
2. Artists are to abandon the ‘individualism’ and the fear of strict discipline as petty bourgeois attitudes.
3. Artistic creation is to be systematized, organized, ‘collectivized,’ and carried out according to the plans of a central staff like any other soldierly work.
4. This is to be done under the ‘careful and yet firm guidance of the Communist Party.’
5. Artists and writers of the rest of the world are to learn how to make proletarian art by studying the experience of the Soviet Union.
6. ‘Every proletarian artist must be a dialectical materialist. The method of creative art is the method of dialectical materialism.’
7. ‘Proletarian literature is not necessarily created by the proletariat; it can also be created by writers from the petty bourgeoisie,’ and one of the chief duties of the proletarian writer is to help these non-proletarian writers to ‘overcome their petty bourgeois character and accept the viewpoint of the proletariat.’ (148)

Sympathetic as he is to the ideals of communism and to art’s role of instigating a “change of heart,” Spender responds to these resolutions with indignation. “It is evident that the aim of this manifesto,” Spender writes, “is to convert art into an instrument that can be used for party purposes. It is not the business of the artist to observe, but to conform” (149). Spender’s concluding remarks, this time, carry a tone of warning rather than of hope: “if one is on the side of the greatest possible degree of freedom, if one insists that one should write as one chooses and about what one wishes,” he writes, “one is not a traitor to the cause of world socialism.” “Unless artists insist on their right to criticize,” he concludes, “communism will become a frozen epoch, another ice age” (150).

Spender’s argument against the Communist instrumentalization of literature is given added force by the date and venue of its publication. *The Left Review* was the journal of an organization founded to support writers “who will use their pens and their influence against imperialist war and in defence of the Soviet Union, the State where the foundations of Socialism have already been laid”
Further, the *Left Review* had from its inception dedicated considerable attention to a conference far more important than Karkhov: the much-discussed First Writers’ Union Congress. Inserted hastily into a blank space in the inaugural *Left Review* was the announcement:

**The Moscow Conference**

*A conference of revolutionary writers called by the Soviet Writers’ Association is being held in Moscow while this issue of THE LEFT REVIEW is in the press. One of the editors of THE LEFT REVIEW is present at this conference, together with writers from many other countries. We hope to be able to publish in our next issue a special report.* (11)

This report, by Amabel Williams-Ellis, appeared in the Review’s second number, in November of 1934. But while the official proceedings, published the next year as *Problems of Soviet Literature,* would show that the Congress had enthusiastically ratified all seven of the Kharkov resolutions, Williams-Ellis’s report presented a very different picture. It did not quote Gorky’s remark, “The proletarian state must educate thousands of first-class ‘craftsmen of culture,’ ‘engineers of the soul’” (67); it omitted Zhdanov’s important address, which identified the role of Soviet artists as “to remould the mentality of their readers and thereby become engineers of human souls” (23); and it left out Radek’s attack on “the idea of individualism, which may be expressed as follows: ‘I, a writer, a worker of the mind, cannot submit to any discipline’” (143). It instead relied heavily on a speech by Ehrenburg omitted from *Problems of Soviet Literature.* Noting Ehrenburg’s critique of the Party’s “industrial” approach to the production of literature (“You can’t tackle the writing question with the measures you use for industrial production speeds” (23)) and defence of difficulty (“Is a writer to be reproached if he is not accessible to everybody? Songs for accordion are easier than Beethoven” (24)), Williams-Ellis offered a conclusion that subsequent history would forcefully disprove: “The effect of the conference will certainly be to help the creators in their age old battle against the prigs” (28). Though the meaning of the Conference had yet to congeal, its eventual effect would be to canonize precisely the view of literature, writers, and readers that Spender attacked in “Writers and
Manifestoes”: of writers as party workers who use literature as an instrument for promoting the passive obedience of readers.

That Spender’s essay was not only a rejection of Soviet literary practice but also of the Day Lewisian stream of his own movement is signaled in Spender’s other appearance in *Left Review* 5. His long poem *Vienna*—occasioned by the failed socialist uprising against Austria’s nationalist government in February of 1934, and by Spender’s visit to the city shortly afterward—had appeared in late 1934, and was reviewed by Montagu Slater in the issue. Slater begins by attacking an earlier review in *New Verse*—one that found *Vienna* wanting both in poetry and in “any real intensity of propagandist mission” (19-20). Slater dismisses this criticism as that of a magazine “which every two months hoists the flag of pure poetry,” and he goes on to offer *Vienna* his measured praise. While the final section “is given over to the familiar self-questionings” and lyric impulse of Spender’s 1933 *Poems*, Slater finds in general that “[t]he static landscapes of *Poems* have been exchanged for pictures of action” (187). In light of the debates of this chapter, what Slater sees in *Vienna* can perhaps best be summarized as an attempt to circumvent the dichotomy established by Roberts, Day Lewis, and the Writers’ Union between public epic and irresponsible lyric. What he praises in *Vienna* is the attempt at reinvigorating the one by means of the other:

There remains a lively hope that by the bringing in of the real—and public—events; by refreshing the older public modes with the newer and till now almost private styles; by correcting the powerful sense of Englishry with that of the international boundaries of revolution: the next stage in this poetic evolution will be towards broader appeal and the greater power that goes with it. (187)

Slater was picking up upon what was clearly a conscious aim for Spender. In *The Destructive Element*, written throughout 1934 and completed in Vienna, Spender argues, “[t]he question for a writer of our time, which is at the back of all discussed questions of belief, and of contemporary sensibility, is what is the modern subject? A subject large enough to enable the poet to write long poems” (189). He later names “[p]leasure or sorrow in the incidents of life, cut off from all theorizing or opinion,
[as] the source of lyric,” and concludes based on this that “it is not surprising that few successful long poems have been written to-day; and that the form of the most successful long poems should be an extension of the lyric” (203). In the Vienna Uprising, Spender believed he had found a subject worthy of a long poem; and in the clear distribution of right and wrong between the Fascist oppressors and Socialist freedom fighters, Spender no doubt believed he had found a “theoretical” explanation which left pure lyric behind. Though Spender didn’t use the term himself, Virginia Woolf, having spoken with Spender about the still-unpublished poem, described Vienna in a letter of October 24, 1934, as “his Epic” (L 5: 340). It is the tension between epic and lyric, however, that most distinguishes it.

*Vienna* is from its first line un-Robertsian. It begins in an Eliotic mode, with an unresolved dilemma whose very phrasing is left to the reader to complete:

> Whether the man living or the man dying
> Whether this man’s dead life, or that man’s life dying
> His real life a fading light his real death a light growing. (49)

The unstated question is “I don’t know whether $x$ or $y$ is better.” Apart from the specific problem of death and sacrifice, a larger generic problem lingers over *Vienna*: I don’t know whether an epic or a lyrical depiction of the February Uprising is better—whether the sort of public, communal poem called for at the Writers’ Congress would better serve the interests of the oppressed, or whether a private, reflective poem in the mode of *Poems*. Indeed, more so than the Uprising itself or Spender’s personal reaction to it, this is the true subject of *Vienna*. The poem’s first section, “Arrival at the City,” reproduces the disorientation of a foreigner in a strange city. In its cacophony of voices, no settled ideological or formal position manifests itself; while it does include some ironic shots at the posited enemy (“Our wet dream dictator” (49)), the speakers are many and differentiated, and the conversation mostly chit-chat. In its second section, “Parade of the Executive,” the cacophony is replaced—in a manner reminiscent of *The Magnetic Mountain*—with a dialogue between two voices,
identified respectively as “The Executive” and “The Unemployed.” The divisions, however, are not absolute as in Day Lewis. When “The Executive” speak lines such as

Let there be processions o let banners
Stream through the streets that anyhow look like pictures
Let no one disagree let Dollfuss
Fey, Stahremberg, the whole bloody lot
Appear frequently, shaking hands at street corners
Looking like bad sculptures of their photographs (52),

they do not speak in their own voice. It is likewise not “The Unemployed” themselves speaking when they are attributed the lines

We can read their bodies like advertisements
On hoardings, shouting with common answers.
Not saying, life is happy, unhappy is ill,
Death is reward, law just, but only
Life is life, body is body, a day
Is the sun (53).

The “trick” to this section is that lines given to the Executive are in fact spoken by the Unemployed, imagining themselves in the position of the Executive or simply giving their opinion of them; and the lines of the Unemployed are likewise spoken from the perspective of the Executive. The effect of this vocal chiasmus is not only to stage a phantom dialogue between two parties that never sat down to negotiate, but also to propose a linguistic basis for their conflict. The Unemployed see the Executive as manipulators of signs: parade-prone, banner-wielding sculptures of photographs. The Executive take the Unemployed for unsophisticated and easily manipulable literalists. Under the reign of the Executive, the Unemployed later state, “A scalpel excellently reduces / Warts, rebels. Even miracles / Have been performed, as the elimination of voices / That contradict official faces” (55). “Faces of our men beneath steel helmets,” they continue, “Should echo one face, stone face of a palace, / North ocean reflecting vast speechlessness” (56). While this section of the poem does propose a clear enemy, that enemy’s chief crime is Bakhtinian monologism. The fact that the unified,
monologic voice is also at the core of the epic genre he is toying with in *Vienna* places Spender’s poem on uncertain ground.

“Death of Heroes,” *Vienna’s* third section, is its deliberate attempt at writing in the epic mode. The section consists of versified first-person testimony from the father of a revolutionary killed in the Uprising and of an account of the capture and execution of its leader, Wallisch. It is in this section that the “us/them” pronoun distinction is most prominent: “we in prison,” “Our resistance” (60); “their newspapers / With lying words foreknowingly cast in lead,” “Their foursquare voice through unassailable air” (58). The section struggles, however, with the necessary hypocrisy of countering “their foursquare voice” with a foursquare voice of “our” own. At its most honest, the epic voice falters in the face of atrocities, its verse form spilling over into prose:

Against this, at Meidling our leader refused to serve out arms: ‘I refuse to send men to the slaughter house.’ Other leaders were cowards. At Schlinger Hof, the police drove out all the women and children in front of the building, and threatened to fire on them. The workers surrendered. (59)

At its seemingly bravest, describing in epic similes the final attack on Wallisch, it is all the more patently weak:

Like diving monoplanes  
Through precipice of air on polished metal,  
Curled down on them the ski-troops. They sniped  
And were repulsed. Through snowdrifts men dragged guns.  
Like air-raid with naked flashes, thunder,  
Collapsed the storm.

The tropes only barely rise above the literal; the ski-troops no doubt at any moment could have summoned aid from actual monoplanes, just as the rebellion collapsed not only like an air-raid but because of one. “After,” the section concludes, “Wallisch was a word buried / In unmarked ground” (62). As a word he is indeed “buried” in a section unable or unwilling to effect his epic transfiguration.
The epic having been assayed in “Death of Heroes,” *Vienna* lands—somewhat regretfully—fully immersed in lyric. In the final section, the ironically titled “Statement and Analysis,” the political analysis of voice implicit in the previous sections becomes explicit. Beginning with the once-again-Eliotic lines “Fading fading the importance / Of what was said / by so many voices / Between the sunset and the coffee,” the poem goes on to stage a series of short lyrics by “Five Voices.” At their conclusion the speaker, seeming to despair at his failure to sustain the epic mode, collapses into lyric:

Beneath the lower ribs and the navel
I hold the desert, dividing my health
With five voices.

... I, I, I.

In the first section of *Vienna*, the speaker, contrasting the city’s ancient “statues of desirable angels / Whose tears are solid worlds” with its modern “obscene electric gestures, its glance like rape,” announces: “I choose the wholly dead” (50). It is an apt condensation of *Vienna*. Spender may indeed have “chosen,” as Montagu Slater said he did, to adopt the “old public form” of epic and to mix it with the “private styles” of the modernist lyric “I.” But the possibility of such a marriage, and not the public event itself, is the primary concern of *Vienna*—whether Spender can accommodate both his personal voice and the voices urging his poetry to become a weapon. The answer of *Vienna*, as was the answer of “Poetry and Revolution” and “Writers and Manifestoes,” is no.

The period 1925-1934 is remarkable for having asked so many such questions. What sort of genre was needed to bring the reader’s imagination to life in an increasingly mechanized society? How could a poetic genre appeal to a broad audience when it demanded so much of its readers? Was it capitalist society itself that made readers unreceptive to it? If a new society was demanded, what sort of writing could bring it into being? Could a monologic poetic discourse counter a fascist menace characterized by monologism? The answers were extremely various, but by 1934 were
beginning to come into better focus. The debates of the 1920s showed that poetry—associative, imaginative, visceral—could provide an effective counter to instrumental industrial society. Modernist poetry in particular—better able to incorporate the rhythms of every day life, more in touch with the modern world, dependent on the active participation of its readers—carried immense promise. But poetry, which seemed capable of saving the modern world, was being killed off by it. The poetic “boom” of the early 1930s showed that poetry could be made popular, but would have to sacrifice its ideal of engaging its readership. The socialist realist poetry of Day Lewis was a dead end; the turn to denotative, propagandistic epic a mistake. Vienna and Spender’s essays made this clear, but also pointed toward another possible way forward. Though its attempt at combining lyric and epic was a self-conscious failure, the gesture toward hybridity of genre was a promising one. Indeed, away from the headlines and the spotlight, some of the modernists who had most contributed to the understanding of modernist poetry as the genre of independent, responsible readerly engagement, were making experiments along similar lines. Making good on Wilson’s prophecies on the hybrid future of literature, these writers were mixing poetic genres not only with one another but also with prose.

1 That Read had himself been a writer of museum catalogues for the Victoria & Albert Museum since 1922 might, of course, serve to modulate this criticism.

2 The “To-day and To-morrow” series was premised on generating such debate: on the advertisement for the series printed in Thamyris, the series is described as “[w]ritten from various points of view, one book frequently opposing the argument of another.”

3 While (a) is a quotation from Thamyris, (b) appears to be a paraphrase.

4 Contemporary Techniques never moves beyond mere analogy: at no point does it assign any role to poetry in effecting revolution.

5 Graves imagines their complaints: “They have completely disappeared; they are walking in the suburbs of poetry called alternatively Nonsense or Madness” (188).

6 Read writes (Wright reads?), “[p]oets can afford to be unpopular because it is the price they pay for being in advance of the general sensibility. At all great epochs of change and of crystallization it is the medium of verse that has hitherto embodied the first and the final accents of intelligence” (573).

7 In the introduction, Wilson (in a decidedly Auerbachian and Woolfian moment) speaks of the Elizabethans’ “medley of images; the deliberately mixed metaphors; the combination of passion and wit—of the grand and the prosaic
manner; the bold amalgamation of material with spiritual.” “Is this not the natural state of poetry?” he asks. “Is it not the norm against which, in English literature, the eighteenth century was a heresy and to which the Romantics did their best to return?” (14).

8 *Thamyris* does contain some hints of its own about hybrid form. While at times he speaks promisingly—arguing, for example, that we must “take full advantage” of the fact that the nature of poetry “has to a certain extent grown more like that of prose” (30)—he always stops short of calling for full hybridity. “Poetry still is,” he insists, “and always must be, a different art from prose” (30). And in his closing remarks he argues, if verse were to be abandoned by general consent, we should soon be compelled to find an awkward substitute for it in rhythmical or poetic prose. [. . .] It is too primitive, too monotonous and cumbersome to perform more than a small part of the various functions of modern spoken verse, to which we should inevitably be driven before long to revert. (86)

If here, as elsewhere, Trevelyan leaves us wanting to know how, exactly, poetic prose is “primitive” or “cumbersome,” and just what exactly we find in poetry proper that we can’t find in poetic prose, he nevertheless succeeds in raising questions for debate. His own decidedly “cumbersome” prescription was for the resurrection of verse through adoption of quantitative verse and “triple time.”

9 This was by no means a view universally held among the poets themselves. For example, both Day Lewis’s *A Hope for Poetry* and Spender’s *The Destructive Element* claim Eliot as a primary influence—in Day Lewis’s terminology, as an “ancestor.”

10 See the discussion of Magnitogorsk below for a possible subconscious motivation for choosing “magniloquent” instead of the more natural “grandiloquent.”

11 The economic depression greatly increased the prestige of the Stalinist USSR, whose non-market economy grew substantially during the depression years. For the reaction to German Fascism, see Hynes’s *The Auden Generation*, 130-131 and the discussion of the impact of *The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror*.

12 In one place a tension is clear, though hastily explained away. In Spender’s “Funeral,” Roberts argues, “poetry is [. . .] turned to propaganda, but it is propaganda for a theory of life which may release the poet’s energies for the writing of pure poetry” (19).

13 “If Marxism seems to us to be tainted with its nineteenth-century origin,” Roberts writes, “it is for us to prepare the way for an English Lenin by modifying and developing that doctrine. [. . .] The only way of ensuring that a political party shall represent our ideals is to work with it now” (11).

14 Geoffrey Grigson responded, “I feel’ Roberts should say. He does not think. He feels without thought, and feeling without thought is passive. It is sentimentality. It is not action in politics; or action in literature, which is art. He feels that we must repudiate the present system and live by fighting against it [. . .] Those who feel only can be united, if they wish, in any book, any club, any party; but it disgusts me to find feeling made more than art and the good artist styed here with sentimentalists or ineffectual propagators” (“Faith or Feeling?” 15).

15 Day Lewis joined the Communist Party in 1935.

16 Geoffrey Grigson said more simply, “Mr. Day Lewis has written a bad book, ‘A Hope for Poetry.’ [. . .] Advertising is written to persuade, to sell goods. Mr. Day Lewis, instead of writing for his equals or betters, has written to persuade others to read himself, Mr. Spender, and Mr. Auden. An inferior purpose has bred an inferior book, evasive on the poet and politics, ridiculous often in judgment, [. . .] and in prose style as cheaply poetical as Mr. Humbert Wolfe or Mr. Basil de Selincourt or any other Sunday journal buffoon” (14).

17 He identifies himself in this passage: “The ‘First Hymn to Lenin’ was followed by a rush of poetry sympathetic to Communism or influenced by it. ‘New Signatures’ (1932) showed the beginning of this trend; ‘New Country’ (1933) contained definitely Communist forms by Auden, Charles Madge, R. E. Warner and others: Spender’s ‘Poems’ and my own ‘Magnetic Mountain,’ both published in 1933, continued the movement” (53). He continues his defence of propaganda thus: “the effect of invocation, of poetry, and of propaganda is to create a state of mind; an own ‘Magnetic Mountain,’ both published in 1933, continued the movement” (53). He continues his defence of propaganda thus: “the effect of invocation, of poetry, and of propaganda is to create a state of mind; an

18 Auden’s syntax, Day Lewis says, allows him somehow to be austere and luxuriant at the same time: to employ “phrases flat and precise on the surface yet suggesting mystery below” (68).

19 Day Lewis can’t quite hold his own instincts in check. This is a remarkably “lyrical” passage.

20 Though he contrasts the works of Day Lewis and the *New Country* poets and the theories of Socialist Realism, Albert Gelpi does suggest many parallels, most notably in terms of their “anti-modernism”: 
the logic of the thirties required conventional forms for revolutionary effectiveness, as the Soviet experience seemed to confirm. The efforts of the Russian avant-garde artists to employ their revolutionary aesthetic in the service of the new Communist regime quickly met official opposition—indeed, brutal suppression and bitter exile—in the very name of the workers’ revolution.  

21 Two poems from The Magnetic Mountain were also included in the first issue of New Verse. Every poem Day Lewis published in New Signatures and New Country made its way into The Magnetic Mountain.

22 Citations are to poem number as recorded in Day Lewis’s Complete Poems; no line numbers are provided.

23 These speakers are not identified by name in The Magnetic Mountain. The speeches of the wife, mother, and schoolmaster were, however, published in New Signatures as “The Wife Speaks,” “The Mother Speaks,” and “The Schoolmaster Speaks.” These were not included with the other excerpts from The Magnetic Mountain but were called “Satirical Poems.”

24 For more on Day Lewis as a writer of epic, see Albert Gelpi. “Where a Modernist like Joyce ironized the epic and Pound registered the heroic in splintered fragments,” he writes, Day Lewis “strove to render the force of the heroic in sustained narrative” (46). He discusses “The Nabara” (1937) as a direct descendent of classical, Anglo-Saxon, and English epic: “In order to raise the sea fights to epic heights, Day Lewis used Greek-like hexameters, heavily stressed and alliterated like the Anglo-Saxon sagas, all laid out in a tightly rhymed [. . .] stanza reminiscent of Spenser’s Faerie Queen” (61).

25 Gelpi argues that “Day Lewis was attempting to give The Magnetic Mountain something of the multiplicity of voices and broader social awareness that Auden was seeking in The Orators” (39). He does not finally disagree with the view of Samuel Hynes, however, that Day Lewis’s “simplistic and categorical presentation of issues and oppositions makes The Magnetic Mountain propaganda” (39).

26 See, for example, the exultant analysis in A Hope for Poetry of The Magnetic Mountain’s opening poem:

> Now to be with you, elate, unshared,
> My kistred joy, O hoverer in wind,
> Over the quarry furiously at rest
> Chaired on shoulders of shouting wind (1; emphases in A Hope)

> “Internal and cross rhyming,” he writes, “can impart a subdued, sustained melodic tone to verse, and enable the writer to use rhyme words which have grown stale as end-rhymes” (72).

27 Magnitogorsk is mentioned many times in the published proceedings of the First Writers’ Union Congress. Karl Radek, for example, writes “[t]he Soviet proletariat, which in actual life has already created Magnitostroy, Dnieprostroy, Kuznetsktroy, had not yet created any works of literature commensurate with the greatness of its material and political achievements” (130).

28 Day Lewis, Grigson writes, “(and all who imitate him or Auden without their ability) would gain by most thoroughly submitting to the truth of Spender’s ‘Poetry and Revolution.’ Spender recognizes danger. In unambiguous, sensuous words hevaluably exposes it and usefully presents a present hardship of the poet” (17). Later in the same issue of New Verse, in a review of Louis Aragon’s The Red Front, Spender writes “If [Aragon’s] type of propaganda has any effect at all, I do not see what that can be except to breed in people a superstitious belief in the necessity of murder and reprisals. This seems to me an excessive simplification” (25).

29 This essay was reprinted, in revised and slightly retitled form, as the “Writers and Manifestos” chapter of Spender’s 1935 book The Destructive Element. Spender was freer here to criticize the LR:

> There is not the least doubt that a great many Communists look on art purely as a party instrument. To take a small instance, I read in a proposed manifesto sent by Alex Brown to Left Review, that “during the initial period of our magazine [it is] most important to carry on rigorous criticism of all highbrowism, intellectualism, abstract rationalism, and similar dilettantism.” And what do these abusive terms mean, one may ask? The answer is only too simple: it is everything that WE happen not to agree with ideologically. (233)

30 This position was adopted at the February 1934 Conference of the British Writers’ International itself. The complete resolution of the conference was printed in each of the first two issues of The Left Review, and responses to it formed a recurring feature of the Review’s first year. Day Lewis responded in the January 1935 issue, and was almost entirely supportive of the statement. His response begins “I believe that the substance and object of this statement are of vital importance to all writers who aim at something more than superficial entertainment” (128); and ends, “I feel sure our Association can do its best work (a) in proving that revolutionary ideas and art are not incompatible and (b) in affirming that no one can be a revolutionary writer who has not thoroughly assimilated these ideas by carrying them into practice” (129).
It was published in English via Martin Lawrence by the Co-Operative Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R.

That literature was to be systematized under the guidance of the Party was implicit in the forming of the Writers’ Union and calling of the Congress; that Soviet literature was to serve as a guide to international writers was implicit in the translation and dissemination of its proceedings in *Problems of Soviet Literature*. That dialectical materialism was to be the philosophical basis of all Soviet art was integral to the Congress’s primary achievement of formulating the “official” state aesthetic of Socialist Realism. As Bukharin phrased it in his address, “socialist realism is a distinct method in art, the counterpart of dialectical materialism, the translation of the latter into terms of art” (251).

The “Faces of our men beneath steel helmets” *should* “echo one face, stone face of a palace, / North ocean reflecting vast speechlessness”—but they *do not*. While “face” is echoed, its half and unstressed rhyme with “palace” is telling—one of Vienna’s signs of hope.
Chapter Three
I Salute Thee; Passing: Virginia Woolf’s “Ode to Cutbush” and the Democratic Art of Hybrid Poetry

The Strange Case of Mr. Cutbush

Why, on a Sunday in late October 1934, did Virginia Woolf write the “Ode Written Partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush Above a Butcher’s Shop in Pentonville”? Why, at the age of fifty-two, having published seven novels and completed the draft for an eighth, having written some thirty short stories and over a hundred essays and reviews, did she write her only poem? We can begin to answer these questions by looking at Woolf’s other works—her novels, stories, and essays—for a basis of comparison by which to understand the unusual Ode. In terms of plot, character, and narrative structure, the Ode fits quite comfortably into Woolf’s oeuvre. Like her short story “An Unwritten Novel” (1920) and her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), Woolf’s Ode belongs to the genre of the “speculative biography,” a form that traces its origins to Baudelaire’s “A une passante.”¹ Like these works, the Ode begins by narrating a fleeting encounter with a stranger in a public space, and then attempts to extrapolate from this encounter an account of the stranger’s life. The Ode has a further similarity to the two works of the 1920s: its double plot. The first plot is the “speculative biography” itself, of John Cutbush, a butcher from suburban London whose name the narrator sees on a sign while passing by his shop. Here we are told of his courtship of a kitchen-maid named Louie, of his reluctant apprenticeship as a butcher, and of his family life in the streets and parks of Pentonville. The second plot, which becomes explicit only toward the end of the Ode, presents the narrator’s self-conscious struggle to properly understand a stranger’s life. The narrator of “An Unwritten Novel” ends her story by declaring her subjects ungraspable (“Mysterious figures! [. . .] Who are you?” (115)); that of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” concludes by insisting that the latter is “an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety” (28). The recognizably Woolfian narrator of the Ode closes similarly, reflecting on “how little we can
interpret and read aright / the name John Cutbush” (151-2). The relationship between the Ode’s Woolfian narrator and her character John Cutbush invites one further comparison: to the relationship between the narrator of *Mrs Dalloway* and her character Septimus Smith. Like Smith—and and like his own close literary relative, Leonard Bast from E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*—John Cutbush belongs to a lower social class than his narrator, though he bridges this class divide, to some extent, through self-education (while Smith reads Shakespeare, and Bast, Ruskin, Cutbush is a reader of Byron).

In its style, however, the Ode is singular among Woolf’s works. Its formal complications extend beyond the fact that it is, discounting the poems written for *Between the Acts*, Woolf’s only production in verse; for as its seemingly endless title both proclaims and demonstrates, it is not simply “a poem,” but one written “Partly in Prose.” The Ode’s six-page typewritten manuscript does nothing to resolve its generic complexity: amid numerous typos and handwritten corrections, it is very difficult to say for certain where the poetry ends and the prose begins. In the opening verse paragraph, for example, which introduces John amid his parents’ deliberations over whether he should be apprenticed as a florist or butcher, there is only a single clear line break; the other lines simply run to the edge of the page. Thrown into this hybrid form is a tremendously varied jumble of images. Set against John’s equally ordinary and geographically limited career options are his grand and globally expansive dreams of waves in California, a humming bird in “Aethiopeia,” and the King in Buckingham Palace (5-8); against the elevating “Oh Cutbush” and occasional outbursts of heroic diction there is the doleful register of “little John [. . .] standing glum” (1). Woolf’s “Ode” thus fits very uncomfortably into that generic designation: it is not really, or wholly, in verse; and its encomiastic role of celebrating or elevating its hero is limited both by the putative hero’s suburban ordinariness and the narrator’s apparent unwillingness or incapacity to elevate him. After considering the Ode in relation to Woolf’s other works, then, we are left not with answers but with further
questions: we wonder not only why she wrote the Ode but also why, ten years after writing the works the Ode most resembles, she decided to return to the “speculative biography” and to a character so much like Septimus Smith.

In our quest for answers, we can look to Woolf’s *Diary* and *Letters*. While nothing appears in either for October 28th, the day she wrote the Ode, contiguous entries provide some illumination. We find that on the 24th, in a letter discussing a dinner she was planning, Woolf mentions Stephen Spender and his “Epic,” *Vienna* (L 5:340-1); on the 26th, she describes a party where she met Yeats, who spoke to her of the occult (D 4:255-7). On the 29th, the day after writing the Ode, she writes in her diary, “[r]eading Antigone. How powerful that spell is still—Greek. Thank heaven I learnt it young—an emotion different from any other. I will read Plotinus: Herodotus: Homer I think” (257).

That same day—and here we notice a significant repetition—she wrote a letter to Spender, declining to review *Vienna*, which he had sent her a few days before. Turning to the index of Woolf’s *Letters*, we notice that Spender was a frequent correspondent of Woolf’s in the months leading up to October, 1934—and this correspondence, we soon find, contains our first real clues as to why Woolf chose to write her only “poem.” One letter in particular—written June 10th—evinces a generic restlessness that seems a likely motive for Woolf’s experiment in hybrid verse. She begins by responding to some remarks of Spender’s about *Vienna*, then in progress, and the relationship between poetry and political propaganda; this leads her to reflections on the generic limitations of poetry: “poetry makes statements,” she says, but “aren’t there some shades of being that it cant state?” The respective limitations of poetry and prose, she goes on to say, are a present preoccupation of hers:

I am writing with prejudice, I admit, for I spent the last week describing the state of reading poetry [and prose] together, and I don’t think you could say that in poetry. So with an infinite number of things: or such is my feeling. Then I go on to say that prose, as written, is only half fledged; and has a future, and should grow. (L 5:315)
It is not only “the things you can’t say in poetry” that are on Woolf’s mind in this letter; she is also concerned with the restrictions of prose, which is “only half fledged” and must “grow.” If we read elsewhere in the Diaries, we see that in mid-1934 Woolf was at work on what would become The Years, a work she describes as a “representational” novel with “[n]o ‘beautiful writing’” (D 4:245). We can speculate that Woolf’s lively correspondence with Spender, the young poet, was inspired in part by her sense of the limitations of her prose form in The Years, and of the advantages in some respects of the less “representational” form of poetry. What I have called Woolf’s “generic restlessness” is on full display in the part of the letter in which she tells Spender, “I should like to write four lines at a time, describing the same feeling, as a musician does; because it always seems to me that things are going on at so many different levels simultaneously” (L 5:315). And she makes it clear, as she continues, that she believes she has much to learn from poetry: “I shall like anytime to read your poem; I want to read nothing but poetry” (L 5:315).

If we can see in this correspondence some rudiments of an explanation for Woolf’s desire to write the Ode—a process of self-questioning that leads her to regard her own prose form as limited, and growing curiosity about the generic advantages of prose-infused poetry—we are still left wondering, why then, exactly? Why did she write the Ode in October, 1934 and not at some other time? The diaries and letters suggest that this generic project was given impetus by the same political concerns that led Spender to write Vienna when he did. On the 18th of February, she wrote in her diary, “[a]ll last week they were fighting in Vienna: this somehow comes closer to usual to our safe London life: people shot down. why?” (D 4:202). Three days before, she had written to her nephew Quentin Bell, who was living near Monaco, “[y]ou are nearer Vienna than I am—but everybody says here this is the beginning of the end. We are to have Mosley within five years” (L 5:277). On July 2nd, Woolf wrote to Ethyl Smith about Hitler’s purge of the Brownshirts—the so-called “Night of the Long Knives” that Hitler addresses in Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will: “For the first time almost
in my life I am honestly, without exaggeration, appalled by the Germans! Cant get over it. How can you or anyone explain last week end! Their faces! Hitler! Think of that hung before us as the ideal of human life!” (L 5:313). A diary entry of the same day shows the intrusion of far-off political events into the matter of everyday life: “A fine hot summers day here & we took Philip Babs & 3 children to the Zoo. Meanwhile these brutal bullies go about in hoods & masks, like little boys dressed up, acting this idiotic, meaningless, brutal, bloody, pandemonium” (D 4:223). The Night of the Long Knives is still on Woolf’s mind several days later in her letter to Spender, which she concludes as follows: “What about politics? Even I am shocked by the last week in Germany into taking part: but that only means reading the newspapers” (L 5:315). Woolf is much too modest: one is not placed on a Nazi hit-list merely for reading newspapers. The Ode, we will come to see, can be rightly regarded as a form of anti-Fascist participation, though it is inevitable that Woolf’s literary “taking-part” should differ substantially from that of the Communist-aligned Spender. That Woolf should “take part” by writing a “speculative biography” rather, say, than a semi-Epic in the style of Vienna, indeed tells us much about their political differences.

So why the “speculative biography”? Why unearth the decade-old premise of “An Unwritten Novel” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”? Why respond to Vienna and to the Night of the Long Knives by imagining the life of a stranger? A final contemporary occurrence, again approachable via Spender, helps to elucidate. On October 24th, Woolf noted with pleasure that Spender had defended her in The Spectator against the attacks of Wyndham Lewis’s Men Without Art. Woolf first learned that Lewis’s book was to appear on October 11th, writing in her diary, “[n]ow I know by reason & instinct that this is an attack; that I am publicly demolished” (D 4:250). When she read the book two days later, she wrote, “[t]his morning I’ve taken the arrow of W.L. to my heart: he makes tremendous & delightful fun of B&B [“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”]: calls me a peeper, not a looker, a fundamental prude” (251). Hermione Lee, in her biography of Woolf, argues that the Ode,
attempting as it does “to imagine the whole life of a London butcher,” is “clearly [a] response to Lewis’s jibes about ‘peeping’” (658). Woolf did want to confront Lewis’s criticism: she wrote in her diary, “[i]f there is truth in W. L. well, face it: I’ve no doubt I am prudish and peeping, well then live more boldly” (252). The “speculative biography,” premised on the desire to see and understand another person, presented an excellent form in which to respond. It also presented a way to “take part” in the fight against Fascism—for the urge to inhabit the perspective of a stranger, as I will argue, is fundamental to Woolf’s understanding of democracy.

Proceeding from these hints and leads, this chapter will argue that Woolf wrote the “Ode to Cutbush” in October, 1934 because she believed that such novelistic poems could contribute positively to the preservation and development of democracy. My first section focuses on Woolf’s long theoretical engagement with the politics of hybrid genre, looking particularly at the arguments for the democratic potential of poetic prose. The next section will argue that in the early 1930s, Woolf became increasingly interested in hybridity “in the other direction”: in her writings on the “Auden Group” in particular she concerned herself with the possible benefits of the incorporation of prose elements into poetry. The chief advantage for Woolf of poetry over prose is its capacity to inculcate in its reader a “rhythmic” attitude: a way of reading everyday life as one would a poem, and thus of seeing as meaningfully interconnected the myriad discordancies that characterize modern life.

I will next proceed to a reading of the Ode that sees it as the product of Woolf’s long engagement with the politics of hybrid genre, and particularly of novelistic poetry. Focusing primarily on the way the novelistic technique of free indirect discourse mediates a complex and shifting interaction of poetic voices, I will make a case for Woolf’s Ode as a coherent and successful artistic response to the political situation of October, 1934.
A Hybrid Form for a Democratic Age

It would be difficult to imagine a figure more comprehensively involved in the debate about the death of poetry (without yet being mentioned in connection with it) than Virginia Woolf. Of the many books and articles discussed in the previous chapter, most were either written by interlocutors of Woolf’s or published by her Hogarth Press. R. C. Trevelyan was a personal friend and correspondent of Woolf’s, as were two of those who responded to Trevelyan, Desmond MacCarthy and Vita Sackville-West. Each of Cock Robin’s Decease, Contemporary Techniques of Poetry, and Another Future for Poetry was published in the Hogarth Essays series. Herbert Read was a Hogarth author: his 1928 critical work Phases of English Poetry was published there, and he contributed his 1925 memoir In Retreat to the Hogarth Essays. The “new poetic generation” too was intimately connected with Woolf and the Hogarth Press. John Lehmann, a member in good standing of that generation, was an employee of the Press from 1931. It was with his assistance that Hogarth published both New Signatures and New Country, the volumes that introduced the “Auden group” to the English reading public. Day Lewis’s Magnetic Mountain bore the Hogarth imprint, as did his two previous collections. As for Spender himself, he was a friend and correspondent of Woolf’s, and his Vienna, as we have seen, had a significant role in the genesis of her only “poem.”

Moreover, Virginia Woolf was not only a curator of these debates but actively engaged in them. It is with extreme difficulty, in fact, that I have sequestered Woolf’s critical voice in this separate chapter. The truth is that each of the texts cited in the previous chapter is in conversation, whether directly or indirectly, with Woolf’s essays and fiction. It is indeed from Woolf that I have taken the debate’s name. As her narrator looks out the window in the final chapter of A Room of One’s Own, she imagines the indifference of passersby: “Nobody cared a straw [. . .] for the future of fiction, the death of poetry or the development by the average woman of a prose style completely expressive of her mind” (112). In the context of this dissertation, we cannot be left indifferent to
Woolf’s discussion of these topics. Indeed, Woolf is perhaps the most important theorist of genre to my argument, since she returns so often to the value of hybrid forms that combine elements of prose and poetry, and since she defends these hybrids so directly in terms of their social value in a democratic society.

In a dissertation that aims to discuss the democratic import of experiments in hybrid genre by Woolf, Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis, Woolf is in one respect the most likely candidate—for she, unlike Eliot and Lewis, was on the Nazi hit-list, and does not, like them, have a reputation as a reactionary. At the same time, however, the fact that she did not write any traditionally political works—and that she did not hold official posts in democratic institutions or sit on committees—makes it more difficult to establish her political bona fides. In Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere, however, Melba Cuddy-Keane presents a strong case for Woolf’s importance to the defense and promotion of early twentieth century democracy. Much as Ken Hirschkop argues that Bakhtinian dialogism should be viewed as contributing necessary extra-institutional cultural “depth” to democratic institutions (53), Cuddy-Keane argues that Woolf sought to develop the styles of discourse and modes of thought necessary to the successful functioning of democratic systems.

Woolf’s essays, addressed to a “common reader” defined by curiosity and intelligence rather than by class, have as their “social project” the education of their readership for meaningful participation in social and political life: Cuddy-Keane argues that Woolf “wrote about literature to inculcate good reading practices, and she did so because she believed that an educated public is crucial to the success of democratic society” (2). This education is actualized both in the content of Woolf’s essays, which encourage and enact “the empowerment of marginalized, repressed, or absent voices” (39), and in their shifting, self-reflexive, dialogic style—what Woolf called her “turn & turn about method,” and something very like the Auerbachian critical style I have labeled “honest.” Inculcating “mental agility and flexibility” in their very style, Cuddy-Keane argues, the social impact of Woolf’s
essays is to “cultivate active minds in opposition to the normative and regulative influences of authoritarian discourses” (121). In several ways, Woolf’s “Ode to Cutbush” fits into the democratic essayistic project outlined by Cuddy-Keane. Later in this chapter, I will explore the manner in which the poem’s hybrid form elicits the active engagement and mental agility of its reader. We have already noted one of the “marginalized, repressed, or absent voices” that the Ode seeks to reintroduce to the social conversation: that of working-class John Cutbush. But now let us look at another repressed voice that it resurrects: the voice of poetry.

Woolf returns often in her essays of the 1920s to the importance of poetic language, arguing insistently that if poetry is indeed dying in the early twentieth century, it is at great expense to the development of its democracies. While seldom remarked, this is one of the central arguments about genre in *A Room of One’s Own*. It would be possible to misread Woolf as advancing in this work a Bakhtin-like attack on poetry at the expense of the novel; her famous remark that nineteenth-century female writers inherited “a sentence that was unsuited for a woman’s use” (92) is bolstered, for example, by the claim that the poetic genres they inherited were no more congenial to their purposes. Just as Bakhtin attacks the epic as a genre “already completely finished [. . .] congealed and half-moribund” and celebrates the novel as “not only alive, but still young” (“Epic and Novel,” 14, 3), Woolf sees the novel—in all its elasticity and freedom from generic constraints—as the only option available to the female writer:

There is no reason to think that the form of the epic or of the poetic play suits a woman any more than the sentence suits her. But all the older forms of literature were hardened and set in place by the time she became a writer. The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands. (92)

However, while Woolf, like her contemporary Bakhtin, sees poetic epic and verse drama as “hardened,” moribund genres unsuitable to a modern female writer, she does not share his polemical disgust for poetry in general. Indeed, later in this same passage Woolf argues that female writers have lost something valuable by working so exclusively in prose genres, and calls for the
development of new hybrid forms of the novel that incorporate elements of their lost inheritance—of poetry. “No doubt we shall find her knocking that in to shape for herself when she has free use of her limbs,” Woolf says of the female novelist of the future, “and providing some new vehicle, not necessarily in verse, for the poetry in her. For it is the poetry that is still denied outlet” (92).

The political dimension of the suppression of the poetic voice is developed in the first and final chapters of A Room of One’s Own. At the scene of the Oxbridge lunch, Woolf boldly identifies the disappearance of poetry as a central problem of modernity. Comparing the lunch to an imagined pre-war scene, she says “[e]verything was different”:

Nothing was changed; nothing was different save only—here I listened with all my ears not entirely to what was being said, but to the murmur or current behind it. Yes, that was it—the change was there. Before the war at a luncheon party like this people would have said precisely the same things but they would have sounded different, because in those days they were accompanied by a sort of humming noise, not articulate, but musical, exciting, which changed the value of the words themselves. (15-16)

The observation that “we have stopped humming under our breath” (19) recurs throughout the work. The narrator sees this loss of the musical quality of speech, for example, in modern poetry: while she can quote the mellifluous verse of Tennyson and Rossetti at length, she “cannot remember more than two consecutive lines of modern poetry” (18). In the final chapter, the narrator associates the “humming” quality of speech with the suggestivity of poetic language, and makes a political case for the importance of poetic language by contrasting it with the denotative and referential styles of Fascism. In the course of her argument about androgyny, Woolf’s narrator picks up a novel by a hypothetical male novelist, “Mr. A,” and finds a creative blockage—an “impediment of Mr. A’s mind which blocked the fountain of creative energy and shored it within narrow limits.” She quickly identifies the “impediment” in question: Mr. A—the victim of an age in which “virility has now become self conscious”—“no longer hums under his breath” (118). In the self-consciously masculine writing of modernity, she continues, “[i]t is the power of suggestion that one misses most” (119). The political analogy is made when she considers the paradox of a Fascist poem. Since
political Fascism is predicated on the subservience of the populace to the desires of the leader, and “humming” poetic language is characterized by its suggestivity and irreducibility to a single meaning, she concludes that the Fascist poem is a logical impossibility: “Poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father,” she says; “[t]he Fascist poem, one may fear, will be a horrid little abortion such as one sees in a glass jar in the museum of some country town” (121). Woolf shares with Bakhtin—with whom, owing to factors of language, and geography, and political repression, she was unable to enter into conversation—an appreciation of the elasticity of the novel and the recognition that it is better suited to the conditions of modernity than the poetic epic. But her theory of genre differs from his in important ways: she does not take his step of associating all poetry with authoritarian discourse, and indeed sees its suggestiveness as formally anathema to the Fascist’s need for fixed, explicit meanings; and she does not see poetry and the novel as binary opposites, but suggests the aesthetic and political advantages of their combination into hybrid forms.

These differences from Bakhtin are presented more clearly still in an essay published two years before A Room of One’s Own, “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future” (1927), Woolf’s most significant and direct engagement with the politics of hybrid genre. While A Room of One’s Own makes a mostly negative case for the democratic value of hybrid form—arguing that poetic suggestiveness is incompatible with Fascism, and lamenting the absence of poetic “humming” from modern life—“Poetry, Fiction, and the Future” outlines affirmatively the social role of such forms. Like A Room of One’s Own, it begins from the premise that the disappearance of poetry from modern life presents a grave sociological problem. If hers is “an age clearly when we are not fast anchored where we are,” she proposes to discuss one possible reason for this predicament: “the failure of poetry to serve us as it has served so many generations of our fathers” (429). The social condition for which this “failure of poetry” is partly responsible, Woolf argues, is characterized by discordant diversity and unresolved difference. She illustrates this spatially through the image of a city street:
The long avenue of brick is cut up into boxes, each of which is inhabited by a different human being who has put locks on his doors and bolts on his windows to ensure some privacy, yet is linked to his fellows by wires which pass overhead, by waves of sound which pour through the room and speak to him of battles and murders and strikes and revolution all over the world. (433-4)

Possibilities for connection are repeatedly frustrated in Woolf’s description of the modern apartment building: while it brings its residents close to one another, they lock themselves up in their individual cells, and remain mutually alienated; and while the new technologies of the telephone and radio introduce themselves as means of establishing connection beyond these isolated units, they seem only to bring messages of hatred, violence, and social discord. As Woolf continues, the apartment building becomes an image of the modern mind, which is equally beset by unresolved paradoxes. If one were to go in and speak to the apartment-dweller, she says, one would find that “he is extremely alive to everything—to ugliness, sordidity, beauty, amusement”; he is also “immensely inquisitive,” and “follows every thought careless where it may lead him.” But this curiosity and alertness to experience in all its contrasting variety produces what Woolf calls “his most marked characteristic—the strange way in which things that have no apparent connection are associated in his mind”:

“Feelings which used to come simple and separate do so no longer. Beauty is part ugliness; amusement part disgust; pleasure part pain” (432-3). As she states in another part of the essay, in a modern world from which poetry has disappeared, “[t]he mind is full of monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions” (429). This “hybridity” of experience, the essay argues, requires a hybrid form for its expression.

For Woolf—as for Eliot and Lewis, as we will see in coming chapters—the Elizabethan poetic drama provides an important historical example of a hybrid form properly adapted to its age and able to express its contradictions. This form, ranging effortlessly “from philosophy to a drunken brawl; from love songs to an argument,” conveys an Elizabethan “attitude to life [. . .] made up of all sorts of different things” (431). The poetic forms being practiced in the early twentieth century,
however, are not adapted to a social situation characterized by multiplicity and difference—an “attitude,” as she describes it, “full of contrast and collision” (430). While excellent modern poetry is being written, Woolf argues, it is being written in a useless genre: the lyric. “[F]or our generation and the generation that is coming,” she says, “the lyric cry of ecstasy or despair which is so intense, so personal and so limited, is not enough” (429). In a democratic age defined by its multiplicity of voices, the “personal” and single-voiced lyric is not of any use. What is needed is “some general shaping power, some conception which lends the whole harmony and force”; “[t]he fine fabric of the lyric,” she concludes, “is no more fitted to contain [the modern] point of view than a rose leaf to envelop the rugged immensity of a rock” (430).

The style Woolf proposes for the present, and envisions as a participant in the establishment of a democratic future, combines elements of poetry and the novel, both of which she regards as inadequate in isolation to the needs of her historical situation. Poetry, she argues, has been employed too much on the side of beauty, and has been kept too remote from “the common purposes of life” (434). Having too long “remained aloof in the possession of her priests,” the poetry of the early twentieth century finds itself incapable of expressing the “hybrid emotions” and social diversity of its age:

When we ask poetry to express this discord, this incongruity, this sneer, this contrast, this curiosity, the quick, queer emotions which are bred in small separate rooms, the wide, general ideas civilization teaches, which have kept her at arms’ length, she cannot move quickly enough, or broadly enough to do it. (434)

Woolf continues by arguing that the novel too is unsuited to its age. In a world in which “beauty is part ugliness,” Woolf argues, the novel has shown itself capable of truly describing only the latter. If poetry is too remote from “the common purposes of life,” prose is too much occupied with them: “Prose has taken on all dirty work on to her own shoulders; has answered letters, paid bills, written articles, made speeches, served the needs of businessmen, shopkeepers, lawyers, soldiers, peasants” (434)—but it has not expressed what is beautiful in the lives of its many and diverse users. Thus, in
writing her prescription for the “future of fiction,” Woolf proposes a hybrid genre “written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry”; which has “something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose” (435):

It will give the relations of man to Nature, to fate; his imagination; his dreams. But it will also give the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life. It will take the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things—the modern mind. Therefore it will clasp to its breast the precious prerogatives of the democratic art of prose; its freedom, its fearlessness, its flexibility. (436)

Woolf’s hybrid form employs the “democratic art of prose” to include the marginalized voices of a diverse society, but also recognizes that a crucial element of this social project involves including the poetic voices that have been “denied outlet.” This form will thus satisfy the longing at all social levels “for ideas, for dreams, for imagination, for poetry” (436). In the summer of 1934, with democracy under much more urgent threat than in 1927, writing to a young poet committed to fighting the growing threat of Fascism, it was to “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future” that Woolf’s mind turned. When she tells Stephen Spender in her letter of June 10th that she is busy revising an essay for a proposed third Common Reader whose argument is that “prose, as written, is only half fledged; and has a future, and should grow,” it is clearly to this essay that she refers. Her decision to follow this letter by writing a novelistic poem rather than a poetic novel, however, requires further explanation.

Hybridity in the Other Direction

Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel” envisions the incorporation of poetry into the novel—what it calls “novelization”—as a hostile process in which poetic elements are mortified and ridiculed. For Galin Tihanov, novelization thus represents generic “colonization” rather than genuine inter-generic dialogue (147). In Woolf’s “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future,” there is some suggestion that the hybrid form she envisions might result from similarly violent action. “[W]e may guess,” Woolf says,
that we are going in the direction of prose and that in ten or fifteen years’ time prose will be used for purposes for which prose has never been used before. That cannibal, the novel, which has devoured so many forms of art, will by then have devoured even more. (434)

One could argue that it was as an abettor of novelistic cannibalism that Woolf worked in the 1920s and early 1930s. To the Lighthouse, written as an “elegy,” and The Waves, written to a rhythm (L 4:204), are both thoroughly poetic works. In a letter Stephen Spender wrote to Woolf from Vienna in 1934, he says, “[n]ow I write this, I remember your books—the ones I most like—seem to me to be poetry” (qtd. in Lee 612). In another letter to a young poet, John Lehmann, Woolf identifies her generic “perspective” as that of a novelist seeking to introduce elements of prose: writing in June, 1932, she follows a criticism of Auden by stating, “[b]ut I may be transferring to him some of the ill effects of my own struggles in the other direction—writes [sic] poetry in prose” (83). Throughout the 1930s, however, Woolf became increasingly interested in generic hybridity from that other “perspective”: in the incorporation of novelistic elements into poetry. In a letter to R. C. Trevelyan in April, 1934, Woolf says that her “plea for adventurous prose is not disinterested,” for “had I been able to write poetry no doubt I should have been content to leave the other alone” (L 5:293). When she imagines herself as a poet in the essays of the early 1930s, however, she does no such thing.

The first of Woolf’s essays to explore the question of novelistic poetry, “Aurora Leigh” (1932), is itself written in a remarkable hybrid form. Woolf employs in this essay all her resources as a novelist—most notably, free indirect discourse—to produce a polyphonic exploration of the generic possibilities and pitfalls of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s 1857 novel-poem. The first voice to speak in the essay is that of Barrett Browning herself, in direct quotation from her diary, expressing her desire for Aurora Leigh to deal with subjects normally reserved for the novel—to “[r]ush into drawing rooms and the like, ‘where angels fear to tread’; and so [meet] face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age” (203). Another voice is that of the character Aurora Leigh, who in Woolf’s paraphrase argues for something like Bakhtin’s “contact” between poetry and the living present:
“The true work of poets, she said, is to present their own age [. . .]. For living art presents and records real life, and the only life we can truly know is our own” (209). Mingling her own critical voice with a free indirect discourse rendering of Barrett Browning’s, Woolf’s essay summarizes the generic aims of *Aurora Leigh* as follows:

It was true that the old form in which poetry had dealt with life—the drama—was obsolete; but was there none other that could take its place? Mrs Browning, convinced of the divinity of poetry, pondered, seized as much as she could of actual experience, and then at last threw down her challenge to the Brontës and the Thackerays in nine books of blank verse. (210)

Throughout the essay, however, other voices intervene to question the success of the attempt. The literary “primers” accuse Barrett Browning of clumsiness and formlessness (202). A voice with engrained expectations regarding the proper subjects of novels and poetry calls *Aurora Leigh* “absurd.” When a poet “poaches upon a novelist’s preserves and gives us not an epic or a lyric but the story of many lives that move and change and are inspired by the interests and passions that are ours in the middle of the reign of Queen Victoria,” this Victorian voice complains, the results are ridiculous: in Barrett Browning’s attempts to versify the trivial and mundane, “[t]he simple words have been made to strut and posture and take on emphasis which makes them ridiculous” (211). Another voice succeeds this, however, which is more sympathetic to Barrett Browning’s achievement. “If we compare the prose novel and the novel-poem,” it says, “the triumphs are by no means all to the credit of prose” (212). The characters in *Aurora Leigh* achieve a “heightened symbolical significance unachievable in the novel,” and “[t]he general aspect of things—market, sunset, church—have a brilliance and continuity, owing to the compressions and elisions of poetry, which mock the prose writer and his slow accumulations of careful detail” (213). From this perspective, Barrett Browning demonstrated a “flash of genius when she rushed into the drawing-room and said that here, where we live and work, is the true place of the poet” (213). Without allowing either of these voices to prevail over the other—without herself pronouncing *Aurora Leigh* absurd or superb—Woolf concludes her essay by considering the novel-poem’s relevance in 1932. Whether or not it was
successful, she says, *Aurora Leigh* is an example of bold generic adventurousness lacking in the present:

> the best compliment we can pay *Aurora Leigh* is that it makes us wonder why it has left no successors. Surely the street, the drawing-room, are promising subjects; modern life is worthy of the muse. But the rapid sketch that Elizabeth Browning threw off when she leapt from her couch and dashed into the drawing-room remains unfinished. The conservatism and timidity of poets still leaves the chief spoils of modern life to the novelist. We have no novel-poem of the age of George the Fifth. (213)

Two years later, Woolf would make the attempt herself—as I will argue—in her “Ode to Cutbush.” But “Aurora Leigh,” which appeared in Woolf’s *Second Common Reader* in the same year that the Hogarth Press published *New Signatures*, seems to have as its more immediate target the young poets represented in that volume—an audience she addresses more directly in yet another work of 1932.

The idea for *A Letter to a Young Poet*—Woolf’s contribution to the Hogarth Letters series—was suggested by John Lehmann. In a September 1931 letter, Woolf declared the idea “most brilliant” and described herself as “seething with immature and ill considered and wild and annoying ideas about prose and poetry” (*L* 4:381). Suggesting that Lehmann “get Spender and Auden and Day Lewis to join in” and asking “Why should poetry be dead? etc. etc.,” Woolf provided in her letter a miniature prospectus for the volume that appeared the next year, which concerns itself with the enfeebled state of poetry and the possibility of its renaissance in the Auden generation. Perhaps because it was inserted into the already dialogic framework of the Hogarth Letters—which, though individually published, responded and sometimes replied directly to one another10—Woolf’s *Letter* advances a more straightforward argument than the polyphonic “Aurora Leigh.” It argues that the poetry of Auden’s generation, though promising, is imperiled by two contradictory tendencies. The first, curiously, is its democratic and hybridizing impulse to include the full range of social experience and subject matter. In Woolf’s reading of Auden’s “Which of you waking early and watching daybreak,”11 this extended range is personified, somewhat awkwardly, by the charwoman
Mrs. Gape, a class-other who is made to stand for all that is conventionally regarded as prosaic as opposed to poetic:

   The poet is trying to include Mrs. Gape. He is honestly of the opinion that she can be brought into poetry and will do very well there. Poetry, he feels, will be improved by the actual, the colloquial. But though I honour him for the attempt, I doubt that it is wholly successful. I feel a jar. I feel a shock. (222)

Is this not, we might ask, just the shock of honest, hybrid language? Might it not simply be evidence of Bakhtinian discourse “warm from struggle”? Woolf’s response calls back to the analysis of unresolved dualities in “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future”:

   The poem is cracked in the middle. Look, it comes apart in my hands: here is reality on one side, here is beauty on the other; and instead of acquiring a whole object round and entire, I am left with broken parts in my hands which, since my reason has been roused and my imagination has not been allowed to take entire possession of me, I contemplate coldly, critically, and with distaste. (223)

Woolf considers his poem promising—worthy of “honour”—and approves Auden’s attempt, as she did Barrett Browning’s, to integrate novelistic elements into poetry. Woolf argues, however, that Auden’s poem ramifies rather than harmonizes the paradoxes of modern experience; to employ terminology from chemistry, she finds that Auden produces not a solution of the solute prose and solvent poetry, but rather a mechanical mixture of the two. The modern reader needs a poem able to form the chaotic associations and “hybrid emotions” of his mind into an emotional whole, but here poetry and prose only meet, and do not mingle.

   Turning to Spender and Day Lewis, Woolf identifies the second dangerous tendency of the young poets as their exaggerated interest in the self—their excessive lyricism. Recalling the image of the apartment block of “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future,” she calls theirs essentially a poetics of “small separate rooms”: “the self that you are engaged in describing,” Woolf says, “is a self that sits alone in the room at night with the blinds drawn” (226). While the poetry of the 1930s is anxious to include material from marginalized social strata, it does not succeed in imagining life from any perspective other than its own. It thus presents a descriptively accurate image of the paradoxical
modern mind: entranced by beauty in one moment, and overcome by dull everyday existence the next; intensely interested in the everyday, and yet cloistered from it. Woolf demands more from art than mere descriptive accuracy, however: she wants it to set these paradoxes in some rhythmic relation.

It is indeed rhythm—the villain of Bakhtin’s generic melodrama—that Woolf proposes as the most important generic tool at the poet’s disposal for the chemical “solution” of the unresolved cleavages of modern life. Though it is an age in which “there are a thousand voices prophesying despair”—claiming “[s]cience [. . .] has made poetry impossible; that there is no poetry in motor cars and wireless” (229)—Woolf argues that these voices “do not go nearly deep enough to destroy the most profound and primitive of instincts, the instinct of rhythm” (203). The task of the young poet in this world riven by paradox is to discover latent harmonies:

All you need now is to stand at the window and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open, and shut, boldly and freely, until one thing melts into another, until the taxis are dancing with the daffodils, until a whole has been made from all these separate fragments. (230)

Though she adds, “I do not know what I mean by rhythm” (231), the consequences of its employment by the young poets of the 1930s are the same as those of the genre hypothesized in “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future”: to move democratically out into the world; to see this world in all its discordancy; and, without removing or denying the discordancies, to harmonize them by recovering hidden associations and unnoticed beauty. The affective dimension of such “rhythmic” works is suggested by the similarity of this image to one in the final chapter of A Room of One’s Own. There, the narrator—looking out her window, just as Woolf would have the young poets do—watches a man, a woman, and a taxi-cab converge at a point directly below her. When the man and woman then get in to the taxi, the narrator says, “[t]he sight was ordinary enough; what was strange was the rhythmical order with which my imagination had invested it” (113). This sight, she says, “seems to ease the mind of some strain” (113). In A Letter to a Young Poet, Woolf asks the poet also
to look out his window, and suggests that their work can ease their readers’ minds “of some strain”: “let your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses, sparrows—whatever come [sic] along the street—until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole. That perhaps is your task [ . . .] to re-think human life into poetry” (230). If the poets of the 1930s could succeed in their hybrid task—could use their poet’s instinct for rhythm to discover the strands that connect the diverse elements of life in an early-twentieth century democracy—they could instill in their readership a capacity for doing the same. If the poet can “re-think human life in poetry,” he can also teach his reader how to see life in 1934 not as a tangle of contradictions but as a harmonious dance. If an artistic style could help us to read everyday life the same way we read a poem, Woolf suggests, it would be one appropriate to that “queer conglomeration of incongruous things,” the democratic world.

Taken as a whole, Woolf’s engagement with questions of democracy and genre is characteristically multi-voiced. In A Room of One’s Own she presents a negative case for the democratic value of the suppressed voice of poetry: if its suggestivity makes it un-Fascist or even anti-Fascist, then its capacity of opening up meaning can be read as contributing to democratic diversity. As “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future” suggests, however, poetry alone is not enough: it must be combined with prose, whose democratic aspect lies in its capacity to deal with the full range of experience. In the essays of the early 1930s, where she imagines hybridity from the perspective of a poet rather than a novelist, the quality of poetic rhythm becomes a central interest. This generic aspect, arguably more prominent in novelistic poetry than poetic prose, is not only a way of writing but also a way of reading that in turn becomes a way of seeing: the best poetry, Woolf suggests, can inculcate in its reader an attitude to the modern world in which its multitudes of contradictions and discordancies can be seen as interconnected—not resolved into a unity, yet also not mutually hostile; rather, incorporated holistically into a rhythmic dance.
As she wrote the “Ode to Cutbush” in her country house, Rodmell, Virginia Woolf’s copy of Stephen Spender’s *Vienna* sat unread in her London mailbox. Despite these complications of space and time, however, the two works bear an apparent similarity. *Vienna*, after bravely assaying the epic in its opening sections, collapses in defeat into the lyric “I, I, I” in its conclusion (50). The “Ode to Cutbush,” after bravely imagining the lives of John and Louie Cutbush in its first plot, appears also to collapse into lyrical defeat in its self-analytic final movement. Woolf closes the Ode as follows:

```plaintext
as we
hold the *Evening Standard* under the lamp how little
we think of the wealth we can gather between the
palms of two hands; how little we can grasp;
how little we can interpret and read aright
the name John Cutbush but only as we pass his
shop on Saturday night, cry out Hail Cutbush
of Pentonville, I salute thee; passing. (147-154)
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Given that Woolf theorizes hybrid poetic genres as possessing the potential to set contrasting opposites in rhythmic relation, things seem remarkably set apart at the end of the Ode. The speaker’s voice is unmistakably poetic, but apparently in the wrong mode: in its diction, its rhythms, and its tone, this would seem precisely the “lyric cry of despair” condemned in “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future.” And this heightened, personal mode seems self-consciously at odds with its “ungraspable” ordinary subject: John Cutbush, his shop on a Saturday night, and the newspaper, the chronicle of everyday life. The sense of a failure to bridge the putatively poetic and the putatively prosaic is reinforced by the passage’s stark pronoun distinctions: the lyric “I” is contrasted with the cherished but remote “thee” and, more problematically perhaps, a higher-class “we” seems to stand far apart from the unknowable, working-class “his.” Just like the conclusion of *Vienna*, then, the end of Woolf’s Ode seems an admission of generic defeat: John is left prosaic, the speaker poetic, and the closing “Hail Cutbush,” therefore, either despairing or mocking. In her reading of what she
calls Woolf’s “strange prose ‘Ode’,” Hermione Lee argues that in this final movement Woolf “recogniz[es] in some despair the limitations of her view” (658).

Yet while many important similarities exist between Woolf’s and Spender’s poems, the argument of this chapter is that generic failure is not among them. To read Woolf’s Ode as a self-conscious failure, I would argue, is not only to misunderstand its generic intentions and Woolf’s criteria of generic success, but also to underestimate its complexity. Like most of Woolf’s writing, the “Ode to Cutbush” is a work of considerable narratological sophistication: it is composed of many voices and many perspectives, each of which is in conversation with the rest, and each of which develops and changes in the course of the poem. In deference to this complexity, I will approach the Ode in a roughly sequential manner, exploring the questions and difficulties raised as it progresses, and considering as I go its provisional solutions. Beginning from these charges of classist snobbery and generic failure, I will present Woolf’s Ode as a rather unusual onion: the more layers you peel back, the less it stings. First I will show how it responds to the ideologically suspect project of “elevating” the sordid and the prosaic by means of poetry. Its allusions to Byron, I argue, tie it to a poetic tradition already characterized by inclusiveness and hybridity. Next, through an analysis of the Ode’s vocal complexities and use of “slippery” FID, I will show how poetry is not an external imposition into the lives of John and Louie, but a presence in it. Analyzing John’s use of epic devices, I will suggest that his voice should be read, to some extent, as ideologically and stylistically independent of that of Woolf’s narrator—but that his poetic voice, though differentiable from Woolf’s and the narrator, enacts some of the effects Woolf sought in her Letter to a Young Poet, particularly through its use of rhythm. I will conclude by re-reading the Ode’s final lines, which, I argue, both recognize and instantiate the potential of Woolf’s experiment in hybrid genre.

We can begin the peeling process by considering the Ode in relation to Woolf’s two criticisms of the “Auden Group” in her Letter to a Young Poet. The Ode’s apparently pessimistic
closing lines in fact contain Woolf’s response to her criticism of Spender and Day Lewis—that they were too self-involved and so described a self “that sits alone at night with the blinds drawn” (226). The “I” with which the Ode concludes is something else completely: it is a curious, public “I” which seeks genuinely (and democratically) to connect with its “other”; it is neither alone (it speaks also as “we”) nor static (it is mobile, travelling through the city streets, saluting Cutbush as it passes by). Even if one were to misread these concluding lines as “despairing,” one would have to admit that such despair results from the failure of a generous and democratic intention: the attempt to understand someone outside one’s immediate social environment. The Ode’s response to Woolf’s other criticism of the “Auden Group” is more nuanced, and will require more peeling to draw out. In her reading of Auden, Woolf argues that his attempt to include prosaic, colloquial, everyday elements in his poetry produces a work “cracked in the middle”: beauty is on one side, and sordid reality is on the other. This point can be considered a restatement of the generic problems presented in “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future” in the image of the apartment building: just as the modern apartment dweller faces a spatial situation in which increased density brings increased alienation, Auden’s work brings poetry and reality into contact without connection or harmony. This image of the apartment block is brought into the second verse paragraph of the Ode with all its generic overtones intact. It begins with the following description:

And the dusk falls;
dusk gilt with lights from the upper windows;
one reads Herodotus in the original at his upper window; and another cuts waistcoats in the basement;
and another makes coins; and another turns pieces of wood that shall be chairlegs. (26-31)

The literal situation—mutually alienated inhabitants of a single building, close in space and yet pursuing their tasks in isolation—is reinforced by the line break at “upper/window,” which both stresses the disparity of pursuits (productive activity such as the fashioning of waistcoats and chair legs is contrasted with the apparently “low,” possibly criminal minting of coins and the rather
“higher” activity of reading Greek, whether for self-improvement or mere enjoyment). The line break also calls attention to the window—which both reveals and separates—as a symbol of their tantalizingly close division. In “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future” Woolf stresses the role of technology in producing this situation: the “wires which pass overhead” and “waves of sound which pour through the room and speak to him of battles and murders and strikes and revolution all over the world” (433-4) present a double-sided image, both connecting people to one another and yet reinforcing their separation. This too is imported into the Ode:

Up she [Louie] starts from her couch on Primrose Hill; 
from her couch on the sweet, cold bed of earth; 
earth laid over buds and bulbs; over pipes and 
wires; taking to its cold sweet breast now the 
water pipe; now the wire; which flashes messages 
to China where the mandarins go, mute cruel, delicate; 
past the gold pagodas; and houses have paper 
walls; and the people smile wise inscrutable smiles. (42-49)\(^{15}\)

Distinct entities literal and figurative, prosaic and poetic, real and beautiful, combine here to form an “Audenesque” heterogeneous jumble. Through the literal network of pipes and wires, Primrose Hill and China are shown to be connected, but not quite capable of communication. Through the “paper walls” of the medium, the sense of tantalizingly close division persists, and the images returned retain their exotic otherness: China and the Mandarins are to Louie “mute cruel” and “inscrutable.” The poetic means of building bridges between these juxtaposed elements yield similar results. Repetition and anaphora work to establish continuity across the passage, but other formal devices and verbal formulae exhibit discomfort with the modern reality they are asked to describe. The personified Earth, for example, takes to its breast the water pipe and the wire along with the “buds and bulbs,” forming in its welcoming Whitmanian\(^{16}\) body a metaphor capable of joining all things new and old, near and far, real and imagined. One feels, however, something of the same “shock” that Woolf felt on reading Auden, when the gentle epithet “sweet, cold bed” is applied to an earth pieced through with wires, teeming with information, and hot with electricity.
That these scenes of generic and social division are present in Woolf’s Ode, however, should not be taken as evidence of that poem’s failure; rather, they should be read as its internal recognition of the artistic and sociological problems it sets out to address. That they are present from the poem’s first lines reinforces this sense; and that the poem begins immediately to address them attests to its seriousness of purpose. The Ode begins to do so through its two references to Byron. The first of these comes while John is swimming in a conspicuously ordinary space, “the pond where the dogs bark”: “Yes I swim here. / making believe he is among the great athletes; / like Byron he could swim the Hellespont; John / Cutbush of Pentonville” (68-71). A negative reading of these lines would see it as further evidence of disjunction and disconnection. If Cutbush truly believes that he in his dirty pond is really like Byron, the argument might go, then he must be the victim of literary ideology, of believing in “the illusion of a society worthy of man which does not exist” (Adorno 43). The Miltonic line break that cuts John’s heroic nomination in half would only reinforce this reading, as might the poem’s second reference to Byron:

But I swam the Hellespont—he dreams; he had read
Byron in Charing Cross Road he had sipped and
tasted Don Juan where it stood dust parched wind
blown exposed to the lights of the pavement. (68-71)

Here, the negative argument would run, is John at his most Leonard Bastish or Septimus Smithy: the realm of art—Byron’s expansive, sunny, Mediterranean, Romantic poem—seems entirely at odds with his own environment: the dismal, dry, and dusty Charing Cross Road.

The suggestive properties of poetic language—specifically, the chain of associations released by the mention of the Hellespont—preclude, however, such a negative reading. The Hellespont, the sometimes-bridgeable strait dividing East from West, Europe from Asia, and—at certain times and to certain minds—democracy from tyranny, presents an appropriate image in a poem seeking to confront a modern world whose dualities need bridging, and whose prosaic poetry is too apt to separate beauty from reality. Read as a symbol within the poem, the Hellespont goes some way to
bridging the gaps already adumbrated. Arguably the best-known treatment of the Hellespont, for example, is the account of Xerxes’ bridging of the strait at Abydos in Book VII of the *History* of Herodotus. This allusion links (or even identifies) John with the seemingly isolated figure who “reads Herodotus in the original at his upper / window,” and thus presents one of the poem’s many implicit warnings not to place the butcher John absolutely on the side of “reality” as against the world of art and beauty. The effect of the Hellespont image is deepened by the specific literary reference, which leads outside Woolf’s Ode not only to the biographical fact that Byron swam across the Hellespont, but also to the poem he wrote about it, “Written After Swimming from Sestos to Abydos.” Byron’s poem pushes this chain of literary associations still further by comparing his nautical feat to that of Leander, most famously related in the English poetic tradition in Christopher Marlowe’s unfinished “Hero and Leander.” Marlowe—one of the Elizabethans whose generic mastery Woolf praises in “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future”—introduces his hero as “Amorous Leander, beautiful and young. / (Whose tragedy divine Musaeus sung)” (51-52), thus extending the chain all the way to the mythic origins of poetry: to Musaeus, the son of Orpheus and grandson of Apollo.

The literary genealogy evoked by the reference to Byron highlights a strain of inclusiveness, liveliness, and hybridity in the English poetic tradition: it points to examples of the kind of poetry Woolf believed the poets of the 1930s ought to emulate and that Woolf herself emulates in her Ode. Byron’s “Sestos to Abydos” is the most pertinent example. Adopting a profoundly skeptical attitude to what he calls the “doubtful story” of Leander’s December crossing of the Hellespont (14), Byron’s speaker sneers at a poetic tradition that would deflate or otherwise impinge upon the glory of his putatively less impressive springtime swim:

For me, degenerate modern wretch,
Though dripping in the genial month of May
My dripping limbs I faintly stretch,
And think I’ve done a feat today. (9-12)
Byron’s poem stages a central predicament of the modernist period: like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for example, “Sestos to Abydos” is about the incongruity between the false exaltations of the poetic inheritance and our lived experience in the present. Byron responds to this incongruity not by declaring poetry dead and recasting himself as a novelist, but by infusing a lively, “wretched” prose voice into his chosen medium of poetry. If any sense remains of a gap between the “prose” spaces of John Cutbush—the dirty pond and the “dust parched” road—and his “poetic” longings—his Byronic ambitions—this is bridged by an engagement with a literary tradition already characterized by adaptation, flexibility, and reconfiguration.

Woolf is not alone in citing Byron as an important exemplar of poetic hybridity, nor is this the only text in which she makes this association. Though Woolf did not have access to Bakhtin’s “Epic and Novel,” it is worth noting that *Don Juan* functions there as his primary example of novelized verse (6, 33). Trevelyan, whom she would have read, uses *Don Juan* to make his argument about the unfulfilled potential of narrative poetry (57). Woolf herself, in *A Letter to a Young Poet*, encourages her interlocutor to write relevant and accessible verse by telling him, “[y]ou were Byron, remember; you wrote *Don Juan*” (229). In the midst of her prescription for the democratic hybrid genre of the future in “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future,” Woolf says, “Byron in *Don Juan* pointed the way; he showed how flexible an instrument poetry might become, but none follow his example to put his tool to further use” (434). In the Ode, Woolf puts Byron’s example to use, serving to include John Cutbush in a tradition in which his poetic self is every bit as welcome as Byron’s.

*The Location of Poetry*

The next layer of the onion begins to peel back when we ask such questions as: Why should John want to be included in the poetic tradition? Are we meant to think more of John because he finds himself in a poem? Is the role of modernist poetry thus to “elevate” ordinary people like John
to the same exalted level as aristocratic figures like Byron? Is this not all rather condescending? Such questions take us back to one of the earliest modernist poets: Charles Baudelaire, whom no less a modernist poet than T. S. Eliot called “the greatest exemplar in modern poetry of any language” (426).

In the *Salon de 1845*, Baudelaire proposes the task of modern art as the discovery of poetic (specifically, heroic and epic) elements in everyday life:

> the heroism of modern life surrounds us and presses upon us [. . .] There is no lack of subjects, nor of colours, to make epics. The painter, the true painter for whom we are looking, will be he who can snatch its epic quality from the life of today and make us see and understand, with brush or with pencil, how great and poetic we are in our cravats [ties] and our patent-leather boots. (*The Mirror of Art*, 38)

While Baudelaire placed himself among those in ties and patent-leather boots, and saw the poet as a “first among equals,” several early twentieth century modernists perceived a more hierarchical relationship. Eliot took from Baudelaire the lesson that the poet must “elevate” what is “sordid” in modern life: “It is not merely in the use of imagery of common life, not merely in the use of imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis,” he wrote, “but in the elevation of such imagery to the *first intensity*—presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something much more than itself—that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men” (“Baudelaire,” 426). Walter Benjamin, in a similar interpretation of Baudelaire, asks, “[d]o the dregs of society supply the heroes of the big city? Or is the hero the poet who fashions his work from such material?” (*Baudelaire*, 80).

My position is that Woolf’s *Ode* is not susceptible to such criticisms. Benjamin’s phrasing, in fact, provides an excellent template in which to elucidate my claim: in Woolf’s *Ode* there can be no distinction between “dregs” and “poets,” because the dregs *are* the poets. While Woolf is sometimes accused of producing stereotyped representations of working-class characters, the *Ode* implicitly rejects any spurious assumption that the lives of working-class people are inherently unpoetic, that working-class people are unfamiliar with poetry, or that they are incapable of themselves writing poetry. John and Louie do not need to be saved by poetry from the prosaic banality of their lives,
for poetry is already a presence in their lives. This becomes clear when we pay careful attention to the numerous mutually differentiated voices that make up the Ode. Consider, for example, the opening lines:

Oh Cutbush, little John, standing glum between your father and mother, the day they decided what to make of you, should you be florist or butcher, hearing them decide your fate; shall you be florist or butcher; while the long wave lies iridescent on the shores of California; and the elephant in Abyssinia and the hummingbird in Aethiopeia and the King in Buckingham Palace Go their ways: Shall John be florist or butcher? (1-10)

In this passage, several voices are variously combined: that of the narrator, who might be addressing the reader or might be addressing John directly; those of John’s parents, whose speech is introduced in direct (though unmarked) quotation (“Shall John be florist or butcher”); and that of young John himself. If we see the poetic “meanwhile” (the series of romanticized events taking place while John’s parents decided his fate) as spoken by the narrator, the effect might be deflating or ironic: here is poor, sadly unpoetic John, whose dreary fate is being decided, while at the same time, over there, exotic animals frolic in far-off places and Kings exalt on their thrones. But there is much to suggest that it is John who perceives this contrast, and that the poetic imagination is his own. In this scene, in which John is still a child, the dreams of elephants, hummingbirds, and kings are recognizably childlike; and the childlike consciousness responsible for them mistakes Abyssinia and Aethiopeia (two archaic names for Ethiopia, which in October 1934 was soon to be invaded by Mussolini’s troops) for different places. 21 We should, I would argue, read these lines as free indirect discourse (FID). In fact, in this Ode “Partly in Prose,” the narrator’s persistent employment of the novelistic technique of FID is perhaps its most important “prose” element. FID, which allows the reader to hover between the consciousnesses of the narrator and character, is a particularly apt device in a “speculative biography” centrally concerned with the feasibility of inhabiting someone
else’s perspective. If we read these particular lines as FID, their effect is far from distancing: brought in to John’s consciousness, we see that the disjunction of everyday life and poetic imagination is a problem faced not only by ourselves as readers of this poem, but also by John himself, whose options are indeed constrained, but whose imagination is expansive.

Recognizing the Ode’s extensive use of FID does not “settle” its many voices; indeed, it is the “slipperiness” of FID that I want to emphasize. Anne Neumann captures this uncertainty in her definition of FID as

that mode of discourse which quotes what we feel could be at least some of the words of a character’s actual utterance or thought, but which offers those words interwoven with the narrator’s language (though not systematically subordinated to it) without explicitly attributing them to the character in question. (366)

In the above passage, we feel that the dreams of faraway places are delivered in words that could be at least some of John’s own, though these words are interwoven with the narrator’s and are not explicitly attributed to him. Kathy Mezei speaks of the “undecidability inherent in the structure of FID” and its “structural and semantic indeterminacy” (67). Bakhtin, who sees FID as a defining characteristic of novelistic as opposed to poetic discourse, describes it as an interactive “zone” where “a dialogue is played out between the author and his character” (320).22 It is this undecidability and interactivity that characterizes the use of FID in Woolf’s Ode.

The Ode’s two references to Byron make the slipperiness of its FID especially clear.

Consider the first, which begins by introducing John’s future wife, Louie:

Coming down the asphalt path, with her velvet beret on her head, saucily askew, Comes Louie, betweenmaid to Mrs. Mump at the Rectory, infant still innocent still; but avid for love; sixteen years old; glancing saucily; past the pond where the dogs bark; and the ducks quack; Lovely are the willows and lilies sliding and twitching; and behold the old gentleman trying to disentangle the
child’s boat with his stick from the willows; and John says to Louie,
In summer I swim here; Sure? Yes I swim here.
making believe he is among the great athletes;
like Byron he could swim the Hellespont; John
Cutbush of Pentonville. (11-26)

Apart from the three instances of direct quotation (John: “In summer I swim here.” Louie: “Sure?”
John: “Yes, I swim here”), it is often difficult to decide who is saying what in this passage. There is
much to suggest, however, that Louie’s voice predominates. She immediately cuts a daring and
artistic figure in her velvet beret, and even before she speaks, her liveliness forces itself into the
texture of the verse in the form of two “saucy” line breaks, at “saucily / askew” and “glancing /
saucily.” Her poetic demeanor is backed up with actual poetry: the heightened diction and inverted
syntax of “Lovely are the willows / and lilies sliding and twitching” can be read as an FID rendering
of her unspoken mental impressions of the scene beyond “the pond where the dogs bark.” (Here is
one, rather direct, way of including the prosaic charwoman “Mrs. Gape” in poetry: make the
charwoman a poet.) If we recognize Louie as the focalizer of this passage, the reference to the
Hellespont appears in a very different light. There are, I think, two ways of reading it: “making
believe he is among the great athletes; / like Byron he could swim the Hellespont” is either John’s
speech filtered through Louie’s consciousness and rendered through FID; or else it is Louie’s gently
mocking response to John’s boasting. According to these readings, the reference to “great athletes”
and the allusion to Byron belong either to Louie or John; in context it is much less likely (though
still possible) that the line belongs to the passing narrator. One way, then, of reading the virtuoso
allusion to Byron and the Hellespont—which establishes a literary-historical justification for the
incorporation of prose elements into poetry—is as an artistic self-assertion spoken by Louie or John.

Seen thus, the working-class voices of Woolf’s Ode are not just those of characters but also of
“authors”: they speak for themselves in a self-fashioned poetic form. If we are still wondering why
Woolf chose to write the Ode in verse, the fact that John and Louie are poets provides a possible
answer: it can be regarded as hybrid form borne of necessity—for if a novelist narrator wants truly to tell the story of a pair of working-class people who happen to express themselves in verse, she will have no choice but to combine her prose with their poetry. 23

That Hero Again

In the remainder of the poem, it is John’s poetic self that preoccupies the Ode. The second reference to Byron (“But I swam the Hellespont — he dreams; he had read / Byron in Charing Cross Road” (68-69)), for example, emphasizes his status over Louie’s as the author of the Hellespont reference. This reference also emphasizes the slipperiness and “undecidability” of the Ode’s FID, shifting rapidly between imagined first-person narration (John: “I swam the Hellespont”), third-person narration (narrator: “he dreams”), and imagined third-person narration (John: “he had read…”). The middle part of the Ode—from the third to the fifth verse paragraph—presents what I read as “specimens” of John’s developing poetic voice, and thus both intensifies John’s status as a poet and ramifies the poem’s vocal complexities. To read this section as presenting examples of John’s poetry, I realize, introduces an irresolvable logical problem; namely, that since the narrator has never met John Cutbush, has not read his poems, and does not even know that he is a poet—since this is a speculative biography—she cannot possibly present John’s “actual” poems. This “illogic” is, as we have seen, to some extent an inescapable element of FID: following Neumann’s definition, the narrator is simply “quoting” here what she feels “could be at least some of” John’s “actual” poetry.

In one sense, then, John’s poems exist only in the narrator’s mind. At the same time, however, they are clearly not written in her voice, either—for their primary generic inheritance is the thoroughly non-Woolfian epic. In A Room of One’s Own, as we have seen, Woolf describes epic as a masculine genre ill-adapted to the needs of female writers (92). In the 1930s and 1940s, moreover, Woolf became increasingly interested in the political dimension of epic. As Melba Cuddy-Keane has
argued, the role played by the epic hero, in its association with the “ingrained political assumption” of Western patriarchal societies” that “a group is by definition both leader-centred and belief-centred” (“Politics of Comic Modes,” 273), was anathema to Woolf’s “vision of a society that accommodates fragmentation, paradox, ambiguity, and contradiction” (280). The Baudelairean project of discovering and elevating the “epic” and “heroic” aspects of modern life provides further grounds for Woolf’s objections to the genre. E. W. M. Tillyard, a contemporary of Woolf’s, argued in *The Epic Strain in the English Novel* that there is a “natural” requirement on the part of the reader of epic that “he who speaks for them should be much their better; [that] there must be something heroic about him” (16). This is a relationship entirely unsuited to what I have presented as Woolf’s democratic project, which depends upon a horizontal relationship between author and reader characterized by interaction and engagement. Neither Woolf herself nor the Woolfian narrator of the Ode would choose for herself the ideologically suspect epic voice; its inclusion in the Ode, therefore, should be read as indicative of its genuine heteroglossia. For the sake of convenience, I will refer throughout this section to “John’s poem” or “John’s poetic voice.” It is essential to keep in mind, however, that this voice is neither entirely John’s nor entirely the narrator’s, but is rather a point of imaginative intersection between them.

One of the most characteristic features of John’s imagined poetic voice—its penchant for heroic nominations—demonstrates that epic is not wholly anathema to Woolf’s democratic project. On the one hand, names like “John Cutbush butcher of Pentonville” (103), “Louie of the Avenue kitchenmaid to the / clergyman” (80-1), and “Adela, / wife of Cuthbert the clergyman” (40) are monologic and denotative: lacking entirely in the poetic suggestivity Woolf celebrates in *A Room of One’s Own*, they serve to pick one person decisively out of the world, and to assert and fix his or her individuality. On the other hand, in the Ode these heroic nominations are applied to identities that are threatened and in need of assertion. In certain passages, indeed, one gets the sense that
individual identity will become lost in the polyphony of voices that constitute the Ode. In describing
the courtship of John and Louie, for example, discourses of journalism, advertising, and domestic
servitude intrude on the singularity of the event:

Up she gets and he follows her, down the Avenue
as far as the corner, by the paper shop; Man
murdered in Pimlico is on the placard; where they
kiss by the paper shop; and so part, and dark
night enfolds them; and she hurries down the area
to the lit kitchen with the saucepans steaming
for master's dinner. (50-56)

It is at such moments, when polyphony risks becoming cacophony, that the monologic heroic
nominations show their usefulness. The technique receives a dress-rehearsal of sorts in the following
passage:

From the harsh steeple fall the iron notes;
warning Louie Louie of time and tea;
how Cook will say, If you’re out larking with the
boys again I'll tell Her meaning Mumps, Adela,
wife of Cuthbert the clergyman. (37-41)

At first the rhythm and diction are severe and vaguely Eliotic; a semicolon separates this voice from
one distinctly like J. Alfred Prufrock, sharing his obsessions with “time and tea”; next we jump into
Louie’s consciousness (“how Cook will say”), who proceeds to embed yet another voice. The
passage is reminiscent not only of Eliot, but also of Joyce’s Ulysses. Like the “Oxen of the Sun”
chapter, it presents a parade of styles moving from the controlled to the chaotic: beginning with the
controlled and individual “harsh steeple,” we move to the generality of an occupational designation
(“Cook,”) and finally to the fabulously unspecific pronoun “Her.” At this point the process reverses
itself, and identity is asserted among the competing voices. First we get “Her” nickname (“Mumps”),
then her Christian name (“Adela”), and finally a heroic designation worthy of the display of forces in
Book II of the Iliad: “Adela, / wife of Cuthbert the clergyman.” Though ambivalent, making Adela’s
identity dependent on that of her husband, this formula nonetheless rescues her individuality from the confusion of voices that precede it.

In John’s hands, the technique is somewhat less ambivalent. The Ode’s fifth verse paragraph adds a second perspective to the earlier scene in which Louie watches John swimming. Now, he watches her watching him:

And he sees the violets and asphodels and the naked swimmers on the bank in robes like those worn by the Leighton pictures at Leighton house. Louie of the Avenue kitchenmaid to the clergyman, watches and waves her bare arm as he dives. (76-81)

As the “Leighton” stutter indicates, in this passage we see through John’s eyes via FID. What characterizes his perspective is a tendency to read reality in terms of overdetermined artistic symbols. Whereas in the previous swimming scene the gap between the ordinary space and John’s heroic athletic feat was registered in the Hellespont image, here we see it in terms of the contrast between violets and asphodels: the former a standard poetic symbol of ordinariness, familiar from Wordsworth; and the latter the immortal poetic flower that covers the Elysian fields. John understands his fellow swimmers, moreover, through their representation in art: they are repetitions of the Greeks and Romans that populate Frederick Leighton’s paintings. There is a sense here that John’s artistic self-education is getting in the way of his experiencing the singularity of the life set before him. The epic voice again shows its usefulness, however, by separating Louie from her overdetermined surroundings in all her geographical and occupational specificity. The break at “the / clergyman” enhances the effect, moderating her subordination to Cuthbert by leaving her in her own line.

The Ode’s third and fourth verse paragraphs, which I read as FID projections of Cutbushian “juvenilia,” demonstrate further the possibilities and perils of epic. Seeking to celebrate his
profession, John does so in part by justifying it according to the standards of a remote, imagined “them”:

And he hires a barrow and goes to Smithfield
at dawn; at chill dawn sees the cold meat,
shrouded in white nets borne on men’s shoulders;
meat from the Argentines; from haired and red pelted hogs and bullocks.

All in white like surgeons go the butchers of
Smithfield, handling the shrouded cadavers;
the stark and frozen corpses that shall lie like
mummies in the ice house till the Sunday fire revives
them and they drop juice into the big plate to
revive church goers. (57-67)

The rudiments of John’s epic style are present here. The tone is consistently cold, hard, and detached. The accentual rhythm is recognizably, if inconsistently, Anglo-Saxon: most lines have four stressed syllables, and most gesture toward alliteration across a medial caesura—while “shrouded on white nets borne on men’s shoulders” alliterates successfully, many other lines, like “at chill dawn sees the cold meat” have near alliterations of c and ch or s and sb. Phrases such as “at chill dawn,” “haired and red pelted / hogs and bullocks,” “shrouded cadavers,” or “stark and frozen corpses” might risk hyperbole in isolation, but pressed together here, surrounded on all sides by similarly-voiced images, achieve a mutually-reinforced dignity. The repeated image of the shroud shows Cutbush at his best: its inconspicuous literality—the white nets are literally shrouds, for they cover the dead bodies of hogs and bullocks—reinvigorates a potentially dead metaphor, and so implicitly asserts that the poetic shroud is not out of place in an abattoir. The English language, it must be noted, is uncomfortable with the butcher’s trade—signifiers like “beef,” “ham,” and even “abattoir,” seek to protect their users from grim signifieds. John’s poem, however, follows the meat all the way from the table to the field, and dignifies the butcher’s work by providing it with a material history. With its familiar hard tone, it traces the path most eaters would prefer to ignore, from the butchers (“shrouded in white nets borne on men’s shoulders”) to the country of origin (“meat from the
Argentines”) to the animals themselves. By the end of this chain, the “haired and red pelted / hogs and bullocks” seem, like Homer’s oxen, almost worthy of sacrifice. There are two ways of reading the poem’s closing apotheosis, in which the frozen corpses of meat are “revived” on Sunday like a risen Christ, and the juice they drip in turn revives the “church goers.” Whereas the poem to this point had celebrated the “process” of the butcher’s trade, one could argue that John here justifies it by its “product”—that John is “elevating” his profession according to spurious external standards, and stressing its usefulness to “them.” On the other hand, the lines can be read as a biting satire of the middle-class churchgoers, who accept without thanks the sacrifice both of the animals and of John’s labour.

The Ode’s sixth verse paragraph, which projects what I regard as an example of John’s mature poetic style, continues to employ epic devices, but manifests a clearer attitude to the middle-class “them.” This passage shows that John is not merely a poet, but a good poet—surpassing, in Woolf’s reading of them, the poets of the Auden group. The opening lines—which begin, like Heaney’s Beowulf, with “So”—acknowledge an outside perspective but do not defer to it:

So he sets up shop on his own.
To the passer by it is another of those shops
that stay open till one on Saturdays. Although the
west end is curtained and shuttered, here, in the
purlieus of London, the residue of London,
the night is the time
of gala. (83-89)

The first two lines, enacting the multiplicity of the Ode’s FID, trade perspectives: the first is spoken by the narrator, whose primary task in the Ode is to imagine John’s life; the second voice is John’s, who imagines what his life must look like when viewed from the outside. Looking at himself from this imagined outside perspective, he finds nothing to be ashamed of. While the west-end region of middle-class culture sleeps, self-enclosed and “shuttered,” Pentonville—not only a “purlieu” on the margins of London, but also the “residue” of London; in the Biblical sense, “the leavings of a
destructive agent” (*OED* 1c)—is very much awake, as the stylish and vital line breaks indicate. The gala proceeds, leaving aside the question of how it looks from outside:

The flares are lit over barrows. The feathers and blouses blow like flowers. The meat blazes. The sides of oxen are patterned with flower leaves in the pink flesh. Knives slice. The lumps are tossed and wrapped. Bags bulge on women's arms. (89-94)

The scene is vaguely reminiscent of the tournaments and funeral pyres of *The Iliad*. Indeed, in one of this section’s characteristic re-inflections of an image from elsewhere in the poem, the “barrows” that earlier were tools for carting meat (“And he hires a barrow and goes to Smithfield,” 57) are here transformed into burial mounds. The fact that oxen are feasted upon further ties the scene to Homeric epic and the *Odyssey*: “Oxen of the Sun” episode, which turns on the politics of slaughter. But that word “oxen,” with its conspicuously Anglo-Saxon plural form, suggests that the scene is not entirely deferential to (or comprehensible through) Greek epic. While the devices of the “leader-centred” epic had been useful to John as a means of asserting identity in previous sections, the predominance of the passive voice in these lines signals a change of technique. In this scene entirely without subjects—in which “flares are lit,” “knives slice,” and “lumps are tossed”—John presents an image of a harmonious and coherent community nonetheless beyond the grasp of definitive representation. This indefinite harmony is reflected in the complex Anglo-Saxon alliterations of lines like “feathers and blouses blow like flowers,” and also by the echoing of words in contiguous lines: “feathers” and “flowers” recalling but not repeating “flares”; “blouses” and “blow” calling out imperfectly to “barrow” and “blazes.” John’s handling of flower imagery provides further proof of his artistic development: whereas in the swimming scene, the violets and asphodels stand apart both from Louie and from one another, here John achieves symbolic unity by finding them in the sides of oxen “patterned with / flower leaves in the pink flesh.” The image fulfills the promise of the
Hellespont reference: in John’s gala poem, beauty is a part of reality, and all is a set in a complex, suggestive, harmonious dance.

_How Little We Can Read Aright_

We hasten the peeling process toward its conclusion by asking another question: what characterizes the narrator’s style? In the first seven of the Ode’s verse paragraphs, what stands out is her extensive use of FID. As we have seen, this can present a considerable challenge to the reader of the Ode: because we pass so quickly between points of view, because of the logical complexities in certain points of view, and because transitions between them are not marked, we can seldom be entirely certain whose consciousness we are seeing through. Thus the tentativeness with which we must approach the first Hellespont reference: it is probably not given directly from the narrator, and is more likely FID from Louie’s perspective, though she may or may not be mentally quoting something John said, and so on. Adding to the complexity is the fact that Woolf’s narrator does not give what Molly Hite calls “tonal cues”: the “textual markers that prompt readers to have one affective response rather than another” (249). One of Hite’s examples from _Mrs. Dalloway_ ably demonstrates the challenge faced by the reader of the Ode: Woolf’s narrator calls Septimus Smith “one of those half-educated, self-educated men whose education is all learnt from books borrowed from public libraries” (71)—a description that, Hite argues, “articulates certain class-bound opinions but also strains them to the point where they teeter into absurdity” (259). Woolf’s narrator does not come right out and tell us that this description is absurd: the reader, who at other points gains access to Smith’s perspective via FID, must notice for himself that, as Hite says, “the homogenizing connotations of ‘one of those’ cannot stand” (259). We face a similar situation when we read the already-cited lines, “To the passer by it is another of those shops / that stay open till one on Saturdays” (233). Like that of _Mrs. Dalloway_, the Ode’s narrator withholds tonal cues: we as readers must notice for ourselves that the homogenizing connotations of “another of those” cannot stand—
that John and his shop are unique. But, as we have seen, the lines present a further challenge to the reader: if we read closely, we see that they are not spoken by the narrator, but delivered via FID from John’s perspective, who is himself imagining the perspective of someone like the narrator—someone passing by his shop on a Saturday. Molly Hite argues that the absence of tonal cues in Woolf’s novels “encourages engagement in readers” and draws them into an “interaction” with the text: “Attentive readers may never be able to decide once and for all how to take a difficult passage—and perhaps by extension, to take a character or interpret the moral framework of the book as a whole” (266). The Ode’s complex attribution of voices via FID intensifies this need for readerly engagement and interaction.

In the Ode’s final verse paragraph, however, the narrator’s style changes drastically. While every one of the Ode’s first 139 lines employs FID, its final 14 lines make no use of the device. Instead, as I have noted, the narrator delivers something like a lyric finale, speaking directly and providing tonal cues. It is not merely a stylistic shift, however, or a change of voice. In the first seven verse paragraphs the narrator presents herself as a writer, and we in our turn are her engaged, and occasionally baffled, readers; but in the eighth verse paragraph, Woolf’s narrator changes tack and presents herself to us as a fellow reader. Her use of “we” in the closing lines, I would argue, refers not to some privileged social or cultural class elevated above that of John Cutbush, but rather to the community of readers of the Ode, in which party she includes herself:

as we
hold the Evening Standard under the lamp how little
we think of the wealth we can gather between the
palms of two hands; how little we can grasp;
how little we can interpret and read aright
the name John Cutbush but only as we pass his
shop on Saturday night, cry out Hail Cutbush
of Pentonville, I salute thee; passing. (147-154)

The question we are left with at the end of the Ode is not “what kind of a writer is Woolf’s narrator?” but rather “what kind of a reader is she?” From my perspective, she is the right kind—and, whatever
the logical complications involved, Woolf’s narrator seems to have learned to be such a reader by reading John’s gala poem. In *A Letter to a Young Poet*, Woolf argues that what poetry had to offer its readers is a way of looking at the world: by demonstrating the potential of poetic rhythm to connect the diverse strands of modern, democratic society—that “queer conglomeration of incongruous things,” as Woolf calls it in “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future” (436)—poetry can inculcate in its readers a way of reading everyday life as a rhythmic, coordinated dance of discrete elements. In these final lines, the Ode’s narrator—her voice no longer definable by the prose technique of FID—becomes the sort of poetic reader Woolf describes. Having read John’s gala poem, whose complex rhythms set poetry and reality in a complex dance, Woolf’s narrator learns to read everyday life like a poem. Thus the *Evening Standard*—a newspaper, a chronicle of day-to-day existence—teems with richness, and makes her think of “the wealth we can gather between the / palms of two hands.”

John himself cannot be mastered or represented finally; his otherness is not there to be conquered but to be treasured. Thus her acknowledgement of how “how little we can interpret and read aright / the name John Cutbush” is not, as Hermione Lee argues, a recognition of the limitation of her view, but a confirmation of its immense capacity.

At the end of “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” after Woolf declares the latter elusive of final representation, there is some lingering sense of dissatisfaction: she tells her audience, “do not expect just at present a complete and satisfactory presentment of her. Tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure” (29). Conversely, “An Unwritten Novel,” which also ends by declaring its representational “failure,” presents such “failure” in a palpably positive light: after some initial desolation (“Well, my world is done for! What do I stand on? What do I know?”) Woolf’s narrator concludes, “it’s you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it’s you I embrace, you I draw to me—adorable world!” (115). Considered in the light of Woolf’s democratic project, the narrator’s “failure” in the Ode is every bit as important as her initial desire to understand the passing stranger.
To be sufficiently curious to imagine another’s life, but sufficiently humble and respectful not to imagine that one can fully inhabit another’s perspective, is to think, I would argue, as a Woolfian democrat. Thus the significance of the Ode’s final lines, “I salute thee; passing.” To salute is to put oneself on a level. This is the effect in Whitman, who salutes, for example, to assert his equality with a prostitute in “To a Common Prostitute” (“Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you / . . . / I salute you with a significant look” (2)) or with all humanity in “Salut au Monde” (“I see ranks, colours, barbarisms, civilizations, I go among them, I mix indiscriminately, / And I salute all the inhabitants of the earth” (302)). Woolf asks also, however, that the level gaze be combined with the recognition of mutual unknowability; like Bakhtin, she emphasizes the “excess of seeing” that narrator and character must retain with respect to one another.27 Again this is embodied in the narrator’s characteristic formal device, FID, by which she hovers between first- and third-person consciousnesses, without entering completely or finally into either. Thus when Woolf’s narrator appends a semicolon and a “passing” to her salute of Cutbush, we should read it as a marker of the necessary provisionality that must attend representation in a democratic world.

One final question remains, implicit in the Ode’s final lines: what kinds of readers are “we”? To some extent, I would argue that the Ode leaves us no choice but to become the same sort of reader as its narrator. Consider the following lines, which appear in the penultimate verse paragraph:

These are semblances of human faces seen in passing translated from a foreign language.
And the language always makes up new words. (124-6)

We have already seen that we should not take these lines as “despairing”; in the context both of the Ode and of Woolf’s genre theory, such a reading does not stand. But how are we to take them? They seem a pre-statement of the narrator’s closing epiphany that to truly honour our fellow citizens in a democratic society, we must accept them as irreducibly complex—as invested with a poetic richness that cannot, and will not, ever be fully captured. Their form, I would argue, “enacts” this
message. While their similarity to the Ode’s final lines, particularly the repetition of “passing,” suggests that we are to read these as spoken by the narrator, in context the situation is more complex. The lines are delivered in a scene in which a weary, aged John looks around his neighbourhood and takes stock of all the changes that have taken place in the course of his life. In this context, it makes sense to attribute these lines to John. Just as the narrator does at the end of the poem, it seems as if John is here considering the impossibility of ever fully understanding his ever-increasing cast of neighbours, who live their lives “in passing,” in parallel to his. Encountering this complex situation, we, the reader, must do what both John and the narrator do: we must accept complexity, we must not seek to attribute the lines definitively either to John or to the narrator, we must suspend our craving to resolve the narrative situation. These lines present an apt condensation of the promise Woolf saw for generic hybridity: experiencing simultaneously the poetic beauty and novelistic vocal complexity of the lines, we are actively engaged in unraveling them, and yet must also stand back and simply admire them, acknowledging that mastery is beyond us.

1 In Baudelaire’s poem, the speaker passes a woman in the street (“Une femme passa,” 3) and is left to wonder about her, “Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité? / Ailleurs, bein loin d’ici! trop tard! jamais peut-être! / Car j’ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais, / O toi que j’eusse aimée, ô toi que le savais!” (11-14).

2 The letter begins, “I’m very glad indeed to have your book, which I found last night on getting back from Rodmell. So I haven’t read it yet, and I shall read it at least 10 times before I know anything about it.” She continues, “[n]o I dont think I could review poetry: for one thing I’m so slow at reading it: and then one always hurts one’s friends’ feelings: and finally, d’you really think there’s any use in writing about contemporaries? Isnt it inevitable that one should Grigsonise? (I mean get into a groove, and write out of the malice of one’s miserable heart)” (L 5:341). The reference to Grigson may have been prompted in part my Grigson’s venomous reviews of Day Lewis’s poetry (see Chapter 2), which was published by Woolf’s Hogarth Press.

3 A riot erupted at a gathering of Mosley’s British Union of Fascists on June 7th, 1934 at Olympia. Among the injured was the anti-fascist Aldous Huxley. As a result of the outcry, Lord Rothermere and his Daily Mail withdrew support for the BUF.

4 This is not to imply that Woolf had, in the interim, lost her interest in the knowability and unknowability of others—which is, for example, the subject of Bernard’s concluding chapter in The Waves (1931). I refer only to one genre she employed in exploring this subject, the “speculative biography.”

5 Referring to the passage from Mrs Dalloway in which the latter reflects that it is “very dangerous to live even one day,” Lewis writes, “[o]utside it is terribly dangerous—in that great and coarse Without, where all the he-men and he-girls ‘live dangerously’ [. . .] But this dangerousness does, after all, make it all very thrilling, when peeped-out at, from the security of the private mind” (139). This is not a central argument of Lewis’s chapter. For more on it, see the beginning of my fifth chapter.
It was an aim of Woolf’s work as a publisher in the mid-1930s to provide a forum for the voices of working people. For example, *The Worker’s Point of View: A Symposium* (Hogarth, 1933), edited by C. T. Cramp, includes essays by a mechanic, a miner, a plasterer, and a compositor, each of whom explains his perspective.

Woolf later said, in “Craftsmanship” (1937), “it is [words’] nature not to express one simple statement but a thousand possibilities [. . .] We pin them down to one meaning, their useful meaning, the meaning which makes us catch the train, the meaning which makes us pass the examination. And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die” (127, 132).

Rashmi Gaur argues in *Virginia Woolf, the Poetic Strain in Her Novels*, “Virginia Woolf is essentially a poet, who has written novels, and not poetry” (1)—though, as we have seen, she did write one self-contained “poem,” and wrote others for *Between the Acts*.

This is part of an interesting correspondence about prose and poetry carried out between Woolf and R. C. Trevelyan in 1934. In April, Trevelyan sent Woolf some stories, to which she responded with praise and advice: “I’m always wanting you (but this is another theme) to break through into a less formed, more natural medium. I wish you could dismiss the dead, who inevitably silence so much[,] and deal with Monday and Tuesday” (L 5:293). Trevelyan responded with a poem, “To V. W.”:

> Fortunate therefore I must deem all those
> Who serve that ‘other harmony of prose’;
> And among all most fortunate you must be,
> Whose chosen art has left your spirit free
> To range through all experience, in quest
> Of such spoil as may please your fancy best. (Qtd. in Woolf, D 4:233)

In her diary entry for July 28th, Woolf wrote, “Perhaps Bob T. was right in his poem when he called me fortunate above all—I mean in having a mind that can express… I mean, that I have to some extent forced myself to break every mould & find a fresh form of being, that is of expression, for everything I feel & think. [. . .] Here in H & N [Here & Now, working title for *The Years*] I am breaking the mould made by *The Waves*” (D 4:232-3). In the cited letter she wrote Trevelyan on reading his poem, she concludes, “I daresay my plea for adventurous prose is not disinterested: had I been able to write poetry no doubt I should have been content to leave the other alone. Anyway, in reading this I see quite plainly what poetry can do and prose can’t. So the envy isn’t all on your side” (L 5:317).

A Hogarth Letter was indeed written in reply to *A Letter to a Young Poet*; Peter Quennell’s *A Letter to Mrs. Virginia Woolf*.


When John Lehmann criticized Woolf’s reading of the young poets, Woolf replied in a letter, stating, “I think he is all to be praised for attempting to swallow Mrs. Gape; but he ought to assimilate her. What it seems to me is that he doesn’t sufficiently believe in her: doesn’t dig himself in deep enough; wakes up in the middle; his imagination doesn’t go off the boil; he doesn’t reach the unconscious automated state—hence the spasmodic, jerky, self conscious effect of his realistic language” (L 5:83).

On the recognition of rhythm in everyday life, see “The London Docks” from *The London Scene*: “Rhythmically, dexterously, with an order that has some aesthetic delight in it, barrel is laid by barrel, cask by cask” (17).

On the “we” in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Howards End*, see Hite 257.


On Woolf and Walt Whitman, see Cuddy-Keane, *The Intellectual and the Public Sphere*, 42-45. See also my discussion of Whitmanian “saluting” at the end of this chapter.

I am thinking particularly of Leonard Bast’s desire to keep “Romance” and “Reality” separate. Tracing Leonard’s thoughts, Forster’s narrator says—during a visit to the Schlegel’s—“He did not want Romance to collide with the Porphyrian” (116). Demonstrating what the novel advances as the correct attitude toward these two worlds, Margaret later writes to Helen: “Don’t brood too much [. . .] on the superiority of the unseen to the seen. It’s true, but to brood on it is medieval. Our business is not to contrast the two, but to reconcile them” (98).

Charing Cross Road as it continues south of Oxford Street is called Tottenham Court Road, where Septimus Smith lives with Rezia in *Mrs Dalloway*. While this serves to connect John and Septimus, it also marks their differences—for John lives far away in Pentonville, and is apparently only visiting Charing Cross Road when he reads Byron.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Woolf was herself reading Greek while writing the Ode, and had Herodotus on her reading list. This provides further evidence of connection between Woolf and John.
Lauren Rusk argues, “often the working-class women Woolf mentions seem more like figures traced from the broad strokes of Dickens, Shakespeare, Shaw, and Hans Christian Andersen” (18). Mary M. Childers accuses Woolf of “explicit denigration of the working classes” (76). Alison Light’s Mrs. Woolf & the Servants recounts Woolf’s often fractious relationships with her female servants. As Jane Goldman argues in her review of Light’s book, Woolf does not always “emerge well from her own account of such domestic frictions, but she is more alive to her own contradictory position than some received stereotyped versions of Woolf would have us believe.”

On the day Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, Woolf noted the fact in her diary and added that she “cannot spell” the country’s name (Lee, Virginia Woolf, 666). (In Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa confuses Albania and Armenia.) Note the near-insertion of “poeia” in John’s particular misspelling.

Bakhtin’s cognate term for FID is translated as “pseudo-objective discourse.”

Woolf’s engagement with poetry in the 1930s is always about inhabiting someone else’s perspective. Poetry always remains, as it were, Woolf’s generic “other.” The essays Woolf writes about hybrid poetry in the early 1930s should be read as her attempt to see the generic challenges facing contemporary artists from a perspective other than her own.

In this case, however, the reference is to serving tea, rather than to being served tea.

See Tennyson’s “The Lotos-Eaters”: “Others in Elysian valleys dwell, / Resting weary limbs at last on beds of asphodel” (line 170). In Wordsworth’s Lucy poems, he described her as “A Violet by a mossy stone” (“Song,” 5). Note, however, that for others the violet can function as one of those purple flowers that, like the narcissus and hyacinth, suggest resurrection from the grave. Cf. Pater, The Renaissance: “Far out on every side of us those elements are broadcast, driven in many currents; and birth and gesture and death and the springing of violets from the grave are but a few out of ten thousand resultant combinations” (247).

This imagined outside perspective is very much like that of Sir William Bradshaw in Mrs Dalloway, whose thoughts, rendered in FID by Woolf’s narrator, use that same word “purlieu” to refer to the London suburbs: “But Proportion has a sister, less smiling, more formidable, a Goddess now engaged in the heat and sands of India, the mud and swamp of Africa, the purlieus of London, wherever, in short, the climate or the devil tempts men to fall from the true belief which is her own [. . .]” (85).

Woolf’s formulation of the “spot the size of a shilling at the back of the head which one can never see for oneself” in A Room of One’s Own (107) is very much like Bakhtin’s idea of the “excess of seeing.”

It is significant that Woolf specifically picks the word “passing” as an example of the suggestivity of language in “Craftsmanship”: Listening to the sentence “Passing Russell Square” on a train, Woolf says, “[t]he word ‘passing’ suggested the transiency of things, the passing of time and the changes of human life” (128-9). This is the sense in which I am arguing that John employs the word; it is not that in which the narrator would be employing it.
Chapter Four
Cacophonous Irreducibility:
T. S. Eliot’s *The Rock* and the Detritus of Contemporary History

*The Rugged Immensity of a Rock*

In the same letter of July 10th, 1934 to Stephen Spender in which she discusses long poems, generic experimentation, and the future of prose—the letter with which we began the last chapter—Virginia Woolf goes on to discuss a clear example of failure in experimental genre: T. S. Eliot’s first completed play, *The Rock*:

The rock disappointed me. I couldn’t go and see it, having caught the influenza in Ireland; and in reading, without seeing, perhaps one got the horror of that cheap farce and Cockney dialogue and dogmatism too full in the face. Roger Fry, though, went and came back in a rage. But I thought even the choruses tainted; and rather like an old ship swaying in the same track as the Waste Land—a repetition, I mean. But I can’t be sure that I wasn’t unfairly influenced by my anti-religious bias. He seems to me to be petrifying into a priest—poor old Tom. (L 5:315)

Exiled to her sickbed, Woolf missed the chance to witness what was surely one of the most bizarre dramatic productions of the 1930s. *The Rock* opened on May 28th, 1934, and ran for two weeks to audiences of over one thousand spectators packed into the three levels of Sadler’s Wells. The spectacle was commissioned by The Forty-Five Churches Fund of the Diocese of London—and as their name suggests, its purpose was to raise funds for the building of forty-five new churches, primarily in London’s working-class neighbourhoods. Its spectators were present not only to enjoy a good show, but also (and perhaps primarily) to contribute to the cause.

The show itself was a pageant play. The main narrative of *The Rock* concerns the efforts of a group of Cockney workmen to build the kind of church the Fund hoped to sponsor: a simple church in a poor neighbourhood. They are menaced along the way by such contemporary anti-religious foes as a Communist Agitator and a capitalist Plutocrat, as well as groups of Redshirts (speaking in free verse) and Blackshirts (speaking in precise, insistent anapests). Interspersed between scenes of present-day church-building are historical scenes in which the righteous—
Mellitus, Rahere, Blomfield, Nehemiah, and others—must fend off the barbarian spoilers in their efforts to build churches and preserve the faith. The patchwork of contemporary and historical scenes is held together by a series of poetic choruses mostly written, as Woolf notes, in the prophetic high style of *The Waste Land*. The play ends when, having first delivered a rousing music-hall number, the workmen prevail against all odds to complete the church, which is then blessed onstage by the real-life Bishop of London.

The book version of *The Rock*, Woolf’s substitute for the experience of the live spectacle, also appeared in May of 1934. The cover page of the June, 1934 issue of Geoffrey Grigson’s *New Verse* carried an advertisement for the play that read as follows:

**THE ROCK** IS THE TEXT WRITTEN BY MR. ELIOT FOR A PAGEANT PRODUCED AT SADLER’S WELLS ON BEHALF OF THE FORTY-FIVE CHURCHES FUND OF THE DIOCESE OF LONDON. IN FORM IT APPROXIMATES TO A PLAY. IT CONTAINS NEARLY EIGHT HUNDRED LINES OF VERSE, MOSTLY CHORUSES. THE DIALOGUE IS CHIEFLY IN PROSE, AND CONSISTS OF SCENES ANCIENT AND MODERN, WITH A CONTINUITY PROVIDED BY THREE BRICKLAYERS.

It is an advertisement almost as bizarre as the spectacle of *The Rock* itself. What is strangest is the defensive posture it adopts: the advertisement seems less interested in selling *The Rock* than in insisting that it is not really a play and not entirely by Eliot. *The Rock* is “the text written by Mr. Eliot for a pageant”; it is not the pageant itself. And it is most certainly not Mr. Eliot’s *play*, the pageant only “approximates to a play,” containing as it does both verse (whose quantity is emphasized rather than its quality) and various scenes of dialogue, “chiefly in prose.” This defensiveness is present also in the advertised product. The title page of the first and only Faber edition of *The Rock* is again careful to disclaim true authorship, reading, “THE ROCK [. . .] BOOK OF WORDS BY / T. S. ELIOT.” The “Prefatory Note” supplies a reason for Eliot’s evasiveness by pointing out the collaborative nature of the venture. “I cannot consider myself the author of the ‘play,’” Eliot writes,
placing the putative genre in scare quotes, “but only of the words which are printed here” (5). The scenario, he explains, is by E. Martin Browne and Rev. R. Webb-Odell. As for the Cockney dialogue Woolf found so distasteful, he writes, “[t]he Rev. Vincent Howson has so completely rewritten, amplified and condensed the dialogue between himself (‘Bert’) and his mates, that he deserves the title of joint author.” “Of only one scene,” he says, “am I literally the author.” Though he does not specify which, it is the scene between the Workmen and the free-verse Redshirts and anapest-wielding Blackshirts.¹ In T. S. Eliot and the Art of Collaboration, Richard Badenhausen argues that collaboration was “a life-long operating procedure in [. . .] Eliot’s theory and practice” (1), but one Eliot regarded ambivalently. The Rock provides a case in point: on the one hand, Badenhausen calls it “a genuinely collective effort” (143); on the other hand, he says, Eliot’s “Prefatory Note” displays “an almost pathological refusal to take responsibility for creation” (162).

If Eliot—who likely wrote the Faber advertisement, and certainly authored The Rock’s “Prefatory Note”—was so eager, right from the start, to distance himself from The Rock, why did he write it at all? The first reason seems to have to do with the highly sensitive question of genre. While very careful to insist that The Rock is not “a play,” there is certainly no mistaking it for “a poem.” When Eliot recalled the genesis of The Rock in his essay “The Three Voices of Poetry” (1953), he stressed that it was the appeal of working in another genre that drew him to the project. “The invitation to write the words for this spectacle,” he wrote,

> came at a moment when I seemed to myself to have exhausted my meagre poetic gifts, and to have nothing more to say. To be, at such a moment, commissioned to write something which, good or bad, must be delivered by a certain date, may have the effect that vigorous cranking sometimes has upon a motor car when the battery is run down. (91)

Since the early 1920s—in such works as “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama,” “Marie Lloyd,” and “The Romantic Englishman”—Eliot had been calling for the creation of a popular poetic drama. In the mid-1920s he had begun and abandoned a verse drama, Wanna Go Home, Baby, later published in fragments as Sweeney Agonistes. But here, at a moment of poetic breakdown, came an opportunity to
try his hand once again at poetic drama—and not only to be guaranteed a large audience, but also to be protected from the risk of failure by the fact of being responsible for the “words” alone.²

Another reason is suggested by Eliot’s title, which echoes a passage in I. A. Richards’s *Principles of Literary Criticism*. In the course of arguing that the role of modern literature is to “outline a morality which will change as its values and circumstances alter” (52), Richards argues, “[t]he view that what we need in this tempestuous turmoil of change is a Rock to shelter under or to cling to, rather than an efficient aeroplane in which to ride it, is comprehensible but mistaken” (51). It was a mistake that the recently converted Eliot seemed openly eager to make. When Woolf complains of the play’s “dogmatism” and concludes that Eliot is “petrifying into a priest,” she identifies a common interpretation of *The Rock*: that it is a straightforward work of religious propaganda—a call to seek shelter from the complexities of the modern world under the Rock of the Church. The Eliot of *The Rock* is easily caricatured as an Anglo-Catholic Day Lewis: a doctrinaire propagandist whose generic experiments are merely means to the end of convincing and converting.

This chapter will argue that, whatever Eliot’s intentions or motivations may have been, *The Rock* is anything but straightforward. I will begin by showing that Eliot’s politics—so often dismissed categorically as conservative, reactionary, or Fascist—are in fact much more conflicted. Looking at his works of social criticism from the early 1930s and his “Commentaries” from *The Criterion*, I will show Eliot’s genuine engagement with the full spectrum of the competing political ideologies of his era—Communist, Fascist, and liberal-democratic—none of which he espouses straightforwardly. Next I will look at his prolonged interest in theorizing a poetic drama. While the works of the years leading up to 1934 demonstrate an increasing interest in the “use” of such mixed forms, I will argue that the “uses” Eliot has in mind for his own work are not reducible to simple propaganda. The Eliot I will present in fact shares the aims of many of our democratic-minded theorists of style: he sees the generic potential of a popular poetic drama as its ability to engage the
reader or audience member in active collaboration. My reading of *The Rock* will place Eliot’s peculiar “Book of Words” in the context of his ambivalent politics and theoretical engagement with hybrid form. I will argue that, whether he meant to or not, Eliot produced with his pageant play not a “Rock” but something much closer to Richards’ “efficient aeroplane.” Presenting a wildly conflicting cacophony of ideologically and genetically differentiated contemporary voices, Eliot leaves nothing certain in *The Rock* but the imperative that the reader make sense of the spectacle for himself.

*The Impossibility of a Democratic Eliot*

To discuss Eliot’s experiments in verse drama in positive relation to the idea of democracy would be, in the view of most critics of Eliot’s politics, to attempt the impossible and tempt the ridiculous. Michael North opens *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* (1991) by declaring “[t]he politics of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound have long been an embarrassment and a scandal” (1). In *Modernism and Democracy* (2006), Rachel Potter argues that “the mass democracy unleashed after the First World War in the early 1920s” was the primary “object of attack” of Eliot’s poetry and prose (10). Also grouping Eliot with Pound, Paul Morrison speaks in *The Poetics of Fascism* (1996) of “the horror of Ezra Pound’s and T. S. Eliot’s political commitments, which are inseparable from their poetic accomplishments” (3). At once upsetting his own notion of “commitment” and specifying the outlet of Eliot’s anti-democratic inclinations, Morrison argues that Eliot “hovered ambiguously on the periphery of fascist and quasi-fascist movements” and adds, “there is, for example, his admiration for Charles Maurras” (10). Maurras—the principle figure of the royalist Action Française, which led a group of far-right parties in precipitating the fall of the leftist French coalition parliament in February of 1934—is along with Pound a persistent companion in discussions of Eliot’s fascistic politics. Casting his account in all the sinister inevitability of the present tense, Kenneth Asher recounts in *T. S. Eliot and Ideology* (1995), “[a]s a young man he adopts from Charles
Maurras and the long tradition of French reactionary thought an advocacy of ‘classicism’,” which “aligned one against romanticism [. . .], democracy, and Protestantism” (8). Avoiding such clearcut labels, William Chace argues in *The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot* (1973), “[a]t crucial moments in his career, Eliot was an advocate of regressive social planning and a snob who saw Jews as an unwholesome and alien presence” (xiii).

The most obvious moment—and that which provides much of the evidence upon which Eliot’s critics rely—was February 1934, when Eliot published *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*. The volume reprints a series of lectures delivered the previous year at the University of Virginia, the stated aim of which was to revise and expand the literary concept of “tradition” from “Tradition and the Individual Talent” into the social category of “orthodoxy.” In the opening of the first lecture he describes the American South as an especially propitious venue for the unveiling for his vision of an “orthodox” society: “You have here,” Eliot says, “at least so much sense of recollection of a ‘tradition’, such as the influx of foreign populations has almost effaced in some parts of the North” (15). Calling the Civil War “certainly the greatest disaster in the whole of American history,” he tells his audience that “the chances for the re-establishment of a native culture” are better in the South than in New England because “[y]ou are further away from New York; you have been less industrialized and less invaded by foreign races; and you have a more opulent soil” (16). What follows remains in this vein. In the most notorious passage, he outlines his vision of an “orthodox” society:

> The population should be homogenous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable. [. . .] And a spirit of excessive tolerance is to be deprecated. (19-20)

As William Chace argues, the “society Eliot hoped orthodoxy would bring about” is defined almost entirely in negatives; specifically, by his “terse censure of certain adversaries (foreign races, self-
consciousness, Jews, and excessive tolerance)” (161). Politically, Chace describes Eliot’s desired polis as “directly opposed to the humanitarian-liberal tradition of tolerance, free thought, and belief in diversity” (160-1). No doubt following upon Eliot’s famous dismissal in the 1934 preface to *After Strange Gods* of “a society like ours, worm-eaten with Liberalism” (13), Rachel Potter titles her section dealing with that text “Against Liberalism.” Placed in the context of Hitler’s contemporaneous rise to power in Germany, the anti-Semitism of *After Strange Gods*, its repeated invocation of “race,” and its focus on social homogeneity not only place him as an “anti-liberal” but also go some way to validate the charges of Fascism.⁶

In the context of this dissertation’s focus on the connection between politics and genre, *After Strange Gods* also establishes the anti-liberal Eliot as a sort of “anti-Bakhtin.” Eliot’s promotion of social homogeneity in *After Strange Gods* presents a striking contrast with “Epic and Novel,” where Bakhtin argues that his “three basic characteristics” of the novel—its “stylistic three-dimensionality”; its distinctive temporality; and its “zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness”—have each been “powerfully affected by a very specific rupture in the history of European civilization: its emergence from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semipatriarchal society, and its entrance into international and interlingual contacts and relationships” (11). The mingling of cultures and languages in this “actively polyglot world” sets off a process of “inter-illumination” in which the novel plays a leading role. “In contrast to the other major genres,” Bakhtin writes, “the novel matured precisely when intense activization of external and internal polyglossia was at the peak of its activity; this is its native element” (12). In Ken Hirschkop’s reading of Bakhtin, the positive social aspect of the dialogic novel is the promotion in its readers of a democratic mindset—one defined by active engagement and independent decision-making. The analysis of art in *After Strange Gods* seems to place Eliot in the opposing camp. Though he presents himself in the preface as a “moralist” rather than a literary critic (12), Eliot spends much of his
second and third lectures separating the “ethically orthodox” art of Joyce and Baudelaire from the “heretical” Lawrence and Hopkins. His condemnation of the “diabolic influence” (49) of the latter group is largely dependent upon his conception of a passive reading public incapable of independent thought. “In the present state of affairs,” he writes, “with the low degree of education to be expected of [the] public and of reviewers,” heretical writing is dangerous because it “is apt to have a seductive simplicity, to make a direct and persuasive appeal to intellect and emotions, and to be altogether more plausible than the truth” (25). Though their lack of education (and consequent susceptibility to heretical appeals both emotional and intellectual) is to be “deprecated,” Eliot accepts it as a fact and responds by advocating the creation of “orthodox” canons. The active, responsible, enfranchised reader of Bakhtinian democracy presents a stark contrast with the passive, mistrusted reader of Eliot’s unprepossessing “orthodox” utopia.

**The Accidental Auerbach**

Read by itself, *After Strange Gods* fully justifies his critics’ charges of scandal, terror, and Fascism. Read in the context of his long engagement with political ideas in his prose writings, however, the work is very atypical. It stands out, in fact, for the lone characteristic it shares with Bakhtin: its dogmatic certainty. For Eliot, who William Chace describes as “entangled in, even obsessed by, politics” (xvii), definite opinions were always the exception. His articles and “Commentaries” in *The Criterion* in the years leading up to *After Strange Gods*, for example, demonstrate not only an intense interest in politics, but also genuine engagement with a wide variety of competing ideologies, as well as pointed unwillingness to align himself with or against any of them. The tone of crisis in his “Commentary” of April 1931 is typical of his writing of this period, and presents the starting point of his political analysis. “The social and political situation in England,” it begins, “is such that we now hear from the most orthodox pulpits in the country that something must be done—something, that is, better than merely turning the present government over and
putting the last one back again." “If,” he continues, “it is to be admitted that the present system not only does not work well now but will never work again, then something more stable than an emergency government must be envisaged” (481). The “Commentary” goes on to consider two alternatives: the “Mosley Programme” of the British Union of Fascists, which Eliot calls “not fundamental enough”; and the Southern Agrarian manifesto of the soon-to-be New Critics, *I’ll Take My Stand*, which Eliot praises here and in *After Strange Gods* (483-4). The case against Eliot as “anti-democratic” would seem bolstered by the fact that both of these alternatives are flagrantly reactionary. If one looks at his more direct engagements with reactionary politics, however, one sees that the situation is not nearly so simple.

Eliot’s essay, “The Literature of Fascism,” which appeared in *The Criterion* in December, 1928, is exemplary of his political slipperiness. Though often cited as evidence of Eliot’s attraction to Fascist ideology, the exceedingly complex movement of Eliot’s argument in fact makes honest citation nearly impossible. Far removed from the Bakhtinian dogmatism of *After Strange Gods*, “The Literature of Fascism” indeed presents an almost perfect example of “honest” Auerbachian argumentative style. Eliot begins his article from a position of Socratic ignorance: declaring himself “a political ignoramus” (283), he identifies a commonplace of political belief—that the expansion of the franchise in England has resulted in the destruction of democracy—and sets out to examine it (281). “It is manifest,” Eliot writes, “that any disparagement of ‘democracy’ is nowadays well received by every class of men” (287)—the consequence of which is “the vague sentiment of approval excited by the word [. . .] fascism” (282). The futility of democracy, Eliot says, “is the one point on which intellectuals and populace, reactionaries and communists, the million-press and the revolutionary sheet, are more or less inclined to agree.” But, he continues, “the danger is that when everyone agrees, we shall all get something that is worse that what we have already.” And so, somewhat unexpectedly, Eliot presents a passionate defence of democracy. “I cannot share
enthusiastically in this vigorous repudiation of democracy,” he writes: “It is one thing to say, what is sadly certain, that democratic government has been watered down to nothing [. . .] But it is another thing to ridicule the idea of democracy” (287). And so, having already declared himself “interested in political ideas, but not in politics” (281), he continues, “[t]he modern question as popularly put is: ‘democracy is dead; what is to replace it?’ whereas is should be: ‘the frame of democracy has been destroyed: how can we, out of the materials at hand, build a new structure in which democracy can live?’” (287). With characteristic slipperiness, however, Eliot follows this rallying cry for democratic thought not with an elaboration of a practical democratic politics (in which he confesses himself uninterested) but with an authoritarian non-sequitur: “Order and authority are good: I believe in them as wholeheartedly as I think one should believe in any single [sic] idea” (287-8). He then proceeds to his own interpretation of “the deterioration of democracy”: that the extension of the franchise has placed more responsibility upon the shoulders of the average citizen than he can bear: “our newspapers pretend that we are competent to make up our minds about foreign policy,” he writes, “though we may not know who is responsible for cleaning the streets of our own borough” (288). From this follows an Auerbachian assertion: that it is the overwhelmed, overburdened position of the average democratic citizens that opens the way for authoritarianism:

There is a general sickness of politics, and a general admission that it is not worth while worrying, as all politicians are alike, and their activity is just as remote from ours as the meditations of Einstein, and our vote doesn’t matter anyway. And in this state of mind and spirit human beings are inclined to welcome any regime which relieves us from the burden of pretended democracy. (288)

Democracy as it exists, Eliot argues, places such a strain on the individual citizen that it creates “a craving for a regime which will relieve us of thought.” In his final argumentative turn, however, he calls into question the sincerity of the most popular ideologies for establishing the “order and authority” that he too desires. “The popularization of such words as ‘fascism’ and ‘communism,” he says, “would reduce any paraphernalia of ideas and political philosophy to a mere elaborate façade.”
While he is attracted by the “comfortable feeling that we shall be benevolently ordered about” (288) under a fascist regime, he finds few of the “political ideas” for which he searches in either Fascism or communism; both, instead, simply capitalize on the popular demand for order. This is the highly equivocal endpoint of the article so often cited as Eliot’s defence of Fascism. Having first decried the public reaction against democracy, then called for true democracy, then called for order, then decried the public’s call for order, he finally dismisses the available sources of public order. Eliot’s evasiveness is perhaps less deliberate than Auerbach’s—less a case of demanding active engagement from his readers than of “playing ‘Possum”—but it provides evidence of a far more nuanced engagement with questions of democracy and authority than his critics usually allow.

If Eliot’s prose style in his Criterion articles is less monologic and more open to competing ideologies than is often supposed, the same is true of his editorial practice. A close reading of Eliot’s March, 1928 article “The Action Française, M. Maurras, and Mr. Ward”—a defense of Maurras in the wake of the 1926 Papal condemnation of the Action Française—reveals his usual careful, elusive style. Though often cited as evidence of his reactionary politics, Eliot does, for example, stress Maurras’s broad class appeal and argue that a Maurrasian movement would “preserve us from a sentimental Anglo-Fascism” (196-7). But far more revealing than the argument itself is the conversation that Eliot subsequently mediates in the pages of his journal. The real focus of Eliot’s article is to censure Leo Ward’s The Condemnation of the Action Française for relying on quotations taken out of context to advance its argument. In the June Criterion, Eliot prints Ward’s seven-page “L’Action Française: A Reply to Mr. Eliot”; appends his own five-page “Reply to Mr. Ward”; and finally includes “A Rejoinder by Leo Ward” before declaring “[t]his controversy must now be closed—Editor” (90). The very staging of such a debate suggests openness to competing opinions and faith in political conversation as its own end; Eliot includes, quite literally, the Bakhtinian “rejoinder.” Such conversations are typical of Eliot’s editorial practice. Eliot’s “The Literature of
Fascism,” for example, was the first in a series of articles that sought to determine if the two ascendant ideologies of his time—Fascism and communism—were as empty of content as he supposed. Though the opening “Commentary” does decry “the facile alternative of communist or fascist dictatorship” (380), the April, 1929 Criterion nevertheless prints two lengthy defenses, respectively, of communism and Fascism: A. L. Rowse’s “The Literature of Communism” and J. S. Barnes’s “Fascism.” In the July Criterion Eliot printed “Mr. Barnes and Mr. Rowse,” in which he summarizes the discussion and offers concluding thoughts: “My own rôle,” he says in this article, “was merely to ask questions” (682). While this is perhaps overstating his editorial neutrality—he does go on to argue for “a family likeness between fascism and communism” (682)—the ideological debates staged in The Criterion under Eliot’s editorship are hardly the work of a convinced Fascist. Indeed, for a sworn opponent of “worm-eaten Liberalism,” they seem to proceed according to logic strongly reminiscent of the four-point condemnation of “all silencing of discussion” (615) in that arch-Liberal text, J. S. Mill’s On Liberty.11

In his style Eliot exhibits an Auerbachian slipperiness; in his editorial practice, a Bakhtinian inclination to admit the rejoinder. It might seem an exaggeration, however, to say that the author of After Strange Gods could possibly intend the same aim as Auerbach and Bakhtin: the promotion of active, independent decision-making. There is much evidence, however, to suggest that this is in fact the case. In the “Commentary” to the issue that included the articles of Barnes and Rowse, for example, Eliot responds to the near-universal preference for communist and Fascist ideologies among “Men of Letters” as follows: “The extreme of democracy—which we have almost reached—promises greater and greater interference with private liberty; but greater despotism might be equally despotic” (379). With his usual opacity, he opposes democracy, Fascism, and communism together against “private liberty” and independent decision-making. The concluding words in this “Commentary” are: “it is as immoral to compel a man to lead a good life—which of course being
compulsory would not be really good—as to allow him to ruin himself” (381). In his article “Mr. Barnes and Mr. Rowse,” Eliot defends with equal vigour the right of the individual to make informed decisions. The problem with Communist and Fascist ideologies, he argues, is that both have become dead letters: the “ordinary man,” he says, regards them both with “familiarity”—“there is nothing ‘shocking’ about them” (682-3). “A revolutionary idea is one which requires a reorganization of the mind,” Eliot writes; “fascism or communism is now the natural idea for the thoughtless person” (683). Slightly later, in a “Commentary” on education in the January, 1931 Criterion, Eliot discusses the role of schools in producing democratic subjects and concludes, “in a democracy, it is essential that people should understand the matters upon which they are exhorted to make decisions, and that they should not be called upon to decide upon matters which they do not understand” (309). If there remains a hint of his authoritarianism in that last clause, it is nonetheless clear that, like Auerbach and Bakhtin, Eliot saw the connection between individual responsible decision-making and democracy. It is only a small step further to suggest that the style of his political articles in The Criterion and his decisions as editor were intended to instantiate this aim.

As we come closer in time to 1934’s After Strange Gods, Eliot’s pronouncements do tend to harden into the dogmatism and explicit “anti-liberalism” characteristic of that work. In “Catholicism and International Order,” delivered as a lecture in 1933, Eliot decries “democratic government” for relying upon “a balance of interests, rather than common interests, upon prudential ethics, not religious ethics” and dismisses Fascists, communists, democrats, and rationalists as different species of “heretics” (122). “Religion and Literature,” delivered the next year, performs a similarly robust repudiation of his former tacit Millism. Beginning from the confident and assured pronouncement “[l]iterary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint” (93), it strikes hard against “the liberal-minded [. . .] who are convinced that if everybody says what he thinks, and does what he likes, things will somehow, by some automatic
compensation and adjustment, come right in the end” (106). Indeed, the purpose of the article is to alert Eliot’s Catholic audience that what is called “modern literature” is little more than propaganda for this “liberal-minded” position; “the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism,” he says, and warns that “the liberal attitude towards literature will not work” (109). And yet Eliot does retain in this most dogmatic and “anti-liberal” of articles his support for what he had earlier called “the idea of democracy.” “It is not that the world of separate individuals of the liberal democrat is undesirable,” he says; “it is simply that this world does not exist” (107). “Modern literature,” moreover, while claiming to support the free competition of ideas, in fact presents its readers with no real choices:

the reader of contemporary literature is not, like the reader of the established literature of all time, exposing himself to the influence of divers and contradictory personalities; he is exposing himself to a mass movement of writers who, each of them, think that they have something individually to offer, but are really all working together in the same direction. (107)

Though he adds “there never was a time, I believe, when the reading public was so large, or so helplessly exposed to the influences of its time” (107-8), he calls upon his small audience of Christian readers to treat contemporary literature as a source of “divers and contradictory” opinions—not to ignore it, but to engage with it ethically, always aware of the difference between “‘what we like,’ and of ‘what we ought to like’” (109).

The question of what genre would best suit this form of ethically engaged reading is not touched upon in “Religion and Literature.” But we can perhaps make an inference based on Eliot’s Criterion “Commentary” of July, 1932. In this article Eliot considers the question so much in the minds of the critics in Chapter Two: that of what genres would survive into a period of Fascism or communism. “It seems to me unlikely that any social changes,” Eliot writes, “whether sudden or gradual, could lead to a state of things in which the major forms of literature could long be
dispensed with” (679). He then makes the Wilsonian point that the best “modern literature”
demands the heightened attention of poetry:

the finest living novelists are those whose work demands of the reader far more of an attention akin to poetic appreciation than any previous novelists have asked. But poetry, in one form or another, will always be wanted, and there will always be people who will feel compelled to write it. (680)

Given his insistence on the value of responsible, independent decision-making in his political writings, it is not surprising that Eliot should see the value of poetry—and of the modern novel—as residing in the active engagement it asks of its readers. And given his persistent critical engagement with verse drama, it is not surprising that he should see the theatre as poetry’s vehicle into the politically uncertain future. “The need for the theatre,” he continues, “will never, unless civilization not merely alters but disappears, be supplied by the cinema. The drama, perhaps, is one form which might gain new life in a new age, and at the same time provide a fresh, and much-needed, vehicle for poetry” (680).

Practical Human Uses; or, Recondity Reconsidered

There is an implicit irony in Eliot’s evocation of Edmund Wilson in the course of his discussion of the prospect of a hybrid poetic drama. For if the king of *Axel’s Castle* is the hybrid modern novel of James Joyce, its hunchbacked villain is the dualistic criticism of T. S. Eliot. As we have seen, Wilson, in arguing that “verse as a technique of literary expression is being abandoned by humanity altogether” (120), points his finger directly at Eliot. Taking from Eliot’s “Dante” essay in *The Sacred Wood* the argument “that it is not possible for a poet to be a completely successful artist and yet persuade us to accept his ideas at the same time” (119), Wilson makes Eliot the exemplar of “the tendency to keep verse isolated from prose and to confine it to certain highly specialized functions” (120). As we have also seen, he asserts that the “real effect” of Eliot’s criticism is “to impose upon us a conception of poetry as some sort of pure and rare aesthetic essence with no
relation to any of the practical human uses for which, for some reason never explained, only the technique of prose is appropriate” (119), Eliot’s unnatural and unusual forced confinement of poetry from prose, Wilson argues, is largely responsible for the moribund state of poetry that only Joycean hybridity can reverse. Wilson, moreover, was not alone in linking Eliot causally to poetry’s demise. Trevelyan’s discussion of *The Waste Land*’s “recondite allusions” and “studied neglect of transitions” argued that such devices served to alienate the diverse, popular audience without which poetry could not survive (72). The widespread disdain for the lyric on the small scale also directed itself toward much of Eliot’s œuvre. The image of Eliot committed to reversing the decline of poetry by combining it with some other, more popular genre, then, would seem as counterintuitive as the possibility of a democratic Eliot.

And yet it is precisely this image that David Chinitz presents in *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, where he characterizes Eliot, contra Trevelyan, as “perturbed by the disconnect between the poetry and elite fiction of his own time and any audience but small avant-garde coteries”; and, contra Wilson, as committed to “interrogat[ing] the claims of literature to a special status outside the social realm; of the ‘serious’ novel to freedom from any imperative to ‘entertain’; and of poetry, in its current form, to fulfill any purpose at all” (14). As a poet, Chinitz argues, Eliot was especially struck by the “moribund” state of poetry and by the realization that “if the poetic craft is to survive at all, it [would] have to take on some new shape” (68). Un-Wilsonian in his demand that poetry fulfill some “practical human use,” Chinitz’s Eliot is un-Wilsonian also in his solution to this dilemma. “Taken as a whole,” Chinitz argues, “Eliot’s career from *The Waste Land* forward is a long process of feeling his way back to a public—of searching for a popular ‘applied poetry’” (69). The specific vehicle Eliot discovers for the “application” of poetry is what Chinitz calls “a generically mixed poetic drama” (104). “Eliot ultimately turned away from poetry as such,” he says, “to devote himself to a new form
of public art—a poetic drama based on popular genres—that he hoped would reconcile the
dissociated realms of modern culture” (14).

This Chinitzian Eliot, it must be noted, coexists alongside the dualizing Eliot in Edmund
Wilson’s inconsistent portrayal in *Axel’s Castle*. A few pages before his denunciation of Eliot’s
criticism, Wilson discusses “the two episodes from ‘Wanna Go Home, Baby’ which he has published
in *The Criterion*”—what was later called *Sweeney Agonistes*—and finds them “rather promising.” In
support of his praise of that work’s “sort of jazz dramatic meter” (113), Wilson quotes not from
*Sweeney* itself but from one of the critical works he so despises: Eliot’s 1926 preface to his mother
Charlotte Eliot’s dramatic poem *Savonarola*. In the passage cited by Wilson, a very Chinitzian Eliot
not only prophesies the importance of a hybrid poetic drama but also sees its language as emerging
from a collision of the poetic and the colloquial:

The next form of drama will have to be a verse drama but in new verse forms. Perhaps the
conditions of modern life (think how large a part is now played in our sensory life by the
internal combustion engine!) have altered our perception of rhythms. At any rate, the
recognized forms of speech-verse are not as efficient as they should be; probably a new form
will be devised out of colloquial speech. (xi; qtd. in Wilson 113)

There is an element of gamesmanship in Wilson’s denunciation of the hybridity-hating Eliot: seeking
to reserve for himself the full glory of his climactic revelation of the hybrid Joyce as the voice of his
age, Wilson no doubt wished to deflect attention from the fact that Eliot had already—for more
than a decade—been arguing something very similar.

“The Possibility of a Poetic Drama,” published in *The Sacred Wood* in 1920, is exemplary
both of Eliot’s critical slipperiness and of his engagement with generic hybridity. It can be regarded
in many ways as Eliot’s “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future.” Like Woolf’s essay, it paints a picture of
the modern world in a state of interrelated social and generic crisis, and it looks back to the
Elizabethan poetic drama as an example of a successful genre in a thriving community. Taking as his
premise that particular genres “[find] their perfection by serving particular societies” (61), Eliot
argues that the “Elizabethan Age in England was able to absorb a great quantity of new thoughts and new images” because it possessed a vital poetic drama—“because it had this great form of its own which imposed itself on everything that came to it” (62). The dramatic poets of the sixteenth century were able to “serve” their society because they had a living form in which to work; Eliot argues, however, that the modernist writer possesses no such means of making himself useful. “Now in a formless age,” he writes, “there is very little hope for the minor poet to do anything worth doing” (64). His examples of the generic failures of his contemporaries provide some grist to the Wilsonian mill. Calling Maeterlinck, Claudel, and Bergson exemplary of “the mixture of the genres in which our age delights,” Eliot complains, “[e]very work of imagination must have a philosophy; and every philosophy must be a work of art” (66). He further argues that “the Shavian drama is a hybrid” since it serves to “popularize” philosophical—and not purely literary—ideas.

Displaying the tendency to separate art from “practical human uses” noted by Wilson, Eliot complains of such literary/philosophical hybrids that “the moment an idea has been transferred from its pure state in order that it may become comprehensible to the inferior intelligence it has lost contact with art” (68). And yet the essay evinces at the same time a contradictory urge to find an audience for poetry, and to discover a popular poetic genre able to serve modern society as the Elizabethan poetic drama served its own. Eliot begins the essay by stating, “the majority, perhaps, certainly a large number, of poets hanker for the stage” (60). He concludes it—bizarrely in the context of an argument occupied with the denunciation of hybrids and popularizations—by calling for a modern verse drama based on an interaction of poetry and a conspicuously “popular” genre, the music hall. “The Elizabethan drama,” he says,

was aimed at a public which wanted entertainment of a crude sort, but would stand a good deal of poetry; our problem should be to take a form of entertainment and subject it to the process which would leave it a form of art. Perhaps the music hall comedian is the best material. (70)
Having dropped this “dangerous” suggestion, which he fears will not be considered “seriously” (70), Eliot hastily concludes his essay without specifying exactly what this “process” would entail, nor what social “uses” it would perform.

Two articles published in the same period as “Possibilities,” however, provide some clues. In “The Romantic Englishman, the Comic Spirit, and the Function of Criticism”—published in the first issue of Wyndham Lewis’s *The Tyro* (1920)—Eliot focuses his attention on the audience. The article begins by asserting “the English myth is pitiably diminished” and that the drama, which ought to provide the English audience with its “myth,” delivers only dreary, routine reality. “Man desires to see himself on the stage,” Eliot says, “more admirable, more forceful, more villainous, more comical, more despicable—and more much else—than he actually is. He has only the opportunity of seeing himself, sometimes, a little better dressed. The romantic Englishman is in a bad way.” “It is only in the music hall,” he continues, “and sometimes in the cinema, that we have an opportunity for partial realization.” Music hall comedians, with their exaggerated, stylized performances, offer something akin to the double-effect of Elizabethan poetic drama: entertainment and criticism. “The audience do not realize,” Eliot says, “that the performance of Little Tich is a compliment, and a criticism, of themselves.” Though typically cryptic, what Eliot seems to see as the advantage of the music hall over the conventional prose drama is its unconscious “function of criticism”: its ability to teach the audience without their realizing it. Though the article stops short, once again, of saying just what music hall teaches its audience, it does nevertheless clearly demonstrate Eliot’s interest in the social “usefulness” of popular forms.

“Marie Lloyd” (1922)—Eliot’s first prose contribution to *The Criterion*—is much more specific in its analysis of what the music hall does for its audience, and what a poetic drama based upon it ought to do. In Eliot’s elegy for this star of the music hall (Lloyd is also mentioned in “The Romantic Englishman”), he insists that Marie Lloyd is already a sort of hybrid artist. Much in the
manner of Eliot’s desired interaction of poetry and music hall, Lloyd herself transfigured the lives of her working class audience into art: “whereas other comedians amuse their audience as much and sometimes more than Marie Lloyd, no other comedian succeeded so well in giving expression to the life of that audience, in raising it to a kind of art” (172). Eliot argues that Lloyd’s ability to thus transform the lives of the lower classes gives her a “moral superiority” over other performers. Through her close understanding of and sympathy with her audience—by giving them “the expression and dignity of their own lives”—Lloyd does for her own class what the art of the “morally corrupt” middle and upper classes cannot (173). The key to her “moral” impact, Eliot argues, lay in her ability to involve the audience as co-creators in the spectacle: “The working man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd joined in the chorus and was himself performing part of the act; he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art” (174). Eliot not only signals his interest in the social usefulness of art in “Marie Lloyd,” then, but also states exactly what a morally consequential form of art ought to do: as in the analyses of Bakhtin, Auerbach, Woolf, and others—and as in his own political writings—he argues that art must engage an audience in active collaboration if it is to have a social impact. Eliot fears, however, that Lloyd’s death signals the end of the music hall, the end of active audience participation, and the end of the “moral” working class:

With the decay of the music-hall, with the encroachment of the cheap and rapid-breeding cinema, the lower classes will tend to drop into the same state of protoplasm as the bourgeoisie. [. . . The working man] will now go to the cinema, where his mind is lulled by continuous senseless music and continuous action too rapid for the brain to act upon, and will receive, without giving, in that same listless apathy with which the middle and upper classes regard any entertainment of the nature of art. (174)

In *T. S. Eliot and the Art of Collaboration*, Richard Badenhausen argues that “Marie Lloyd” shows Eliot “expand[ing] the scope of what it means to collaborate”—moving beyond collaboration between artists and seeking to “establish a union with his audience” (8). While Eliot speaks enthusiastically of
the social and moral importance of such artist-audience collaborations, however, he nonetheless argues that modern forms of art and technology are serving to render them extinct.

The gloominess in the conclusion of “Marie Lloyd,” however, is somewhat disingenuous; for at the same time he was lamenting the death of music hall and the moral effect that went with it, Eliot was also actively engaged in putting them to use. Having used such essays as “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama,” “The Romantic Englishman,” and “Marie Lloyd” to establish his critical position, Eliot spent the middle years of the 1920s working on *Wanna Go Home, Baby*, later published as *Sweeney Agonistes*. Chinitz reads the project as an attempt “to reach a popular audience by drawing on vernacular sources.” In his analysis of its “unique blend of forms,” he includes vaudeville, music hall, melodrama, burlesque, jazz, minstrelsy, tabloid headlines, sentimental poetry, and true-crime reporting (107). But *Wanna Go Home, Baby*—whose fragments Wilson found so promising—was a failure. Unable to finish this first attempt at hybrid playwriting—and later publishing it with its forbidding high-art title and epigraph—Eliot set aside his interest in the poetic drama after his preface to *Savonarola* and turned, as we have seen, primarily to politics. But as we have also seen, his interest in politics led him back to the poetic drama. I have argued that one of Eliot’s primary political interests was the relationship between the political system and the individual’s ability to function as an independent decision-maker. It was in connection with this question that poetic drama—which had the potential to demand poetic attention from large audiences—became increasingly important to Eliot in the early 1930s. The high water mark of this second, more explicitly political phase of Eliot’s engagement with verse drama comes in the years leading up to 1934. His position is neatly summarized in his September, 1934 contribution to *The Harvard Advocate*: “At the present time I am not very much interested in the only subject which I am supposed to be qualified to write about: that is, one kind of literary criticism. [. . .] I am largely interested in subjects
which I do not yet know very much about: theology, politics, economics, and education.” “I am not very much interested in literature,” he says, “except dramatic literature” (69).

It is typical of Eliot that the work in which he most directly addresses the politics of the poetic drama begins by stating, “[t]he present lectures will have no concern with politics” (13). *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, delivered at Harvard in 1932 and published in late 1933, presents a number of ideas familiar from the essays of the 1920s, illuminated by Eliot’s more recent interest in politics. Focusing the argument of “Possibility,” Eliot says here that generic changes “are inseparable from social changes” (21), and proceeds to argue that the death of poetry is the result of such a social change. “When the poet finds himself in an age in which there is no intellectual aristocracy,” he says, “when power is in the hands of a class so democratised that whilst still a class it represents itself to be the whole nation; when the only alternatives seem to be to talk to a coterie or to soliloquise, the difficulties of the poet and the necessity of criticism become greater” (22). The major contribution of *The Use of Poetry*, however, is to offer a way out of this “seeming” dilemma. Eliot repeatedly insists, despite his distaste for the tyrannical middle-class audience, that “the poet naturally prefers to write for as large and miscellaneous an audience as possible” (152). “There is no doubt,” he says earlier, “that a poet wishes to give pleasure, to entertain or divert people; and he should normally be glad to be able to feel that the entertainment or diversion is enjoyed by as large and various a number of people as possible” (31). Standing in stark contrast to the images of stasis and homogeneity of the contemporaneous *After Strange Gods*, Eliot argues that prose/poetic hybridity is necessary to the discovery of a popular genre capable of engaging a broad public, whatever its composition. “Poetry has as much to learn from prose as from other poetry,” he says, “and I think that an interaction between prose and verse, like the interaction between language and language, is a condition of vitality in literature” (152). The specific vehicle for bringing poetry to this “large and miscellaneous audience” is, once again, the theatre. Eliot’s poet “would like to convey the
pleasures of poetry, not only to a larger audience, but to larger groups of people collectively; and the theatre is the best place in which to do it” (154). In delivering poetry to a large and diverse audience, Eliot argues, the theatre performs a social “use”:

The most useful poetry, socially, would be one which could cut across all the present stratifications of public taste—stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration. The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social ‘usefulness’ for poetry, is the theatre. (152-3)

The primary model for this socially useful, popularly enjoyed verse drama is also familiar: the music hall. If poetry is, as he famously concludes, “a mug’s game,” the author of a hybrid poetic drama “could at least have the satisfaction of having a part to play in society as worthy as that of the music-hall comedian” (154). The closing words of the first lecture, however, cast some doubt as to whether the current “state of society” is propitious for the reception of the verse drama after all:

From one point of view, the poet aspires to the condition of the music-hall comedian. Being incapable of altering his wares to suit a prevailing taste, if there be any, he naturally desires a state of society in which they may become popular, and in which his own talent may be put to the best use. He is accordingly vitally interested in the use of poetry. (32)

From one point of view, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* represents an effective rebuttal to Edmund Wilson’s charges against Eliot’s dualizing criticism. Far from segregating poetry from the “practical human uses” of prose, Eliot formulates his prose/poetic verse drama specifically as a socially useful genre—and even goes to far as to use “Use” in the title, twice. But *The Use of Poetry* would not be an Eliotic work if it did not leave as many questions open as answered. Can the verse drama be “useful” to a society which is not in a “state” to make use of it? If it can, how exactly would it effect its utility? What is it, precisely, about the poetry surreptitiously smuggled into a popular dramatic form that is so socially beneficial? Does it engage the reader, as “Marie Lloyd” suggested, in an active participation? Does it criticize the audience’s way of life, as “The Romantic Englishman” argued, and urge them to change their ways once they’ve left the theatre? Eliot’s criticism does not answer these questions. But we do, as we did not in the early 1920s, possess an
actual example of a hybrid verse/prose drama written at the time of *The Use of Poetry* against which we can compare its hypotheses and fill in its lacunae. We can look to *The Rock* for answers.

*Strange Bedfellows*

According to David Chinitz, *The Rock* was Eliot’s Rubicon: “in taking on this assignment,” Chinitz writes, “Eliot was deliberately and consciously crossing a sacrosanct cultural line out of ‘literature’ and into some unexplored terrain lying between high culture, popular culture, and religious expression” (132). For most contemporary critics, however, Eliot’s bizarre production was explicable both in terms of its genealogy and its involvement in a literary movement. Morton D. Zabel, in his article “Poets for the Theatre” in *Poetry*, presented the much-repeated argument that *The Rock*, far from a sudden departure, was the organic product of a decade of theorizing and experimenting in verse drama. “[I]t follows on his ‘Aristophanic fragments’ in *Sweeney Agonistes*,” Zabel writes, “as an apparent effort to put into practice the ideas on poetry for the modern theatre which he outlines in two of the best essays in *The Sacred Wood*” (152). When *New Verse* produced their special issue on “Poets and the Theatre”—which included an article by Eliot—in December, 1935, Geoffrey Grigson wrote in his editorial that not only *The Rock* but the whole of the newly resurgent form of the poetic drama owed its existence to “the pronouncements of Mr. Eliot, who is the father, or god-father, of such plays as there have been” (2). The fact that *New Verse* should have dedicated a special issue to the verse drama at all suggests two further inferences: firstly, that by December, 1935—a year and a half after the first performance of *The Rock*—the verse drama was a genre very much in vogue; and secondly, since *New Verse* was the home to many of them, that the so-called “30s Poets” were somehow involved.

Indeed, the reception and legacy of *The Rock* is peculiarly bound up with the productions of a school to which it is seemingly politically anathema. *The Rock* appeared shortly after Auden’s ironically communist *The Dance of Death*, which was produced alongside the fragments of Eliot’s
Sweeney Agonistes by Group Theatre, which continued throughout the decade to produce poetic
drama by Auden, Isherwood, and Spender—and for which Day Lewis wrote an unproduced play.\textsuperscript{13}
In his article “Chances of a Poetic Drama,” written in November of 1934, Ashley Dukes
immediately paired the strange bedfellows Auden and Eliot as progenitors of the new movement:
“W. H. Auden’s The Dance of Death (Group Theatre) and T. S. Eliot’s The Rock (Sadler’s Wells),” he
wrote, “must be considered as primitives of a new school” (110). Strange as this grouping of the
Communist “30s Poets” and the author of After Strange Gods may seem today (Sidnell calls it
“confusing” (35)), contemporary critics saw much in common. In his article in Poetry, for instance,
Morton Zabel argued that the true promise of a “new poetic drama” was much more than “the
reiviv[al] of a particular literary form, but of something more essential—a purpose, implicit in age
and people, of which true literature is the expression” (158). Eliot himself, in his October 1934
article “Religious Drama and the Church,” provides the clearest explanation of the commonality of
purpose between the “30s Poets” and himself. “The young dramatist to-day,” Eliot writes, “does not
want to write a play merely to please a small audience of poetry lovers.” In response to the familiar
dilemma of expanding the poetic dramatist’s audience, he argues:

The best opportunity that presents itself seems to be the opportunity to appeal to those who
are interested in a common cause which the poet and dramatist can also serve. Only a cause
can give the bond, the common assumptions between author and audience which the serious
dramatist needs. (qtd. in Sidnell 34-5)

Recognizing the paradox of his brotherhood with poets like Auden, Eliot concludes, “[t]here are
only two causes now of sufficient seriousness, and they are mutually exclusive: the Church and
Communism.”

Eliot’s language of “common assumptions between author and audience” suggests a
quiescent alternative to the frequently-encountered poles of engaging an active, independent
audience or seeking to convince and overwhelm a passive one; Eliot seems only to want to preach to
the converted. But the bulk of the reviewers of The Rock saw in it a further commonality with certain
productions the “Auden Group”: that it was propaganda. The reviewer for Blackfriars said of The Rock “[it] is an explicitly Christian play, it is vulgar propaganda, it is to collect cash for Church extension” (309). In New Verse, Charles Madge—a poet and journalist aligned with the Communist Party, and no stranger himself to propaganda—wrote, “Mr. Eliot has thought it necessary, in a world menaced by Communists, Fascists, and Plutocrats, to make propaganda for the Church of England, and incidentally for Major Douglas and ‘modern’ church architecture” (16). Conrad Aiken, writing in Poetry, saw The Rock as an example of the orthodox religious poetry called for in After Strange Gods, “which is propaganda, or something very like it, as long as it remains within that given frame of traditional or taught conviction, as it must” (164). Central to this charge of propaganda, which continues to resonate, is that The Rock sets up its enemies as straw men; that the Communists, Fascists, Plutocrats, and Agitators of The Rock—much like Day Lewis’s opponents in The Magnetic Mountain—speak only in order to be corrected by Eliot’s doctrinally-correct Chorus. The reviewer for Times Literary Supplement complained, “sometimes alien points of view, such as the Agitators’, are thinly projected” (404). In T. S. Eliot and Ideology, Kenneth Asher argues that in The Rock “representatives of secular doctrine make shadowy appearances and one by one are brushed aside by right thinking” (78). In “Auden and Eliot: Theatres of the Thirties,” Robin Grove says, “[a]t best, the Choruses are speaking for their author” (146). The elder Eliot, in fact, agreed. In “The Three Voices of Poetry” (1953), he says that the dominant voice of The Rock was “myself addressing—indeed haranguing—an audience.” “This chorus of The Rock was not a dramatic voice,” he continues: “Its members were speaking for me, not uttering words that really represented any supposed character of their own” (91).
Attempted Monologia

The haranguing certainty of *The Rock* is not merely a retroactive construction of Eliot and his critics but an acknowledged internal element of the play. Not only does the title’s echoing of Richards’s *Principles of Literary Criticism* suggest a striving for moral assurance, the character of The Rock is revealed at the conclusion of the spectacle to be St. Paul—doctrine itself. When the Rock makes its first appearance early in Part I, it is greeted by the Chorus precisely as a source of certainty. “I perceive approaching / The Rock,” the Chorus leader says, “Who will perhaps answer our doubtings. [. . .] The Witness. The Critic. The Stranger. / The God-shaken, in whom the truth is inborn” (8). Inspired, perhaps, by their contact with the Rock, the Chorus proceeds for much of the remainder of the play to offer assured propaganda: a message, as the play’s critics have noted, which is for the Church of England and apparently opposed to the full spectrum of secular ideologies.

Typical is the Chorus that introduces the first appearance of the Communist Agitator:

O weariness of men who turn from GOD  
To the grandeur of your mind and the glory of your action,  
To arts and inventions and daring enterprises,  
To schemes of human greatness thoroughly discredited. (31)

More succinct is the Chorus that opens Part II, which conveniently names the false gods of modernity:

Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before  
That men both deny gods and worship gods, professing first Reason,  
And then Money, and Power, and what they call Life, or Race, or Dialectic. (51)

The unequivocal messages of these Choruses, combined with Eliot’s avowal that they were his mouthpieces, leave little doubt about the intention of *The Rock*. Like Day Lewis’s *Magnetic Mountain*, Eliot’s play was, despite its faux-conversational structure, an essentially monologic piece of propaganda—in Eliot’s case directed against the secular ideologies *The Magnetic Mountain* sought to advance.
The difference between the two works is that Day Lewis succeeded in his attempt, and Eliot failed. The best example of Eliot’s attempt and failure at writing single-voiced propaganda in *The Rock* is the one scene of which Eliot is “literally the author”: the confrontation between Redshirts and Blackshirts toward the end of Part I. Following the unsuccessful attempts of the Agitator to convince the Workmen that church-building is contrary to the interests of their class, the Chorus offers one of its denunciations of secular ideology: “They constantly try to escape / From the darkness outside and within / By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good” (42). Following this, groups of Redshirts and Blackshirts arrive onstage to deliver their false doctrines and receive their rebuttals from the Chorus. The Redshirts say,

```
Our verse
is free
as the wind on the steppes
as love in the heart of the factory worker
thousands and thousands of steppes
millions and millions of workers
       all working
       all loving
in the cities
    on the steppes
production has risen by twenty point six per cent
we can laugh at God!
our workers
    all working
our turbines
    all turning
our sparrows
    all chirping
all denounce you, deceivers of the people! (43)
```

Eliot’s Redshirts present no true challenge in the ideological world of *The Rock*. Their speech is not an instance but a travesty of the rhetoric of Communist poetry: the “freedom” of the Redshirts’ verse form contrasts with their subjection to clichéd industrial imagery and meaningless statistics; and the chirping sparrows and petulant atheism may suggest a direct parody of the kestrels and
priests of Day Lewis’s *Magnetic Mountain*. Shortly after, the Blackshirts enter and deliver a speech similarly engineered for easy dismissal:

*We come as a boon and a blessing to all,*  
Though we’d rather appear in the Albert Hall.  
Our methods are new in this land of the free,  
We make the deaf hear and we make the blind see.  
We’re law-keeping fellows who make our own laws———  
And we welcome SUBSCRIPTIONS IN AID OF THE CAUSE! (44)

In their monotonous anapests, their shameless self-promotion, and their dubious panaceas, the Blackshirts give themselves away immediately as desperate for power and willing to achieve it by any means. When the Male Chorus, somewhat dazzled by the Blackshirts’ initial speech, asks them to clarify their position vis-à-vis the Church, the Blackshirts respond, “we must firmly refuse / To descend to palaver with anthropoid Jews” (44). The Chorus makes easy work of both foes: of the Redshirts it says, “Alas! there is no help here” (43); of the Blackshirts, “There seems no hope from those who march in step” (44). Michael Sidnell concludes, “[t]he Audenesque choruses of the Redshirts and Blackshirts in *The Rock* are mere straw men while the *real* chorus is the vehicle of Eliot’s poetry” (97).

Eliot may have intended it that way, but the situation is not so simple. Though the Chorus is ultimately dismissive of both the Redshirts and the Blackshirts, it is not dismissive of secular political ideology as such. Following its lament for man’s vain pursuit of “systems so perfect that no one will need to be good” (a restatement of Eliot’s opposition to political systems that seek to absolve the individual of personal responsibility), the Chorus checks its pessimism and opens itself to alternatives. “But come,” it says, “let us not lose hope in the world, prematurely.” Seeing the Redshirts approaching, it says,

*There are always the young, the devoted,*  
The enthusiasts, breakers of fetters.  
And some such I now see approaching  
With aloft their gay banner of sunrise. (42)
Disappointed in the Redshirts’ wares, they turn an ostentatiously impartial eye to the Blackshirts:

But who come now, approaching from our right?
Shall these avail us?
The right of some is the left of others.
The right of some is the wrong of others,
It is best to suspend judgment. (43)

In fact the Blackshirts do not avail the Chorus but expose it. For if the Redshirts’ poem travesties poems like *The Magnetic Mountain*, that of the Blackshirts performs an implicit travesty of Eliot himself; in a peculiar instance of part parodying whole, the Blackshirts travesty *The Rock*. If a main line of criticism of the Blackshirts is their craven desire for popular appeal, this is a charge to which Eliot and *The Rock* are of course also susceptible. Though Sadler’s Wells was not equal in size to the massive Albert Hall, it housed a much larger audience, for example, than the miniscule Group Theatre Rooms. And though the rhyming anapestic tetrameter is perhaps heavy-handed, Eliot’s desire for popular forms was by this point well-publicized; *The Rock*, as Chinitz notes, is not shy in exploiting them. The Blackshirts’ ridiculed demands for “SUBSCRIPTIONS IN AID OF THE CAUSE!” must also have seemed familiar to the audience of *The Rock*. The aim of the performance was to raise money for the Forty-Five Churches Fund; indeed, the Workers use the word “subscription” twice in the context of praising generous contributors to church-building (12, 23). Even the Blackshirts’ anti-Semitism seems, in the year of *After Strange Gods*, an ironic self-comment. If the Redshirts and Blackshirts are intended purely as straw men destined for correction by the Chorus, we must ask why the Chorus seems so interested in what they have to say and so disappointed in their answers—and why Eliot mocks the Blackshirts in terms applicable to himself.

The scenes involving another of *The Rock*’s enemies—the Communist Agitator, whom the *Times Literary Supplement* saw as “thinly projected”—raise further questions. There should be little ambivalence or difficulty in denouncing the Agitator. When he arrives on the scene midway through Part I, his specific intention is to disrupt the activity of church-building that *The Rock* was
commissioned to support. In his first appearance, the Agitator attempts to incite a crowd to disrupt the Workmen, and uses two lines of argument to achieve his end. First, he argues that church-building diverts resources from affordable housing and social services for the poor: “Do you think they’re puttin’ up decent ’abitations for you ’n me? Not much o’ that and then somethink less” (31). Second, he argues against religion on rational grounds. Employing the language of one of Eliot’s enemies, P. B. Shelley, the Agitator calls Christianity “a degradin’ and outworn superstition” (31), citing Darwin and a pamphlet by the “Rational Press Association.” Next directing his appeal directly to builders, he invokes Marx’s “opiate of the masses” and asks Alfred to “[l]ay down [his] tools and refuse to work on a buildin’ which is only for the purpose o’ dopin’ the workers” (32). Though The Rock has much invested in the effective rebuttal of the “thinly projected” Agitator, however, it has great difficulty performing it. The Agitator’s Marxian likening of religion to an intoxicant, for example, is given force by the fact that Alfred—the same workman to whom the Agitator directs his remarks—earlier in Part I makes the same comparison: in a reference to American prohibition, he argues that religion is as powerful an addiction as alcohol, which no amount of reasonable persuasion is able to cure: “Look at what’s been ’appenin’ in the U.S. these recent years. You can’t keep people off drink by tellin’ ’em it’s so ’armful they mustn’t ’ave it; and you can’t keep ’em off religion, seemin’ly, by tellin’ ’em it’s so old-fashioned they oughn’t to want it” (15).

The Workmen’s direct attempts at rebutting the Agitator are more equivocal still. If the Communist, atheist Agitator is The Rock’s representative par excellence of the “secularism” to which it purports opposition, it is curious that Ethelbert—the leader of the Workmen—should launch so secular a response. His reply to the charge that church-building diverts money from the needy is not that religion is in any way beneficial to the poor—spiritually or materially—but that the Agitator’s arguments are premised on an outdated economic theory. Ethelbert’s first response to the Agitator is, “I don’t suppose ’e’s even ’eard o’ the principles o’ Credit Reform. [. . .] What’s your view o’
Maynard Keynes?” (34). Later, Ethelbert asks the Agitator what is his specific objection to church-building, “apart from they bein’ a outworn superstition” (34). The Agitator quite reasonably replies, “[a]in’t all this money and labour and material bein’ diverted from its rightful purpose o’ providin’ decent ‘omes for the workers?” Ethelbert’s somewhat baffling response is, “[a]h, there you are. I knew you ad’ered to some antiquated theory of money. So you think that buildin’ more churches means buildin’ fewer ’ouses and flats, does you?” (34). Ethelbert’s economic defence of church-building is never explained, and its presumably mistaken Social Credit or Keynesian basis never presented. Though Charles Madge saw The Rock as propaganda for Major Douglas as well as for the Church of England, one could forgive the audience member more convinced by the Agitator than Ethelbert.

With a readiness to publish his opponents’ ideas reminiscent of his editorship of the Criterion, Eliot allows the Agitator another lengthy scene in which to make his case; this time he incites the mob to sabotage, calling for “Commúnism in our time!” (40). But it is not until Part II—in a scene involving what Madge identifies as the third propagandistic aim of The Rock, modern church architecture—that the Agitator’s logic is allowed to really triumph. This scene involves three characters: a Major, his sister Mrs. Poultridge, and his daughter Millicent. Mrs. Poultridge is immediately established as the unsympathetic figure; she enters the stage just as Mr. and Mrs. Ethelbert have finishing their crowd-pleasing music hall number, and complains, “[w]hat are those workmen about? They seem to have been singing!” (68). Already contemptuous of Eliot’s much-beloved music hall, her disdain for the sorts of modern churches about to be built by the Forty-Five Churches Fund further cements her status as a villain. “I may be old-fashioned,” she says, “and I’m not ashamed of it if I am; but these modernistic churches seem to me to show a shocking lack of devoutness” (69). It is given to the young, iconoclastic Millicent to defend modern churches; and she does so armed with the Agitator’s arguments. When Mrs. Poultridge insists on stained glass,
Millicent replies, “I can’t feel as you do about stained glass. [. . .] I believe that—especially in these times, when we are all so poor—simplicity should be the keynote in church design” (70). Becoming nearly as violent in her rhetoric as the Agitator himself, she later says, “[a]ll church decoration is vulgar. It’s not English. And it’s throwing away money that ought to be spent on other things—libraries and health centres and milk for the children—” (72). Millicent thereby further upsets *The Rock*’s presumed status as a work of straightforward propaganda. By repeating the arguments of the church-hating Agitator while supporting the kinds of churches *The Rock* was helping to build (and making no mention of Keynes or Major Douglas), she creates a bizarre alliance between the play and its enemies. Her slip in calling church decoration “vulgar,” while at the same time defending simple churches on the common people’s behalf, adds still further complication. In another of her iconoclastic harangues Millicent says, “I don’t believe that our English religion needs to depend upon Art. Religion is religion, and Art is Art; and the people who want Art can go to exhibitions and cocktail parties” (73). Delivered in a religious play, to an audience wishing to support Religion by means of Art, by an apparently sympathetic character, these lines truly bend the mind.

The many argumentative complexities of *The Rock* could be unintentional. It is possible that, in writing the Blackshirts’ song, Eliot was unaware of the similarity of their appeal to his own. The Workmen’s ineffectiveness in countering the arguments of the Agitator may simply be a comment on the former’s incomplete education, or a reflection of his own confusion about economic issues. The fact that the Agitator’s arguments return in the mouth of the play’s main supporter of modern church architecture may simply have escaped Eliot’s attention; or might be an element in a more complex characterization than most of his audience would have been prepared to accept. Whatever the intention, however, the effect is one of heteroglossia. Eliot may have introduced his Communists, Fascists, Agitators, and iconoclasts to serve his own needs, but in practice they pursue ideological aims of their own. Not only do they provide persuasive arguments against one another,
they present a systematic critique of Eliot’s ideology—each contributing to deflate some pillar or assumption of his position. If this is unexpected in *The Rock*, it is not unprecedented: Eliot’s political writings proceeded according to a similar logic. *The Rock* and Eliot’s political writings in fact achieve a similar effect: confronting their audiences with a genuine ideological conflict, they ask them to decide for themselves.

*A House of Plaster, with Corrugated Roofing*

Whether it means to or not, *The Rock* provides a forum for the competition of a collection of voices of tremendous ideological diversity. But there is another sense in which these voices differ—one Eliot, author of the “words” of the spectacle, could hardly have overlooked. In terms of their speech genres, they are perhaps more diverse still. From the ponderous tones of the poetic Chorus to the modern Cockney slang of the prosaic Workmen, *The Rock* presents a broad spectrum of modernist styles. The number of forms incorporated into *The Rock* easily exceeds that listed by Chinitz in his discussion of *Sweeney Agonistes*. Among *The Rock*’s poetic forms are Old Testament prophecy; Biblical quotation and paraphrase; Eliotic verse in the *Waste Land* mould; the sermon in verse; the hymn; communist, fascist, and capitalist propagandistic verse; and the music hall number. Among its prose forms are stage Cockney; the sermon; the economic treatise; Church history; Marxist history; Communist crowd-baiting; the tall tale; the newspaper interview; melodrama; and religious ceremony in Latin. As these lists begin to suggest, the ideological and generic diversity of *The Rock* are not independent; particularly privileged for inclusion are forms with a definite ideological association or point of view. But genre does nothing to simplify the baffling ideological complexities of *The Rock*. In a play in which the privileged Chorus and parodied Redshirts both speak in verse, and in which the idealized Workmen and the despised Agitator both speak in prose, no simplifying Bakhtinian association of poetry with the villains and prose with the heroes is
possible. Instead, *The Rock*’s generic diversity serves to further complicate its ideological controversies, and to place an even greater responsibility on the reader in sorting them out.

The debate on “modern” church architecture, for example, gets more complicated still once genre is taken into account. For all the ambivalence of her victory, Millicent does prevail in her debate with her aunt. Though her arguments are derived from dubious sources, and though she expresses unsympathetic sentiments on other matters, her case for simple church architecture in the uncertain economic climate of the mid-1930s is one that is difficult to refute. Yet the play’s poetic voices have great difficulty in agreeing with Millicent’s rational, coherent, but unaesthetic point of view. In one of the early Choruses, the dominant poetic voice of *The Rock* seems specifically to position itself against simple church architecture. It says,

```
Much is your reading, but not the Word of GOD,
Much is your building, but not the House of GOD.
Will you build me a house of plaster, with corrugated roofing,
To be filled with a litter of Sunday newspapers? (29)
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Such a possibility, absurd when expressed in poetry, is shown in Millicent’s prose to be the only responsible course of action. Apparently recognizing the disparity, when the Chorus arrives to comment on the scene involving Millicent, it avoids having to disagree with her by changing the subject. Rather than taking Mrs. Poultridge’s side, it argues that churches ought not to be gloomy—a point not addressed during the discussion—and proceeds implicitly to rebut Millicent’s argument for the mutual independence of art and religion: “Out of the slimy mud of words,” the Chorus says, “There spring the perfect order of speech, and the beauty of incantation” (74-5). The final Chorus directly reaffirms the investment of the poetic voice in beauty and decoration, thanking the “Light Invisible” for “lights directed through the coloured panes of windows / And light reflected from the polished stone, / The gilded carven wood, the coloured fresco” (84-5). What is true to the prose voices of *The Rock*—that hard times call for simpler churches—is false to the universal, ahistorical poetic voices that want art and beauty to serve religion. *The Rock* makes no attempt to resolve this
dilemma, though it goes to great lengths to point it out. The implication, it would seem, is that the poetic voice has one view of the world, the prosaic voice another, and that the two clash irreconcilably.

The controversies over church architecture seem to suggest the nature of the clash—that the values of poetic and prose speakers differ according to the genre in which they speak, and that the genre/value alignment is as follows: that the play’s poetic voices are universal, ahistorical, religious, and sensitive to beauty; and that its prose voices are focused on the present, belong to the fallen, secular world, and are utilitarian in their view of aesthetics. Perhaps this is why the Workmen are so unsuccessful in rebutting the Agitator’s “secularism”—perhaps it is because they speak in prose that they are not able to advance an effectively universalizing, anti-secular response, and resort instead to half-understood Keynesian and Social Credit economics. This posited split of prose and poetic values finds support in the fact of the poetic Chorus’s pointed opposition to the secular world in general, and to economic theories in particular. Mixing the language of Old Testament prophecy with that of the closing section of *The Hollow Men*, *The Rock’s* opening Chorus establishes itself firmly on the side of eternity against the fallen world of time:

O perpetual revolution of configured stars,
O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,
O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
The endless cycle of ideas of action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word. (7)

The Chorus’s anti-intellectual opposition to “invention and experiment” already suggests an opposition to secular theories such as those of Major Douglas and Maynard Keynes quoted by Ethelbert. This opposition is made explicit later in the same opening chorus:

I journeyed to the suburbs, and there I was told:  
We toil for six days, and on the seventh must motor  
To Hindhead, or Maidenhead.
If the weather is foul we stay at home and read the papers.
In industrial districts, there I was told
Of economic laws. (8)

This passage does more than simply express the poetic chorus’s disdain for the secular world and for the economic theories later expounded by The Rock’s prose speakers, however. It also reveals the Chorus’s generic dilemma: that in order to polemicize the present, it must quote from it.

Conspicuous “time-bound” prosaic elements thus enter the hitherto loftily indifferent language of the Chorus, and begin to upset the strict opposition of prose and poetic values: the Chorus uses “motor” as a verb, for example, and makes its first reference (one strikingly different from Woolf’s in the “Ode”) to that chronicle of the fallen world, the newspaper. The Baudelairean application of high poetic style to drearily prosaic details, of course, is a basic element of Eliotic poetics. But in the dramatic context of The Rock it functions to add a further generic dimension to the play’s tangle of ideological controversies. When the Rock, in its first appearance, rails against the fallen world for having “neglected and belittled the desert,” he nonetheless demonstrates his engagement with this world: “The desert is not only around the corner,” he says, “The desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you” (9). A later Chorus, again attempting a denunciation of the superficial and worldly concerns of “the timekept City” of London, produces an unintentionally comical hybrid of a Jeremiad and a commercial for suburban living:

In the land of lobelias and tennis flannels
The rabbit shall burrow and the thorn revisit,
The nettle shall flourish on the gravel court,
And the wind shall say: “Here were decent godless people:
Their only monument the asphalt road
And a thousand lost golf balls.” (30)

Though parodic, the verses spoken by the Redshirts already go some way toward demonstrating the practical, material concerns of The Rock’s poetic voices. The Chorus itself, however, goes even further by portraying industrial success and empire as the reward for righteous living. “When your fathers fixed the place of God,” it says,
They could set about imperial expansion
Accompanied by industrial development.
Exporting iron, coal and cotton goods
And intellectual enlightenment
And everything, including capital
And several versions of the Word of GOD. (20)

The Rock thus forbids simplifications at the level of genre as well. The ideological struggle of the poetic Chorus against its generally prose-voiced opponents is played out not only in their ideas but also in their language itself. Its heroes not only appropriate arguments from its villains, but also borrow their way of speaking.

This generic mixing is evident also in the play’s primary prose voices: those of the Workmen. In their first appearance, their Cockney accents and secular concerns sharply differentiate them from the poetic voices of the Chorus, the Rock, and the various chants that precede them. Ethelbert’s third speaking part includes the line, “[a]in’t you ever ’eard me speak o’ the principles of Social Credit Reform?” and his fourth explains at length “[w]hat Major Douglas ’as to say about banks” (12). Ethelbert’s interlocutors speak in the same class-bound, prosaic language and are similarly interested in the contemporary historical moment: Alfred, for instance, makes his reference to American Prohibition in this first appearance and, on the subject of contemporary atheism, asks his mates, “[l]ook at all what’s goin’ on in Russia” (15). These seemingly straightforward and prosaic voices, however, are subtly cross-pollinated with poetry. The very first lines spoken by a workman—Ethelbert’s “A pick-axe and a spade, a spade, / For and a shrouding-sheet” (11)—present, for example, a complex confusion of poetry and prose. These lines are in verse; indeed, the stage direction indicates that Ethelbert sings them. And he is singing not just any song, but a song from a rather conspicuous work of English literature: the lines are from Hamlet. But though the source is “high,” the dramatic personage is “low”: in Hamlet this song is sung by the “prosaic” Gravedigger. One effect of this opening tangle of genres and registers is to remind us—as John Cutbush’s
reference to Byron did—that poetry and literature are a presence in the lives of the prose-speaking working classes.  

The Gravedigger quotation also serves to establish the generic role of the Workmen’s language—that of establishing in the play a dialogue between the genres. The Workmen are “contested territory” in *The Rock*: many voices are interested in establishing the preeminent account of the nature and the significance of their work, and some even in speaking for them. Before we hear the Workmen speak in their prose voice, for example, we hear in Part I the first of the Workmen’s Chants:

In the vacant places  
We will build with new bricks  
There are hands and machines  
And clay for new brick  
And lime for new mortar  
Where the bricks are fallen  
We will build with new stone  
Where the beams are rotten  
We will build with new timbers  
Where the word is unspoken  
We will build with new speech  
There is work together  
A Church for all  
And a job for each  
Every man to his work. (9-10)

When the Workmen themselves arrive on stage it is immediately apparent that this chant is not sung in anything resembling their actual voices. The verbal complexities are indeed akin to those of The Unemployed and The Executive in Spender’s *Vienna*: the Workmen’s Chant is spoken not by the Workmen themselves but from the perspective of the Chorus, who seek to convey a general and universal rather than a local and historical account of the significance of church-building. The capitalization of “Church” provides the clue: in the Workmen’s Chant it is not “a church” that is being built, but “The Church”; not “words” that are spoken but “the Word.” The Workmen’s prose account of their activity is by no means as assured as that of the Chant: while Ethelbert agrees, “in
buildin’ this church we’re buildin’ somethin’ more than walls o’ brick and mortar” (13), Alfred says, he “[d]on’t see as it makes any difference whether it’s a church or a public house or a bank I’m puttin’ up. I draws me dough just the same so it’s all the same to me” (11).

The contrast between the Chorus’s poetic account of the Workers and their own prosaic self-accounting is perhaps clearest in a scene from Part II, when the church is nearing completion. A Builders’ Song precedes the Workmen’s arrival:

We have worked and have fought  
For this London of ours;  
Our lives have been bought  
By Our Lord on the Cross;  
We are those who pay rent  
To the temporal powers;  
Of our lives misspent  
Our Lord bears the loss. (64)

This dreary, devout, and “eternal” voice already clashes with the cheery, irreverent, “temporal” Workmen with whom the audience has become familiar. But it stands in especially stark contrast to the scene that follows, where the Workmen celebrate their near completion of the church. This is the scene where, moved by their own jubilation and the arrival of Mrs. Ethelbert, the workers perform their music hall number. There is a case to be made that the Workmen’s good spirits in this scene are due to a Chorus-derived “poetic” understanding of their work. When Edwin calls their completion of the church “a’most a miracle,” Ethelbert responds, “it’d be splittin’ ’airs to call it anythink else” (65). Edwin offers acknowledgment of the mystical participation in the building of the church to the twelfth-century clergyman Rahere, who in an appearance in Part I had promised the Workmen his aid: “’e said,” Edwin says, “’e and ’is mates was a-goin’ to work with us” (65). When Alfred asks, “but ’ow do you explain it? I suppose it can’t ’ave been real,” Ethelbert accuses him of a lack of faith: “Fred, I’m afraid you’ve got that disease they call the modern mind. Which is as much as to say, you’ll take no end of trouble to explain away what any man in ’is senses would just believe and take for granted” (65). Favouring the poetic account of the building of the church
over the prosaic, material one, the Workmen seem momentarily to conform to the characterization of the Choruses and Builders’ Songs—which seems to explain their happy mood.

Mrs. Ethelbert’s arrival onstage, however, is quickly accompanied by an effective and unexpected challenge to this poetic account. Her first lines, when she greets her husband, are, “Bert, I near died o’ larfin’, I did, when I ’eard you talkin’ to that young man. That one as wanted you to leave off buildin’ ’cause it was a church” (66). She is referring to the Agitator—who, though discharged approximately an hour previously in the running time of the play, was in its narrative sequence fended off some months before, just as construction was beginning. Disturbed by this temporal dislocation, Ethelbert replies, “[w]hy, you don’t mean to tell me you was there all the time, Ma?” Mrs. Ethelbert replies, “[w]asn’t I! I see that crowd, and I ’eard the young man talkin’, and then I ’eard you answerin’ up to ’im” (66). At this point it is still unclear whether the “crowd” of which she speaks is the mob to which the Agitator was directing his rhetoric or the audience in Sadler’s Wells. But before they begin their music hall song, she dispels all ambiguity: “Bert, anybody’d think you ’and’t ad no re’earsin, they would. You ’aven’t ad a lapsis o’ memory, ’ave you? ’Ere’s ’undreds and ’undreds of people all waitin’ to ’ear you sing that song what was wrote for you special” (67). Just as the Workmen were beginning to acknowledge supernatural participation in and divine significance of their church-building, Mrs. Ethelbert collapses the fourth wall to produce the most purely “prosaic” interpretation of the spectacle possible. Seeing Bert as simply an actor (however ill-rehearsed), his song as written for them by Eliot (the conceit was previously that Ethelbert had written it), and acknowledging the large audience at Sadler’s Wells (for only the Workmen are present onstage)—and even giving her own dialogue away as scripted by her “rocky” malapropism “lapsis,” which combines “lapse” with “lapis,” Latin for stone—Mrs. Ethelbert disrupts the audience’s willing suspension of disbelief just as the Workmen had begun to experience something akin to it.
The competition between the poetic and prose account of the Workmen is one that characteristically resists definite resolution. The Workmen’s Chant and the Builder’s Song, voiced by the Chorus, want to see the Workmen’s church-building not as a contingent historical event but as participant in universal Church history; and at times the Workmen themselves appear to derive comfort from this reading. For the most part, however, their commonsensical, materialist self-conception coexists with the supernatural readings—most spectacularly in Mrs. Ethelbert’s bold tipping-over of the fourth wall. This programmatic irresolution persists literally into The Rock’s final line. Perhaps the most appealing of the poetic accounts of the Workmen is the oft-repeated refrain to the Builders’ Song, “A Church for us all and work for us all and God’s world for us all even unto this last” (64). This line is so appealing because of its broad inclusiveness and since it ties the universal mission of the Church to the present-day problem of working-class unemployment. It is the final line spoken in the play, when The Rock—now revealed as St. Peter—invites the real-life Bishop of London to deliver a Benediction to the audience at Sadler’s Wells. By this point, however, the utopian “Builder’s Song” has been definitively severed from any connection to the play’s actual builders, the Workmen. Their last appearance onstage, just before the Bishop arrives to bless the audience, seems to serve the sole purpose of establishing the Workmen as prosaic individuals distinct from the universal work they have accomplished. Against the utopian echoes of the inclusive Builder’s Song, we leave them bickering along nationalistic lines about Edwin’s use of the expression “O.K.” “I wont’ave these foreign expressions used in my ’earin’,” Ethelbert says: “Words like ‘O.K.’ ain’t English; and what ain’t English is vulgar” (77).

If Eliot was aiming for Scylla in accepting the commission to write the “text” of The Rock, he got Charybdis instead. If he sought the serene moral certainty of a Rock, he found himself immersed instead in the swirling ideological waters of the Whirlpool. As a work of “attempted monologia,” Eliot’s first completed play is a clear failure: its message is confused and its voices contradictory. As
a record of its historical moment, however, it is valuable. It is in a caustic and sarcastic tone that the Chorus asks, “Will you build me a house of plastic, with corrugated roofing, / To be filled with a litter of Sunday newspapers?” (29). But this provides an accurate description of Eliot’s play. Littered with the ideological outpourings of Communists, Fascists, Plutocrats, Keynesians, Social Creditists, and Churchmen, it is composed of the detritus of contemporary history. Like his own “newspaper,” the Criterion, it presents the ideological debates of the early 1930s in all their cacophonous irreducibility. It presents these debates, moreover, through the lens of genre. Poetic and prosaic voices struggle against one another in The Rock, each attempting to impose its view of the world and their reading of the play’s action. As with the ideological voices, the struggle establishes nothing but the complex interdependence of the putatively opposing voices. In his best criticism on the “possibility” of hybrid genre, Eliot stresses that such genres would involve their audience in the creation of the work. In this, his criticism resembles that of Walter Benjamin, whose “The Author as Producer” argues that Brecht’s Epic Theatre—more famous that Eliot’s dramaturgy for its demolitions of the fourth wall—is “exemplary” because it transforms “consumers” into “producers”; because it turns “readers or spectators into collaborators” (777). Eliot’s bizarre first play achieves a decidedly—and perhaps surprisingly—Brechtian end: the only certain thing amidst its tangle of genres and ideologies is that the audience must collaborate actively in the spectacle.

1 See Sidnell 96.
2 See Badenhausen 151.
3 The crisis of February 6, 1934, in which far-right protestors rioted against Édouard Daladier’s government in the Place de la Concorde, led to the formation of a number of anti-fascist leagues such as that to which Benjamin addressed his lecture, “The Author as Producer.” Maurras’s Action Française and its youth league, the Camelots du Roi, were active in the riots.
4 See the special issue of Modernism/modernity (10.1, January 2003) devoted to the issue of T. S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism, and the second part of the debate in 10.2 (September 2003).
5 In “Burbank with a Baedeker, Eliot with a Cigar,” Ronald Schuchard argues that Eliot’s statement “is not, regardless of its appearance, an anti-Semitic statement; it is an anti-free-thinking statement” (16).
6 Schuchard quotes a letter from Eliot to Isaiah Berlin in which Eliot says, “the sentence of which you complain (with justice) would of course never have appeared at all at that time, if I had been aware of what was going to happen,
Indeed had already begun, in Germany” (“Burbank,” 16). Marjorie Perloff replies to Schuchard by pointing out that if Eliot had been reading newspapers, he would have “been aware” (53-54). (Perloff does not mention that Eliot was writing something like a newspaper column.) Schuchard replies to Perloff by pointing out that dissemination of Nazi Anti-Semitism was not widespread in England (“My Reply.”)

7 In the “Commentary” Eliot says “there is raised a general problem which concerns the whole world; though probably it will not be perceived to concern even the whole of America. The question of the Good Life is raised; and how far it is possible to accept industrialization without spiritual harm” (483-4). Eliot opens After Strange Gods by noting “I have been much interested, since the publication a few years ago of a book called I’l’l Take My Stand, in what is sometimes called the agrarian movement in the South, and I look forward to any further statements from the same group of writers” (15). I’ll Take My Stand included articles by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and, most notoriously, Robert Penn Warren, on segregation and slavery. See Mark Jancovich, The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism.

8 Eliot’s most persistent complaint against the “present system” in his “Commentaries” is in fact with its capitalistic rather than its democratic basis. He applauds I’l’l Take My Stand, therefore, for condemning an “organization of society [that] is wholly materialistic” (484), and in the “Commentary” of April of 1932 argues, “the present system [. . .] is imperfectly adapted to every purpose except that of money-making” (467). When he criticizes Communism in his January 1932 “Commentary” it is because he sees “the Soviet system [as] simply the culmination of capitalism” (273).

9 In his “Reply” to Leo Ward, Eliot also explicitly defends Maurras against Ward’s charge that the latter altered his speech throughout his career to suit his interests. “What Mr. Ward calls ‘alteration of speech’,” Eliot says, “I call ‘development of thought’: that is the difference. Mr. Ward does not seem willing to admit that Maurras’ thought has changed, or that Maurras learned anything from maturity except a diabolical skill in cajoling and deluding Catholics’ (86). That Eliot should be defending Maurras’s right to change his mind does seem to leave open the possibility that, through such a discussion, he might change his own.

10 In their General Introduction to the Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines, Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker argue that dialogical editorial practice was a defining characteristic of modernist magazines in general.

11 The four points, outlined in On Liberty, are as follows:

   First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. [. . .]
   Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth [. . .]
   Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but, fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled. . . (635).

12 In “Woolf, Eliot, and the Elizabethans,” David McWhirter notes that both Woolf and Eliot “belatedly invest the Elizabethans with a myth of original coherence and plenitude, the aura of an undissociated golden age” (249). He distinguishes strongly between their reading of Elizabethan society, however, arguing that while Eliot sees it as “idealized and ordered” (250), Woolf celebrates it as “exuberant, expansive, and unruly” (251). McWhirter focuses on “Poetry, Fiction, and the Future” and Between the Acts; and on Eliot’s essays on the Metaphysical Poets, “East Coker,” and The Rock, reading the latter as presenting a “horrified vision” of the present day (259). McWhirter does not discuss “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama.”

13 The Group Theatre produced Sweeney Agonistes in November of 1934 and during its first season, beginning October 1st, 1935. The Dance of Death was produced in February 1934 and during the first Group season. The Group Theatre produced The Dog Beneath the Skin in 1936, The Ascent of F6 in 1937 and On The Frontier in 1939. It produced Spender’s Trial of a Judge in 1938. Cecil Day Lewis’s Noah and the Waters (1936) was originally intended for the Group Theatre (Sidnell 89). Badenhausen, in his larger argument about Eliot and collaboration, calls the Group Theatre “an artistic community that not only sanctioned collaborative achievement but held it up as an ideal” (142). Badenhausen argues that “Eliot was attracted to the [Group Theatre’s] ideal of collaboration, [yet] he also strained to reconcile these lofty collective aims with his fierce attraction to authority, control, and aloofness” (143). He further argues that the connection with the Group Theatre led Eliot to be influenced by Auden’s The Dance of Death in the composition of the “words” to The Rock (142).

14 For Eliot’s negative response to Shelley’s poetry see Use of Poetry, “Shelley and Keats,” 78-94. In Act I of Promethues Unbound, the First Spirit says,

   I fled hither fast, fast, fast,
   Mid the darkness upward cast—
   From the dust of creeds outworn,
   From the tyrant’s banner torn,
Gathering round me, onward borne,  
There was mingled many a cry—  
Freedom! Hope! Death! Victory! (I.694-701)

15 The use of “dope” as a verb first appears in the United States in 1889; the Agitator is using up-to-date, transatlantic slang.

16 In the song of the Unemployed—perhaps an echo of The Unemployed of Spender’s Vienna—sympathy is solicited on the grounds not only that the Unemployed lack churches but that they lack cigarettes and alcohol as well: “In this land / There shall be one cigarette to two men, / To two women one half pint of bitter / Ale” (10).

17 In “What Dante Means to Me,” Eliot says that Baudelaire taught him that “the sort of material that I had, the sort of experience that as an adolescent I had had, in an industrial city in America, could be the material for poetry; and that the source of new poetry might be found in what had been regarded hitherto as the impossible, the sterile, the intractably unpoetic” (126).

18 Cockney language is, however, noted for its rhyming slang.

19 Having sung his lines, Ethelbert strengthens the connection between “high art” and the masses by adding, “I ’eard that at the Old Vic once” (11)—the Old Vic being historically dedicated to the bringing-together of the two. During the scene involving Rahere, the Workman Edwin is confused by the word “jester”; having been enlightened, he responds by likening jesters to a famous music hall comedian: “Oh, like George Robey” (25). The Workmen’s education in the music hall is confirmed in Part II when Mr. and Mrs. Ethelbert perform a music hall number (67-8).

20 There doesn’t seem to be any distinction between the Workmen’s Chant and the Builders’ Song; the voice is the same, and the closing refrain similar.
Chapter Five

Delight in Contradiction:
The Manifold Byways of Wyndham Lewis’s One-Way Song

This Enemy Counts All My Song

Wyndham Lewis’s knack for enervating his contemporaries reached one of many apogees in 1934, the year he published his tenth book of the thirties, Men Without Art. No records exist of the reactions of William Faulkner, I. A. Richards, or T. S. Eliot to the attacks perpetrated in Lewis’s book, but we can perhaps infer them from the documented responses of Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf. When Hemingway read the chapter on his work, “The Dumb Ox,” in Sylvia Beach’s bookshop, he stood up, turned purple, and proceeded to punch out a vase of red tulips. The flowers were standing next to a display of modern fiction, and the resulting flood destroyed, among other books, a first edition of Mrs. Dalloway (O’Keefe 343). The author of the drowned work did not purge her emotions in such a violent display; her metaphor was of a blow received rather than delivered: she wrote in her diary, “I’ve taken the arrow of W.L. to my heart” (D 5:251). Stephen Spender, among the first reviewers of Men Without Art, immediately charged Lewis with unfairness in his treatment of Woolf. In the chapters on Hemingway and Faulkner, Spender wrote, Lewis “as a critic, is at his best”: the two “are evidently writers for whom he has respect and whom he can attack without losing his sense of their proportions” (338). Spender condoned Lewis’s attack of Eliot also on the grounds that it was “amusing” (338). But the chapter on Woolf was another matter. Spender described it as “twelve well-filled pages of malice and ill-temper” (339) and concluded, “Mrs. Woolf is attacked with a great deal of malice and without any show of evidence that Mr. Lewis has read either of her best works, The Waves or To the Lighthouse” (340). Lewis’s response to Spender’s review, in a letter to the Editor of the Spectator, focused on the legal connotations of Spender’s reiterated charge of “malice.” Fearing a formal charge of libel, Lewis responded, “it is the principle of free speech that I am defending as well as myself” (340). He then proceeded to a demonstration of the
sort of free speech he had in mind: “Mrs Woolf is charming, scholarly, intelligent, everything that you will: but here we have not a Jane Austen—a Felicia Hemans, rather, as it has been said; for there are some even more ‘malicious’ than I am, I’m afraid” (342).

Seventy-five years after its first publication, *Men Without Art* continues to claim its victims. Indeed, this dissertation is one. For in his chapters on Woolf and Eliot—the essays Spender found respectively “malicious” and “amusing”—Lewis provides a proleptic rebuttal to the arguments I have advanced in my own chapters on them. His argument against Woolf is essentially that she invented the “crisis of genre”—including the “death of poetry”—to hide her own artistic weaknesses. His argument against Eliot is that nothing whatsoever ought to be taken from the latter’s incessant qualifications and reversals of direction; in Lewis’s opinion, Eliot is just hopelessly insincere and incapable of saying what he thinks. “T. S. Eliot, The Pseudo-Believer”—at thirty pages by far the longest chapter in *Men Without Art*—focuses on Eliot’s activities as a critic. It looks specifically at Eliot’s response to the critical controversy begun by a footnote more famous than Bakhtin’s: the one in *Science and Poetry* where I. A. Richards describes Eliot in *The Waste Land* as having “[effected] a complete severance between poetry and all beliefs” (64). Lewis describes Richards’s claim as “substantially true” (63); for Lewis, Eliot’s theory of impersonality as elaborated in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is little more than a ruse for escaping personal responsibility for his works—an evading what Bakhtin calls “answerability.” But what interests Lewis more than the truth or untruth of Richards’s statement is the way Eliot responds to it. “To be held up to the world,” Lewis writes,

as the guy who had *par excellence* taken to the “destructive element” as a duck does to water, and swum about in it to such purpose as to have proved, for all time, that *without a shred of true belief of any sort*, an artist can still survive intact, and write first-rate poetry—that was scarcely the kind of advertisement Mr. Eliot had plotted out for himself! (63)

Lewis notes what many readers of Eliot’s criticism have observed: that the latter has a sort of “split personality”: revolutionary and daring in his poetry, conservative and restrained in his criticism. The
“Richards dilemma” brought this duplicity in to the open by forcing Eliot to discuss his “revolutionary” poetry in his “restrained” prose. Lewis reads Eliot’s response to Richards in “Dante,” where Eliot calls Richards’s claim “incomprehensible” (269), as exemplary of Eliot’s critical method. In this “elaborate exercise in hedging” (MW A 64), Lewis argues, Eliot equivocates for the express purpose of confusing his reader and avoiding having to take a stand:

“If you deny the theory that full poetic appreciation is possible without belief in what the poet believed, you deny the existence of ‘poetry’ as well as ‘criticism,’” Mr. Eliot writes: and throughout his Note he proceeds to deny it, half-denial it, and then take back his denial: to say that “it is possible and sometimes necessary, to argue that full understanding must identify itself with full belief.” But this all “hangs on the meaning”—or “a good deal”—for there is nothing here that is not doubly and trebly qualified—“on the meaning if any, of this short word full.” Clearly with such vapourish material it is not possible to do very much. (65)

For Lewis there is no deeper Auerbachian intent to Eliot’s critical slipperiness—no desire to challenge his reader’s will to interpretive synthesis with argumentative and ideological reversals. “Sincerity is precisely what Eliot is afraid of,” Lewis says—“sincerity in the sense of integral belief of any sort” (66). Lewis next argues that Eliot’s “broad-minded” or heteroglossic editorial practice at The Criterion can be explained as further exercise in hedging. In an elaborate nautical metaphor likening Eliot to the “skipper of the Criterion,” Lewis describes Eliot as willing to dock his ship in any port—“the most liberal in the world, or the reddest for that matter, in the universe”—providing of course “the boatswain pipes at the right time, in the true traditional fashion, and so long as the royal colours continue to float aloft” (78). “Mr. Eliot’s is a system of dogmatic insincerity,” Lewis concludes. “That is all very well,” Lewis would no doubt retort after reading my fourth chapter, “but it is all the result of Eliot’s cowardice—not of some political, or even generic, motivation. All he was trying to do was hide his beliefs.”

Lewis’s response to my reading of Woolf would be equally direct. His chapter on Woolf in Men Without Art is a response to her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” and takes particular issue with its statement, “[w]e must reconcile ourselves to a season of failures and fragments” (343). Lewis
reads Woolf’s rebellion against “materialistic” literary conventions as resolving into a dispute between “mind,” represented by Woolf, and “matter,” represented by the previous generation of writers—particularly Wells, Galsworthy, and Bennett. Lewis’s first retort is to suggest that if Woolf found these particular writers wanting, she was not lacking in alternate literary models: “Anyone would suppose from what she says,” Lewis writes, “that at the time in question Trollope, Jane Austen, Flaubert, Maupassant, Dostoievsky, Turgenev, Tolstoy, etc., etc., etc., were entirely inaccessible to this poor lost ‘Georgian’ would-be novelist” (137). Just as there was no shortage of adequately “psychological” literary models available to modernists, he continues, there was also no crisis of genre. Ulysses once again provides a counter-example of success in genre: “Joyce’s Ulysses may be a ‘disaster’—a failure—as Mrs. Woolf calls it in her Plain Reader [sic]. But it is not a fragment” (137). Woolf’s promotion of the idea of a “season of failures and fragments” at a time when works as successful as Ulysses were being produced, Lewis argues, was designed simply to justify the paltriness of her own offerings. “If you ask,” Lewis writes,

Do you mean there is nothing in this view at all, of ours being a period of Sturm und Drang, in which new methods are being tried out, and in which the artistic production is in consequence tentative? I reply: There is nothing new in the idea at all, if you mean that the present time differs from any other in being experimental and in seeking new forms: or if you seek to use that argument to account for mediocrity, or smallness of output. (137-8)

Woolf’s idea of “superhuman difficulty—of some absolute obstructing the free circulation of the good things of life”—namely, the idea of the crisis of genre discussed in my third chapter—is to Lewis a mere ruse. He accuses Woolf of complicity in what he labels the “Bloomsbury technique” of “[bringing] into being an imaginary ‘time,’ small enough and ‘pale’ enough to accommodate their not very robust talents” (138). To my chapter on Woolf, Lewis would no doubt respond, “Poetry was not dead at all. It’s just that she could not write good poetry, and did not want to grant that possibility to anyone else, either.”
These imaginary rebuttals of Lewis’s, while occasionally effective, are not very helpful. As with many of “The Enemy’s” sallies against his contemporaries, they serve to shut down the discussion rather than contribute to it. Lewis’s seemingly monologic insistence that Eliot state his singular position definitively—and his ad-hominem contention that, because he did not like Woolf’s novels, her belief in a crisis of genre proved there was no such thing—make him a strange fit in this thesis. Fortunately there is more to Lewis’s essays than an initial reading would suggest. In his essay on Eliot, for example, it becomes clear that Lewis’s objection to the former’s penchant for equivocation does not stem from a monologic or totalitarian belief in the singularity of truth, but rather from the belief that writers like Eliot ought to state their positions so that they can be tested in public debate. “If there is to be ‘insincerity,’” Lewis writes, “I prefer it should occur in the opposite sense—namely that ‘the man, the personality’ should exaggerate, a little artificially perhaps, his beliefs—rather than leave a meaningless shell behind him, and go to hide in a volatilized hypostatization of his personal feelings” (74-75). One of Lewis’s main arguments is that Eliot misused his enormous influence to limit expression and debate. Through his poetry and criticism, Lewis argues, Eliot “succeeded in instilling a salutary fear of speech—a terror of the word, into his youthful followers[,] who have not thought twice, but a dozen times or more, before committing themselves to paper; and when they have come to do so, have spoken ‘neither loud nor long’” (55). Lewis’s article ought to be read with these two criticisms in mind—for Lewis, who is at least as “honest” a critic as Auerbach, takes his own analysis very much to heart. In the brief discussion of Auden in his Eliot chapter, Lewis writes, “[i]t is he who has really given the coup de grâce to Mr. Eliot’s spell. Mr. Auden abounds in speech—words have no sinister terrors for him!” (55). Words do not have sinister terrors for Lewis, either. Where Eliot is careful always to qualify his opinions to the point of meaningless, Lewis states his own so boldly that they often contradict one another. On facing pages, for example, Lewis praises Eliot for the “democratic,” pedagogic orientation of his
criticism, and then condemns him for the same (56-7). And in an essay the whole purpose of which is to attack Eliot’s “insincerity,” Lewis argues at one point that “sincerity” in the sense of “speaking one’s mind” is “not even socially or morally desirable” (59).

A similarly sophisticated argument lies behind the tangential insults and excoriations of Lewis’s chapter on Woolf. Lewis’s main contention in this chapter is not that Woolf is a plagiarist or a poor artist, but that she makes too free use of absolute binaries, such as mind/matter, idealism/realism, and even female/male. He begins the chapter, subtitled “‘Mind and matter’ on the Plane of a Literary Controversy,” by refuting the duality of mind and body, which he calls “philosophically, two very shadowy counters” (131). He next, rather indelicately, attacks the “illusory” gender binary (131-2). This feeds in to his argument against “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” which in Lewis’s view rests upon a stereotyped dichotomy. “When Mrs. Woolf,” he says, “the orthodox ‘idealist,’ tremulously squares up to the big beefy brute, Bennett, plainly the very embodiment of commonplace matter—it is, in fact, a rather childish, that to say an over-simple, encounter” (133). It is “a boy and girl quarrel,” as he later calls it, depending for its effect on any number of spurious divisions. Lewis’s retort that Woolf’s narrator might have read Tolstoy or Flaubert if she was unhappy with “materialists” like Bennett must be read in the context of Lewis’s argument about binaries. While Lewis would certainly agree with Woolf that purely “material” literature provided a poor model to the aspiring modernist novelist, he would point to the other writers (as well as Ulysses) as examples of works neither “realist” nor “idealist” but successful hybrids of the two, existing between either pole of the binary.

The basic contention of this chapter is that when you look beyond Lewis’s blustery, contentious, often amusing surface, something far more interesting emerges. The widespread understanding of Lewis as a single-voiced totalitarian is a reading only of this surface. Beneath it, I will argue, exists a tangle of deliberate contradictions worthy of Auerbach’s prose, and delivered with
an affective intent very similar to Hirschkop’s Bakhtin. In the Introduction I quoted Lewis’s description, in his 1956 autobiography *Rude Assignment*, of the composition of his work of political philosophy, *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926):

> It is not an easy book to write about, because its argument bursts out into manifold byways. There is a further complication. It was my idea at the outset—inspired by the Hegelian dialectic, with its thesis and antithesis—to state, here and there, both sides of the question to be debated, and allow these opposites to struggle in the reader’s mind for the ascendancy and there to find their synthesis. (183)

This chapter accepts Lewis’s self-characterization as genuine, rather than as an attempt retroactively to excuse the totalitarian arguments occasionally advanced in that work. By looking first at Lewis’s political writings in the 1930s, and next at his discussions of poetry, prose, and music, I will draw out the Hegelian reversals that occur not only between works but also within them as an organizing principle. By means of these stylistic reversals, I will argue, Lewis seeks to challenge his reader into interpretive synthesis. The discussion of politics will centre on the diametrically-opposed political works that book-end the decade: the approving *Hitler* (1931) and the condemning *The Hitler Cult* (1939). The next section will counter Lewis’s apparent privileging of prose over poetry by arguing that his fondness for clashing opposites extended also to the realm of genre. This will lead to a discussion of his bizarre poem, *One-Way Song*, published in the last month of 1933. What makes this work so interesting, I will argue, is that the hybrid genre he adopts allows him to abandon momentarily his famously vituperative, self-assured voice. In the strange mix of styles and discourses that make up *One-Way Song*, the “latent Lewis”—the Lewis who delights in contradiction, who admits contesting ideologies, and who leaves interpretive “synthesis” to his reader—comes to the surface.

*Logic in the Midst of Contradictions*

Michael North captures a common (though, as I have argued, oversimplified) interpretation of Eliot’s politics when he calls them “an embarrassment and a scandal” (1). In their common
interpretation, the politics of Wyndham Lewis can only be described as more embarrassing and
more scandalous. An excellent indicator of the abominable condition of Lewis’s political reputation
is provided by the fact that the ill-reputed Eliot was repeatedly called upon to defend it. In his
preface to the 1960 edition of One-Way Song, Eliot complains that the “less respectable” among the
English intelligentsia “vociferate the cry of ‘fascist!’—a term falsely applied to Lewis, but flung by
the massenmensch at some who, like Lewis, choose to walk alone” (10). In his contribution to the 1937
Lewis special issue of Twentieth Century Verse, Eliot unhelpfully offers, “I see no reason to suppose
that he is any more of a ‘fascist’ or a ‘nazi’ than I am” (111). Even in this highly equivocal claim
Eliot is on thin ice. Lewis visited Berlin in 1930 and, when he returned, published Hitler (1931)—the
first book in English devoted to the Nazi leader. Though written from the claimed perspective of
“an exponent—not as critic nor yet as advocate—of German National socialism, Hitlerism” (4),
Hitler is at least a mild ode, with a section entitled “Adolf Hitler a Man of Peace,” and such cringe-
inducing passages as that in which he states, “I do not think that if Hitler had his way he would
bring the fire and the sword across otherwise peaceful frontiers. He would, I am positive, remain
peacefully at home, fully occupied with the internal problems of the Dritte Reich” (47). As the decade
continued, Lewis published Left Wings Over Europe (1936), an apology for the German occupation of
the Rhineland and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia that the Fascist Quarterly called “the political book
of the year” (qtd. in Ayers, Wyndham Lewis, 200); and Count Your Dead — They Are Alive! (1937), a
bizarre defense of German interests focusing on the Spanish Civil War. These activities naturally
set Lewis at odds with the Thirties Poets. It was in this period that Lewis issued a flyer announcing
his intention to counter Victor Gollancz’s Left Book Club with “Mr Wyndham Lewis’s Rightwing
Bookclub” (qtd. in Edwards 389); that Cecil Day Lewis tried to persuade bookshops not to stock
Lewis’s work (Edwards 388); and that Auden called Lewis “That lonely old volcano of the Right”
(“Letter to Lord Byron,” 198). Lewis at least had the sense to utterly reverse his politics at the end of
the decade, with his poorly-titled attack on anti-Semitism, *The Jews: Are They Human?* (1939),\(^{11}\) and his denunciation of National Socialism, *The Hitler Cult* (1939).

What is most interesting about *The Hitler Cult*, from the perspective of this thesis, is not only that it so completely contradicts *Hitler*, but that in doing so it also comes to espouse contradiction as a general sociological principle. *Hitler* is a book obsessed with purity, simplicity, unity, and oneness. Lewis’s enthusiasm for National Socialism was due largely to his belief that it could, through its emphasis on “race,” resolve one of the great concerns of his criticism of the 1920s: what he called in *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) “the piecemealing of the personality.” Lewis believed that modern life increasingly exploited differences of sex, class, nation, age, sexual orientation, etc., in order to destroy the coherence of individual identity. One became, instead of simply “John Smith,” “John Smith, the male proletarian Englishman octogenarian homosexual,” for example, with implicit enmities toward females, owners of capital, foreigners, the young, and heterosexuals. “If you can break this personal continuity in an individual,” Lewis wrote in *The Art of Being Ruled*, “you can break him. For be is that continuity” (204). As preposterous as the idea appears today, the promise of Nazism for Lewis in 1931 was that it might effect a “reintegration of the personality,” and so promote social cohesiveness. “What the National socialist is, in reality, attempting to do,” he writes in *Hitler*, “is to put Race in the place of Class” (83). He continues,

> What I think it is safe to affirm is that ‘Race,’ used as a propagandist engine, must tend to simplify and concentrate. It promises political unity, at all events. It would, if followed out, draw people together, rather than thrust them apart—at least the people of the same race. Thus it would secure greater social efficiency. (85)

A few pages later, he elaborates this defense of cultural homogeneity in the language of literary genre:

> What the doctrine of *Blutsgefühl* [“blood-feeling”] aims at [. . .] is this. It desires a closer and closer drawing together of the people of one race and culture, by means of bodily attraction. It must be a truly bodily solidarity. Identical rhythms in the arteries and muscles, and in the effective neural instrument—that should provide us with a passionate exclusiveness, with a homogeneous social framework. (106-7)
Lewis’s arguments in *Hitler* are both highly atypical of his work—he never sounded so much like D.H. Lawrence, one of his many enemies, as in the above citation—and littered with admissions of inconsistency and weakness, such as the disturbing qualification “at least people of the same race.” Such admissions, however, are always brushed aside in deference to what Lewis regards as the historical urgency of this situation. At one point Lewis argues that development of the “love and understanding of blood-brothers, of one culture, children of the same tradition” represents “the only sane and realistic policy in the midst of a disintegrating world” (109). For Lewis, who experienced first-hand the First World War, any policy that could draw Europe together rather than divide it against itself was worth investigating.

Lewis’s second book on Hitler, drafted shortly before the start of WWII, is largely devoted to self-recrimination. Frank admissions such as “I confess, I was badly taken in, in 1930” (37) are scattered throughout the work. When the subject is the historical situation rather than himself, Lewis advances two arguments, both of which contradict his previous positions. The first is that Hitler is, after all, a “man of war” who must be stopped: Lewis implores his English readers at one point, “Keep hissing! Herr Hitler is a ‘villain’ who, if he is not sufficiently hissed, becomes really dangerous. [. . . ] *So hiss!* as you value your life” (132). The second is that oneness, unity, purity, and homogeneity—“identical rhythms” and “blood-brotherhood”—might not be so desirable as he once believed. Lewis, throughout the 1930s an ardent nationalist, becomes all of a sudden in *The Hitler Cult* a tentative internationalist. Comparison of two passages highlights the dramatic nature of Lewis’s reversal. Discussing the idea of a federal association of the democratic powers in *Left Wings Over Europe*, Lewis writes, “[c]entralized power—when it is human power—is for me, politically, the greatest evil it is possible to imagine” (16). In *The Hitler Cult*, Lewis writes,

Wherever I go to-day I hear people talking about a Federal scheme, the object of which is to induce the great democratic states, especially Great Britain and America, to abandon their national sovereignty, pool their resources, have a common Parliament and armies under one
direction. [. . .] Let me say at once that I am in favour of such a scheme: and if France, Spain, Portugal, and the Scandinavian countries would join it so much the better. (239)

If this seems a suspiciously “Aryan” grouping of nations, the elegiac tone in which Lewis discusses it suggests, at least, that he considered it a genuine mixture. “Some years ago,” he writes, “I hoped to be only with the English—for us to be distinct. Now, after a great deal of close observation, I see that it is impossible. I have to have my England diluted, or mixed. Dear old Great Britain has to take in partners” (241). In the generic terms of this dissertation, Lewis moves from being in *Hitler* a Bakhtinian poet bent on control, unity, and ideological consistency, to being in *The Hitler Cult* a reluctant Bakhtinian novelist, admitting on pragmatic grounds that heteroglossia is, after all, the better choice.

The dramatic reversal effected in *The Hitler Cult* must, however, be contextualized in two ways. First, the strong nationalism espoused in *Hitler* and the prose works of the 1930s was a remarkable departure from the internationalism Lewis advocated both before and after that “low dishonest decade,” as Auden called it (245). In works such as *Paleface: The Philosophy of the Melting Pot* (1929) and essays like “The Foxes’ Case” (1925), Lewis’s support for internationalism was usually delivered in a dialectical manner, his preferred critical style of the early- to mid-1920s. In the latter essay, for example, discussing the trend of “feminization” in Western culture, Lewis argues that the process is “one of the chief signs of the defeat of the white male”—but is “not a thing to be deeply regretted” since “the more tractable material that results should make a world unification more easy to effect” (128). None of this ambivalence is present in Lewis’s passionate post-war argument in favour of internationalism, *America and Cosmic Man* (1948), in which he proposes American “hybrid” multicultural identity as a model for the world (198). Lewis’s definition of “Cosmic Man” provides an excellent summary of his argument in that work: his model citizen is “a perfectly eclectic, non-national, internationally minded creature, whose blood is drawn—more or less—from all corners of the earth, with no more geographical or cultural roots than a chameleon” (203).
These two citations pertaining to Lewis’s internationalism suggest the second context into which Hitler and The Hitler Cult must be placed: Lewis’s consistent employment and espousal of deliberate self-contradiction as a critical and aesthetic method. This dates back to the first issue of Blast (1914), whose first manifesto repeatedly both “blasts” and “blesses” the same target, and whose second manifesto acknowledges such inconsistencies as deliberate: “We start from opposite statements of a chosen world. Set up violent structure of adolescent clearness between two extremes. / We discharge ourselves on both sides” (30). The sixteenth commandment of Lewis’s contemporaneous “Code of a Herdsman” (1914) is: “Contradict yourself. In order to live, you must remain broken up.” Lewis’s ironically titled contribution to Blast 2 (1915), “Be Thyself,” begins “[y]ou must talk with two tongues, if you do not wish to cause confusion,” and proceeds to a Proustian analysis of the multiplicity of the self: “You must be a duet in everything,” Lewis writes, “[f]or the individual, the single object, and the isolated, is, you will admit, an absurdity” (91). A sentence from this essay also provides a theoretical justification for Lewis’s continued employment of deliberate self-contradiction in his political writings of the 1920s. Cautioning against constructing one’s identity out of “the old Body-and-Soul, Male-and-Female” dualities, he writes, “[y]ou must catch the clearness and logic in the midst of contradictions: not settle down and snooze on an acquired, easily possessed and mastered, satisfying shape” (91). Lewis begins in this passage to present self-contradiction as a means of eliciting the reader’s active engagement with the text.

The political aspirations of Lewis’s contradictory style are clearest in his most important political book, The Art of Being Ruled (1926). For the contradictions themselves, we need look no further than the infamous chapter, “Fascism as an Alternative.” This chapter, while praising Mussolini’s Fascism, also endorses its ostensible opposite, Soviet Communism.18 In the same paragraph in which Lewis makes his strongest defence of Fascism he also says, “in the abstract I
believe the sovietic system to be the best” (320). Indeed, his endorsement of Mussolini’s Fascism
repeatedly and deliberately confuses it with its political enemy:

[Italian fascism] is the sort of socialism that this essay would indicate as the most suitable for
anglo-saxon countries or colonies, with as much of sovietic proletarian sentiment as could be got
into it without impairing its discipline, and as little coercion as is compatible with good sense.
(321; emphasis added)

Lewis continually asks his reader to hold such oppositions simultaneously in their minds. His reason
for doing so emerges from his analysis of his own political enemy, the capitalist states of the 1920s
and 30s. Lewis proposes in The Art of Being Ruled what are conventionally referred to as “capitalist”
or “democratic” states ought instead to be called “educationalist states.” The so-called “freedom” of
such systems, Lewis argues, disguises the sinister and totalizing influence of the state, which exerts a
subtler and more insidious form of totalitarianism:19 “the vote of the free citizen is a farce: education
and suggestion, the imposition of the will of the ruler through the press and other publicity channels,
cancelling it. So ‘democratic’ government is much more effective than subjugation by physical
conquest” (106). As Lewis memorably recapitulates in Time and Western Man, he sees “the present so-
called democratic masses” as “hypnotized into a sort of hysterical imbecility by the mesmeric
methods of Advertisement” (25). It was these sorts of brainwashed masses, incapable of
independent thought, who were so easily mobilized to war in 1914: “at the pressing of a button,”
Lewis argues, “all these hallucinated automata, with their technician-trained minds and bodies, can
be released against each other” (ABR 106). What attracts Lewis to the totalitarian systems of
Fascism and Soviet Communism is, in part, their honesty. In contrast to the faux-freedom and
sham-elections of “educationalist” democratic states, Lewis is drawn to the unadorned thirst for
power of totalitarian leaders. “It is we who are the Machiavels,” Lewis tells his readers, “compared to
the sovietist or the fascist, who makes no disguise of his forcible intentions, whose power is not
wrapped up in parliamentary humbug, who is not eternally engaged in pretences of benefaction”
(75). Lewis does not argue that Fascism or Bolshevism is absolutely preferable to democracy (“much
that fascismo or the soviet is direct about, is extremely barbarous,” he says: “But much that western
democracy is indirect about is barbarous as well” [75]). But he is offended, as an artist and critic, by
what he regards as the latter’s dishonest methods—the surreptitious means by which democratic
states put to sleep the critical consciousness of their subjects and achieve subservience behind the
façade of free choice. It would thus stand to reason that Lewis, in addressing his readership of
English “democratic” subjects, should try to speak honestly, and thereby to incite them to
independent thought.20

This is precisely how Reed Way Dasenbrock interprets the Auerbachian complexity of
Lewis’s insistently self-contradictory argument in *The Art of Being Ruled*. The key to reading Lewis’s
work, Dasenbrock argues, “is recognizing that it is a modernist work, dense, allusive, and difficult”
(436). Elaborating on Lewis’s above-cited remarks on his book’s “manifold byways”—the Hegelian
structure of argument that leaves synthesis to the reader—Dasenbrock argues that Lewis’s “shifting,
mobile perspective” (436) is designed to educate his readership to resist the pernicious effects of
advertising, education, and propaganda characteristic of democratic states. The act of reading *The
Art of Being Ruled*, Dasenbrock argues, provides a template for critical engagement with modern
capitalist society:

> We are constantly being given information, arguments, and reasoned explanations of what is
going on, but we always have to assess these things critically, for we don’t know how they
are to be taken. [. . .] It is therefore up to [the] reader to separate the wheat from the chaff in
Lewis’s discourse, to follow the ‘manifold byways’ of his argument, and sort things out for
himself. (437-8)

I am not suggesting that *Hitler* ought to be read in the same way; it is by comparison to *The Art of
Being Ruled* a crudely straightforward book, whose occasional contradictions owe more to
complacency and hurry than to a deliberate rhetorical strategy.21 What I am arguing, rather, is that
*Hitler* represents a departure from what had been Lewis’s primary critical method before the mid-
1920s. The complete reversal of its arguments in *The Hitler Cult* ought to remind us that such
contradictions used to coexist within works as a principle of style. Further, its espousal of multiplicity, mixing, plurality, and internationalism—in contradistinction to the dogmatic attachment to oneness, purity, racial homogeneity, and nationalism of Hitler—were in works like The Art of Being Ruled advanced through the dialectical movement of Lewis’s prose. It is the principle argument of this chapter that this politically-motivated prose style—whose contradictions Lewis employed in order to encourage independent reasoning in his readers—did not disappear in Lewis’s work of the 1930s. While his prose works became increasingly single-voiced, the dialogic style characteristic of the best of his earlier work found expression in a different and completely unexpected genre: poetry.

Hybrids and Monstrosities

When Kenneth Allott decided to include selections from One-Way Song in The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse (1950), Lewis agreed to provide him with an introductory note. This began with recollections of the shocked reaction of his contemporaries when, in December of 1933, Lewis published his first book of poetry. “Many people have enquired,” Lewis recalled, “how it was that I, novelist, pamphleteer, sociologist and so on, suddenly took it into my head to produce a volume of verse.” Lewis’s contemporaries were, in fact, taken aback by One-Way Song. The opening words of G. W. Stonier’s review for The New Statesman are characteristic: “A poem of two thousand lines is scarcely one of the things that might have been predicted of Mr. Wyndham Lewis” (710). But what should surprise us, in turn, is the immediate willingness of much of the poetic establishment of the 1930s to crown Lewis in laurels. In a rapturous review for New Verse that went so far as to describe Lewis as a better versifier than Byron, Gilbert Armitage declared, “[b]efore the appearance of ‘One Way Song’ it was difficult to ‘see’ Wyndham Lewis as a poet: now it is equally difficult to think of him as anything else” (12). In his Spectator review, “Wyndham Lewis as Poet,” Stephen Spender praised One-Way Song as “a poem of great interest even to those who do not usually read contemporary poetry” (25), and found that the “discipline of poetry” had quite miraculously made
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Lewis’s politics more palatable: “whilst I find myself opposed to Mr. Lewis’s Fascist tendencies,” Spender said, “they do not disgust me” (24-5). A few years later, in his fawning introduction to a Lewis special issue of *Twentieth Century Verse*, Julian Symons wrote, “[t]o ask: ‘What has Lewis to do with poetry’ is irrelevant: he has everything to do with poetry, just as he has everything to do with painting and with novel-writing” (105).24

This tide of approbation is surprising not merely because of the generational and political differences separating Lewis from Spender, Symons, and the *New Verse* set. It is surprising also because Lewis had spent so much energy in the 1920s attacking the genre in which they all worked. In his major critical works of the twenties, Lewis had, in fact, waged a war on poetry very similar both in substance and violence to that later carried out by Bakhtin. In works like *The Art of Being Ruled* and *Time and Western Man*, Lewis executed so sweeping an attack on modern culture, in so disorganized a manner, that it can be challenging at times to grasp his precise target. It is thus worth quoting at length the compact summary that Paul Edwards provides:

Lewis is concerned with groupings of ideas that deny creative power to man, or hand creativity over to a larger power of which man is only an instrument; or similarly deny that history results from men’s conscious decisions, attributing a fatality to it instead; that disparage the reality and individuality of consciousness by depicting it as a peripheral surface-effect of a more real, undifferentiated and irrational unconscious; that exalt those forms of social life which have not traditionally exercised conscious, willed and decisive behaviour [. . .] but have traditionally been characterized by passivity and irresponsibility, such as children and the insane; [. . .] that deny the capacity of the intellect to formulate any truth or vision that is not predetermined by ideology [etc.] (Afterword, *TWM*, 465-6)

Lewis’s opposition to these ideas—collectively referred to as “Time-philosophy”25 or “the Romantic spirit”—bears a broad similarity to Bakhtin’s resistance to monologic, centralizing social forces. Like Bakhtin, Lewis is on the side of independent, responsible decision-making—what Bakhtin calls “answerability.” While Bakhtin focuses exclusively on literary texts, Lewis looks at a broad spectrum of social texts—literature, philosophy, advertising, popular music, political rhetoric, etc.—and focuses his polemical energy on those productions of the “Romantic” “time-school” which he
regards as serving to claim agency from the responsible self. Drawing on a musical analogy, Lewis argues in *Time and Western Man* that in experiencing such works, “‘you’ become the series of your temporal repetitions; you are no longer a centralized self, but a spun-out, strung-along series, a pattern-of-a-self, depending like the musical composition upon time” (*TWM* 172). Also like Bakhtin, Lewis repeatedly illustrates his social analysis through an opposition of the genres of poetry and prose. In one of the clearest and most memorable passages in *The Art of Being Ruled*, he employs the notion of poetic rhythm to criticize the way that “freedom” and “irresponsibility” have become “commutative terms” in contemporary libertarian ideology. “Absence of responsibility, an automatic and stereotyped rhythm, is what men most desire for themselves,” he writes: “All struggle has for its end relief or repose.” While “a rhythmic movement is restful,” he continues, “consciousness and possession of the self is not compatible with a set rhythm.” This leads to a generic contrast:

Consciousness and responsibility are prose as contrasted with the poetry of passive, more or less ecstatic, rhythmic, mechanical life. There is, therefore, the intoxicated dance of puppets, and besides that the few natures, as they were called by Goethe; moving unrhythmically, or according to a rhythm of their own. The conventional libertarianism of a century ago envisioned this latter form of personal freedom, this prose of the individual, as it could be called. The libertarianism of today rejects with horror the idea of that “independence.” In the place of this prose of the individual it desires the poetry of the mass; in place of the rhythm of the person, the rhythm of the crowd. (130)

Throughout *The Art of Being Ruled*, Lewis discusses social phenomena such as mass-democracy, advertising, and education as forces which seek to promote the “poetry of the mass” over against “the prose of the individual”; World War I, that coordinated mass-dance, is his major example of their practical success. Lewis returns to this generic distinction in *Time and Western Man*—a work that mostly abandons the dialectical style of *The Art of Being Ruled* in favour of straightforward polemic—in the course of its discussion of “the present so-called democratic masses, hypnotized into a sort of hysterical imbecility by the mesmeric method of Advertisement” (25). In another passage worth quoting at length, Lewis distinguishes between the poetic, “rhythmical” methods of mass-politics and the prose alternative:
I prefer [. . .] the prose-movement—easy, uncontrolled and large—to the insistent, hypnotic rhythm, favoured by most fashionable political thought in the West. For me, there should be no adventitiously imposed rhythm for life in the rough. Life in the rough, or on the average, should be there in its natural grace, chaos and beauty; not cut down and arranged into a machine-made system. Its natural gait and movement it derives from its cosmic existence; and where too obsessing a human law—or time, or beat—gets imposed on it, the life and beauty depart from it. Musical-politics—as the uplift politics of millennial doctrinaires can be termed—are, without any disguise, the politics of hypnotism, enregimentation, the sleep of the dance. (26; emphasis in original)

Bakhtin opposes poetic rhythm in “Discourse in the Novel” because he believes it imposes a false order upon the fraught, multi-voiced linguistic sphere it represents. Bakhtin’s argument is both aesthetic and political: he prefers the non-rhythmatized novel as an artistic form, in part because it proposes a model of a political world preferable to Stalinist Russia. Lewis advances very similar arguments in this passage, though he comes at them from the opposite direction. For Lewis, the poetry-like rhythm that mass-politics seek to impose upon the life of the citizen is attacked first as a political theory, and only secondly as an aesthetic; he is against the “hypnotic” mass-governance only in part because it destroys the “natural grace, chaos and beauty” of disorganized “life in the rough.” Bakhtin—acting, in Hirschkop’s analysis, as a proponent of democracy—and Lewis—explicitly attacking a particular variety of democratic government—are agreed, nonetheless, that loose, chaotic, free prose provides the analogy of their preferred political system. For both, dishonest, regimented, tension-filled rhythmic poetry provides the dystopic counterexample.

Lewis, like Bakhtin, pushes beyond an analogic relation between his generic and political analysis. Just as Bakhtin argues that poetic language played a role in “accomplishing the task of cultural, national and political centralization” (DN 273), Lewis argues that the most fashionable artistic styles of the day are actively working to impose in their readers the same “rhythmic,” “hypnotized” consciousness encouraged by the forces of advertising, propaganda, and mass-politics. He makes this suggestion, for example, in the introduction to *Men Without Art*, addressed to the “Plain Reader.” Everyone understands, he says, that “[i]mplicit in every work of art will be found politics, theology.”
What is not so clear, he continues, “is that the most harmless piece of literary entertainment—the common crime story for instance, or the schoolboy epic [. . .] is at all events morally and politically significant.” He continues, “a whole barbarous system of conduct, and judgments to match, is implied in every flick of the kinetic novelettes” (12). The same assumptions underlie the literary analyses of *Time and Western Man*, whose preface—also addressed to the “general reader”—announces its task as that of alerting its audience to the pernicious political and philosophical assumptions underlying all “the problems of everyday life,” including literature (xi).27

Lewis’s account of the direct relationship between artistic style and political practice differs from that of Bakhtin, however, in two important ways. Firstly, unlike Bakhtin—who is content to deal with older works of art and to speak of “poetry” and “the novel” in the abstract—Lewis makes his argument through analysis of concrete and contemporary works of art. Secondly, he not only acknowledges the existence of hybrid genres combining aspects of prose and poetry, but specifically singles them out for blame. Lewis analyzes a dizzying variety of texts in *Time and Western Man*, from Anita Loos and Charlie Chaplin to Ezra Pound and James Joyce, and discovers in each styles capable of instantiating the “time-philosophy” he so opposes. But the style he most consistently and venomously attacks is what he calls “The Prose-Song of Gertrude Stein.” Stein’s style is hybrid—a “prose-song”—in the sense that it attempts to speak in the voice of average people (“prose”) but in doing so imposes a regular rhythm (“song.”) 28 “In adopting the simplicity, the illiterateness, of the mass-average of the Melancthas and Annas,” Lewis writes, “Miss Stein gives proof of all the false ‘revolutionary,’ propagandist plain-manism of her time” (59-60); and to maintain the realistic, “life in the rough” effect, Stein must keep her style “jumbled, cheap, slangy and thick.” What ruins the prose realism, however, and gives the style its hybrid character, is that “the metre of an obsessing time has to be put into it”—“It has to be rhythmatized”—which has the effect of “giving to the life it patronizes the mechanical bias of its creator” (60). Stein’s style is so objectionable to Lewis because
it seems like a “prose-movement”—realistic, uncontrolled, with all the chaos of nature—but is in fact latently organized, patterned, and controlled. In this way, it presents a stylistic instance of Lewis’s analysis of modern society, in which advertising and mass-democracy seek to impose their regular, controlling rhythms on the movements of the benighted masses.

The political implications of Stein’s hybrid style are most clearly explored in Men Without Art, where Lewis presents them through an analysis of the work of Hemingway, whom he regards as a direct stylistic disciple of Stein. Lewis’s contention in “The Dumb Ox”—the chapter that so colourfully provoked Hemingway’s ire—is that the latter’s Stein-derived style is an agent of political standardization; as Lewis puts it, it is “one of the first fruits of the proletarianization which [...] we are all undergoing, whether we like it or not” (33). Though Lewis repeatedly praises Hemingway as an individual and as an artist, he argues that the latter’s adoption of Stein’s “prose-song” has “impose[d] on him an ethos”; that by taking on her style, he has come himself to think like her, and in turn to encourage this style of thought in his readers: “This infantile, dull-witted, dreamy stutter,” Lewis says, “compels whoever uses it to conform to the infantile, dull-witted type” (26). By taking as his subject matter “the prose of reality—the prose of the street-car or the provincial newspaper or the five and ten cent store” (32), and delivering it in “the anonymous folk-rhythm of the urban proletariat,” Hemingway has become a “folk prose-poet” (24) whose hybrid style has direct political import. Hemingway’s hero—inevitably a “dull-witted, bovine, monosyllabic simpleton” (27)—is “compelled,” by his very manner of speaking, into becoming one of those unreflecting, uncritical, endlessly manipulable victims of the “educationalist state.” “This is the voice of the ‘folk,’” Lewis says, “of the masses, who are the cannon-fodder, the cattle outside the slaughter-house, serenely chewing the cud—of those to whom things are done, in contrast to those who have executive will and intelligence.” Not only is Hemingway’s narrative voice one that itself lacks “answerability,” it also imposes its passivity onto its readers.
Lewis avoids, however, the Bakhtinian trap of assuming that all rhythms are identical and that the generic universe can be simplified into two absolutely opposed styles. This results in part from Lewis’s decidedly non-Bakhtinian critical style, which so often proceeds by means of dialectical self-contradiction. The generic analysis of politics in *The Art of Being Ruled*, for example—the most “dialectical” of his non-fiction works—stops well short of advancing a monolithic conception of rhythm in distinguishing between “prose” and “poetic” political systems; instead, it recognizes a plurality of rhythms, stating its preference for the freer, looser “rhythm of the person” over the hypnotically regular “rhythm of the crowd” (130). In similar fashion, Lewis not only acknowledges the existence of hybrid genres, but also accepts that there is more than one way to mix styles. In the later, more straightforward *Time and Western Man* and *Men Without Art* he devotes much attention to attacking a particular hybrid, the Steinian “prose-song.” But in another of his major critical works, the earlier *The Lion and the Fox* (1925), Lewis presents a protracted account of success in hybrid genre: that of Shakespeare in his late tragedies.

Lewis’s title—drawn from Machiavelli’s *The Prince*—suggests the duality with which he performs his analysis. The “lion” is the superhuman Shakespearean hero, whose home is in the ideal but who finds himself in the real; and the “fox” is the scheming Machiavellian villain whose superior understanding of worldly affairs allows him to bring about the ruin of the idealistic hero. To repeat Lewis’s primary example, Othello is the idealistic lion in his tragedy, and Iago the wily fox. It would be easy to misunderstand Lewis as wholly on the side of the lion against the fox—particularly when he describes Shakespearean tragedy as “a show of the same nature as a public execution” (145), the destruction of a lofty nature by a low and common crowd. But in fact Lewis praises the way that Shakespeare balances these forces against one another. Machiavelli argues that the prince “should take as his models both the fox and the lion” (54); and Shakespeare’s great achievement, Lewis argues, is to have held together so many opposites in his “infinitely supple mind” (13). Shakespeare’s
historical moment, like that which in Bakhtin’s account produced the novel, was one of clashing ideas and mixing civilizations. “In Shakespeare’s time,” Lewis writes, “every influence of the old and new world met and parleyed”; and the “complete eclecticism and confusion of his time” (21) informed both Shakespeare’s personality and art. Personally, Shakespeare “was alternately as black as night and as white as snow, or both at the same time”—“The perfection and equilibrium of his mind is the proof of the beautiful matching of the opposing forces” (24). In his work, he exploited the clashing and balancing of opposites not only in his “lion versus fox” plots, but also in his style.

Lewis’s binary divisions of lion/fox, ideal/real, hero/Machiavel, etc., line up with the poetry/prose division. And just as he praises Shakespeare for setting opposing sides against one another in his plots—in the language of Blast, for setting up a “violent structure of adolescent clearness between two extremes” and then “discharging himself on both sides”—Lewis praises Shakespeare also for capturing their contests in his style. Lewis in fact argues that the primary division in Shakespeare’s consciousness, that between “chivalry on the one hand, and the modern positivist objective spirit on the other,” is one that plays out in his work primarily in a clash a genres. In spirit, Shakespeare is “prosaic”—a positivist and a Machiavel—but the form he has inherited is “poetic”: “The chivalry,” Lewis writes, “the afflatus of the grand style, has its origin in the manner and not the matter of his art” (209). Far from an artistic fault, Lewis sees this clash between Shakespeare’s form and content as one of his greatest artistic strengths. It makes possible the psychological depths of a character like Timon, a “violent, lavish, egotistic fool” (209) who nonetheless appears, when he speaks in blank verse, as “lofty and spotless” (210). Similarly, Lewis argues that the basic conflict of Troilus and Cressida is reinforced at the level of genre: because the “non-heroic Fox” Ulysses “utters [his] craft with all the glamour of the grand style” (211), the audience is confronted formally with the conflict between heroism and rationalism. Generic conflict—lionlike poetic manner against foxish prosaic matter—is in Lewis’s account what produced
Shakespeare’s late tragedies: “Had Marlow’s ‘mighty line’ not existed, Shakespeare might have drawn quite different characters—none for example like Othello or Timon” (211). In Lewis’s own age, however, such formal disjunctions are no longer part of the writer’s inheritance. “When, as in the present age,” Lewis writes, “life loses its exterior beauty, and all the ritual of grandeur has become extinct, the intellect and character everywhere deteriorates” (214). Without clashing genres—when prosaic reality is expressed in prose—art becomes simpler and less compelling, just as a fox alone in a ring makes for less arresting spectacle than one involved in a duel with a lion. In telling contrast to what is a straightforwardly negative image in *Time and Western Man*, Lewis writes, “the moment the drum stops beating the appeal of art weakens; the Fox resumes the centre of the stage, and the Lion withdraws, or perhaps his tail wagging from the wings is all we see” (214). *One-Way Song*, Lewis’s unexpected volume of poetry, is his attempt to coax the lion back on the stage to resume his contest with the fox.

*I Meant That You Should Get It*

Under normal circumstances, T. S. Eliot, in his capacity as poetry editor at Faber and Faber, would have written the dust-jacket description that appeared in the 1933 first edition of *One-Way Song*. Since he was in the United States, however, delivering the lectures that would become *After Strange Gods*, Lewis was left to write the description for himself. He came up with the following:

This considerable poem of two thousand lines is in fact a series of four pieces. *The Song of the Militant Romance* is a lyrical statement of the Romantic attitude in art. There is no counterbalancing statement of the classical attitude. But in the body of the long succeeding piece, *If So the Man You Are*, a number of Boileau-like verses (and again here and there in *One-Way Song* itself) effect, without comment, the necessary contrast. In *If So the Man You Are* it is mainly in the portion given up to the apology and denunciation put into the mouth of “The Enemy” (who comes on the stage to carry on for a while the argument) that these Boileau-like couplets are to be found.

Throughout this chain of poems the expression is dramatic: that is to say it is invariably a person, or a variety of persons, speaking. From time to time the personality of the Bailiff of the *Childermass* thrusts its way into the foreground of the dramatis personae and tinctures strongly the character of the verse.
On the whole *One-Way Song*, as this group of poems is named, would probably come under the head of “satiric verse”: and to give an idea of the general nature of the performance, it would be said that, making allowance for the difference in scale, and in the style of art, these verses proceed from the same impulse as that which produced *The Apes of God*, or *The Wild Body*, and in part the *Childermass*. In manner, dramatization and technical intention, it belongs to that group of works. (Qtd. in Munton 207 and Eliot, “Foreword,” 7-8)

There is much in this summary to reassure the reader taken aback by Lewis’s sudden departure into verse. First, it promises the poem will present an “argument” very much in the spirit of Lewis’s contemporaneous polemics: in attacking the “Romantic attitude in art,” it seems, it will repeat Lewis’s denunciations of the “Time-school” and affirmations of the stabilizing, spatializing “Classical” view. Second, although it will do so through a variety of voices— with a “dramatic” presentation— these voices will be familiar ones, and they will work together to advance the poem’s argument. Since the Bailiff— the villain of *The Childermass*, a parodic figure of the kind of ruler criticized in *The Art of Being Ruled*— delivers the Romantic perspective, we will know to treat him as a straw man, and must trust instead The Enemy, the persona Lewis developed for himself in his magazine *The Enemy*.

Lewis’s first readers were mostly content to follow the interpretive lead provided by his dust-jacket description. G. W. Stonier saw *One-Way Song* as sort of versified *Time and Western Man*: “It is, of course, the folly of the ‘Time’ philosophy, the ‘Great God Flux,’ that is still being tracked down with relentless zeal. Flaubert was not more keen in pursuit of the bourgeois” (710). D. G. Bridson agreed: it repeated what “*Time and Western Man* [had] already proved” (“Sound and Fury,” 167). Walter Allen said, more positively, “it states a familiar position in a fresh way” (496). Spender wrote, “Mr. Lewis remains inveterately the Enemy” (“Lewis as Poet”). In the context of the works analyzed in this dissertation, these reviewers recognized *One-Way Song* as something very much like Cecil Day Lewis’s *Magnetic Mountain*: a poem with a clear, familiar, predetermined argument which, when it introduced apparently competing voices, told its reader which were to be taken seriously and which
to be laughed at. It was, in other words, another Bakhtinian nightmare: a poem in the worst sense—a monologic universe in which there was no possibility for dissent or conversation.

The verse “Envoi” with which One-Way Song ends—the complementary second slice in the autointerpretive sandwich Lewis provided his first readers—appears at first to confirm the nightmare-scenario. It begins its reflections as follows:

If I have not trod the romantic path, blame me!
If it has been a man singing and not a bird—
If so the bird you be to curse, curse me
Poor Parrot! Then I will teach you another word!
If plain speech brings the blush beneath the dirt
I’m sorry if you hate the thing you heard—
But I meant that you should get it, classic and clear,
Between the eyes, or in the centre of the ear!
As plain as the ‘Burgess-gentleman’ got his
In natural verses, or the ‘Ridiculous Miss’,
These times require a tongue that naked goes,
Without more fuss than Dryden’s or Defoe's. (91)

These sound very much like the boastful reflections of a poet who has just thoroughly annihilated his “Romantic,” “Time-school” opponent. They are delivered, moreover, in a voice apparently capable of achieving what it claims: it is self-assured and single-minded; it employs the “naked,” “plain speech” and “classic and clear” verse that it claims to have employed so successfully in blasting its message into the eyes and ears of its reader. This perception is altered, however, when we read the “Envoi’s” summary of the poem’s structure, which differs substantially from that on the dust-jacket:

The Bailiff billed in Number One ‘Fight-talk’
Was a curtain-raiser, to last a minute or two.
Song Two was a sketch of a critical cake-walk.
The romantic standpoint (and a good standpoint, too).
Song three was Me—the electric hare that’s Me—
A Me that blots out for the moment You.
Song Four was the lament of Not-to-be,
Conveying that Me alone is true. (91)
Not only does the speaker’s language lose its directness in this passage (the allegorical “Not-to-be” might be in the manner of Swift or Defoe, but its reference is neither “plain” nor “clear”), but the poem it describes also suddenly seems much less clear-cut. Here we learn that the romantic standpoint—whose sound defeat the dust-jacket description had prophesied—is “a good standpoint.” We also learn that “If So the Man You Are” has portrayed the self as an ungraspable “electric hare,” which is surprising given that *Time and Western Man* had argued that the main danger of “Romantic,” “time-school” art and philosophy was the destruction of the stable, centralized self. The final poem, it seems from this summation, confusingly affirms the Romantic ungraspability of the self as (the only) universal truth.

Lewis’s reviewers got *One-Way Song* wrong—as his critics have continued to do, when they discuss it at all. It should indeed be taken as an index of the poem’s fabulous complexity that these reviewers were forced to rely so heavily on its completely misleading dust-jacket description. *One-Way Song* does not re-state the arguments of polemical works like *Time and Western Man*; indeed, it is largely devoted to questioning the arguments and assumptions of such works. More importantly, it does not reproduce the one-sided, straight-forwardly monologic voice of Lewis’s polemical works of the late twenties and thirties; it should instead be regarded as representing a deliberate escape from the stylistic trap of these works. Lewis, throwing himself into his new genre with all the zeal of a convert, exploited every opportunity for dialogism that it presented. Pushing well beyond the generic confines of “satiric verse,” moreover, he introduced a maximum of narrative complexity by incorporating novelistic and dramatic elements. Though the adventure into a new genre may have been inspired primarily by a personal desire to escape his own voice, the style of *One-Way Song* should also be read in the light of the affective intentions of the dialectical style of *The Art of Being Ruled*. Through his hybrid style Lewis sought the same ends as Auerbach and Hirschkop’s Bakhtin: the active participation and interpretive engagement of his readers.
"I Sabotage the Sentence!"

From the first word of the first poem in *One-Way Song*—“I”—the reader is thrown into a world of narrative complexities. We already know not to mistake this “I” for a lyrical Lewis, for it belongs, the dust-jacket informs us, to a Bailiff-like schoolmaster, a conspicuously unreliable narrator. “Engine Fight-Talk” finds the latter delivering a lesson whose theme is something like “What kind of poetry ought to be written today?” With numerous asides, he begins as follows:

I said (and I always say these things with the same voice)
‘Say it with locomotives! Mark well that animal puff!’
Each man-jack of them marked it, every man-jack—all were boys.
‘If you must, say it with locofocos! Radical Tammany stuff!
Hot and heavy! As if you meant it! Don’t stick at a rough house—real rough!’

But at ‘radical,’ magic vocable, claps crashed forth of stunning applause,
Though rattle-proof, that straightaway shattered my heavily pillared doors! (21)

What the schoolmaster appears to be advocating here is poetry whose manner is up-to-date and whose matter is radically political. Because of the similarity of this poetic doctrine to that put forth in the introductions to *New Signatures* and *New Country*, this section has often been taken as a send-up of the Thirties Poets, with a Bailiff-schoolmaster presiding over an enthusiastic class composed of Auden, Spender, and Day Lewis. Further narrative complexities preclude such a neat reading, however. The dramatic situation of “Engine Fight-Talk” in fact prevents both the schoolmaster and the students from holding reliably to any one position. In *The Hitler Cult*, Lewis describes Mussolini’s speeches as “fight-talks” (179); and like a political agitator, the schoolmaster of “Engine Fight-Talk” is much more interested in rousing his audience than in advancing a coherent argument. As his asides repeatedly demonstrate, he is closely monitoring the reactions of his students, and is willing to adjust his argument to fit their tastes. When he criticizes Marx, for example, and notices the pupils “biting their fingernails,” he pauses to reconsider his approach: “I did not speak for a minute” (23). The pupils, for their part, are prevented from responding honestly to the schoolmaster’s questions by their fear of punishment. When the schoolmaster, treading lightly after the Marx incident,
inquires equivocally about the degree to which the poet should engage with the past—“Should we really drive our ploughshare without compunction across its bones, / (If we have a ploughshare) or should we leave it (if we can) in its proper region?”—the confused students respond, “Either no or yes or merely oh!” (23). Enraged at their inability to answer his unanswerable question, the schoolmaster punishes half the “thunderstruck class” (24) by sending them into the corner. Resuming his lecture, unsure what side to argue for, he argues both: he praises the historical orientation of Shakespeare, who “caught the silhouette of Caesar,” and condemns the same in Browning, “a long winded sort of geezer” (24-5).

Because the schoolmaster is so eager for approval and the students so fearful of censure, the very pertinent question “What kind poetry ought to be written today?” remains unanswered—until, that is, a student named “Percy Burke” speaks bravely up. Aggravated at the schoolmaster’s incoherent lecture, he interjects:

The Past’s a jolly blur.
I like things sharp, like light in Boston. I’m afraid that I demur.
Surely this rummaging in the medieval murk,
This pandering to the mighty vagueness of our hearts,
Oblique attacks with midnight’s moon fraudulently to frill
The escapades of Menads, haunting those bloody parts,
Is not, never can be, quite what Poetry sets out to instill!’ (25)

The views on poetry of Percy Burke are conspicuously like those of Percy Wyndham Lewis, who in *Time and Western Man* had denigrated the Romantic emphasis on “the ‘indistinct,’ the ‘qualitative,’ the misty, sensational and ecstatic,” and upheld the Classical emphasis on “the distinct, the geometric, the universal, non-qualified—the clear and the light, the unsensational” (416). If one were to argue, however, that Percy Burke’s interjection enacts a triumph of the Classical over the Romantic view of poetry—a definitive answer to the topic of the schoolmaster’s lesson—one would need to account for two complications: firstly, that there is in “Engine Fight-Song” no statement of the Romantic conception over which to triumph, since neither the equivocal, egomanical schoolmaster nor his
terrified pupils succeed in producing one; and, secondly, that the next poem in *One-Way Song*, “The
Song of the Militant Romance,” not only provides the missing rebuttal, but provides it convincingly.

Against Percy Burke’s case for sharpness and clarity, the speaker of “The Song of the
Militant Romance” argues for the affective merits of syntactically and rhythmically disruptive form.
He argues, in short, that such styles can serve to shock their readers out of passive apathy and in to
active engagement. Boasting “I sabotage the sentence!” and “I spike the verb,” the Militant
Romantic presents his artistic programme most clearly when he says

you’ll hear a great deal more, where a sentence breaks in two
Believe me, than ever the most certificated school-master’s darlings do!
When a clause breaks down (that’s natural, for it’s been probably overtaxed)
Our sense is observed to squint, or in a dashing grammatical tort,
You’ll find more of the stuff of poetry than ever in stupid syntax! (33)

With a pointed shot at “school-master’s darlings” like Percy Burke who prefer their sentences whole,
the Militant Romantic argues for the emancipating mental “squint” produced by syntactically
disruptive poetry. As he earlier says, a modernist “word-storm”—by breaking the reader out of the
habits and routines enshrined in “perfect sense or perfect rhythm”—has a cleansing effect that
serves as a prologue to cognitive recalibration: “Chaos restored, when by such storms hit / The
brain can mint its imagery best” (31). At times there are hints that we are not entirely to trust the
Militant Romantic. When he says, “Never demand the integral—never completion—/ Always what
is fragmentary—the promise, the presage” (33), there is a palpable echo of Woolf’s “season of
fragments and failures,” the object of Lewis’s derision in *Men Without Art*. Likewise, his call to
“borrow a bellow or two from the pictish or from the Manxman. / Set all our mother-tongue reeling,
with the eruption of obsolete vocables” (30) recalls his numerous attacks on “time-minded” writers
like Pound, Browning, and Joyce. But in several ways Lewis forbids easy dismissal of the Militant
Romantic’s arguments. Despite the fact that he is advocating the aesthetic opposed in *Time and
Western Man*, for example, he shares its formal goals. Lewis’s main charge against “Romantic” forms
like Stein’s “prose-song” was that they served to hypnotize and anaesthetize their reader—that they imposed upon them the unreflecting ethos of “those to whom things are done.” It is precisely this hypnotic slumber, however, that the Militant Romantic seeks to counter with his disruptive, sentence-sabotaging style. A series of conspicuous allusions to Blast also serve to remind us that Lewis himself often wrote in a “Romantic” style. In his first canto, the Militant Romantic says,

> Watch me push into my witch’s vortex all the Englishman’s got
> To cackle and rattle with—you catch my intention?—to be busily balking
> The tongue-tied Briton—that is my outlandish plot! (29; emphasis added)

One is reminded both here both of Lewis’s founding of Vorticism (one of whose slogans was “Kill John Bull with art”) and of the extravagantly experimental first issue of Blast (which teased and balked the Briton by both blessing and blasting England, and contained such syntactically chaotic works as Lewis’s play The Enemy of the Stars). The opening of Militant Romantic’s ninth stanza, “Do your damnest! Be yourself!” (33), calls to mind another of Lewis’s Blast productions: the ironically titled manifesto “Be Thyself” from the second issue, which proclaimed such slogans as “[y]ou must talk with two tongues, if you do not want to cause confusion” and “[y]ou must be a duet in everything” (91). Though it does cause some confusion, Lewis speaks with two tongues in One-Way Song: “The Song of the Militant Romance” not only gives a fair hearing to a perspective opposite to the one he advanced in his contemporary critical works, but goes so far as to be swayed by it—even to recognize it in part as his own.

There are still further dramatic complications to be accounted for, however. On the one hand, the Militant Romantic makes his point: he demonstrates convincingly the affective value of “Romantic” forms of art that challenge the reader into active attention. On the other hand, as the active reader of One-Way Song will have noticed, he does not practice what he preaches. While his language departs from the Classical ideal in its prosy colloquialisms and its unsettled energy, it cannot be described as rhythmically or syntactically difficult. As Alan Bold says, “[t]he Romantic is
made to speak, rather paradoxically, in the classical stutter of the Lewis-gun” (150). This disjunction is clearest in the section where he describes his verse form:

As to the trick of prosody, the method of conveying the matter,
Frankly I shall provoke the maximum of saxophone clatter.
I shall not take ‘limping’ iambics, not borrow from Archilochus
His ‘light-horse gallop’, nor drive us into a short distich that would bog us.
I shall not go back to Skeltonics, nor listen to Doctor Guest.
I know with my bold Fourteener I have the measure that suits us best. (29)

These statements of metrical rebellion ring hollow. The refusal to follow the fifteenth-century metrical regime of Skelton is hardly the stuff of a “saboteur” of the sentence; and his cavalier departures from the proclaimed metre of “bold Fourteeners” hardly produces verbal chaos. The Militant Romantic’s use of rhyming couplets is clearly at odds with his stylistic programme—and the joking half-rhyme on “Archilochus” / “bog us,” though it interrupts the pattern somewhat, does so in a manner more reminiscent of Byron than of e. e. cummings. This final complication of form and content makes “The Song of the Militant Romance” more dialogically rich rather than less, however, for it puts the reader in the irresolvably paradoxical situation of being convinced of the merits of one style of poetry by means of its putative opposite.

A few months after the appearance of One-Way Song, Lewis published an article titled “What is ‘Difficult’ Poetry?” in which he offered the following definition:

Certain literary compositions are not, and have not been intended to be, susceptible of any logical analysis. These are the “difficult” compositions. Their success depends upon their remaining unresolved and floating: a half thought: two disparate notions cunningly compromised in an equivocal, an impossible, association: an existent and a non-existent paradoxically wedded. (196)

These “difficult” poems are not, he goes on to argue, inherently inferior to “easy” poems:

The method of Mallarmé is not “better than” the method of Chaucer or Burns or Dryden, or vice versa. To suggest such a thing is to adopt a schoolboy point of view—or that of the American “college boy”: to substitute, in fact, the spirit of athletic prizemanship for the spirit of art. (196).
This is one of the lessons of “Engine Fight-Talk” and “The Song of the Militant Romance”: that it is silly, immature, and schoolboyish to hold that there can only be one “correct” form of poetry, and to set yourself absolutely against its opposite. But the very involved manner that Lewis goes about making this point in One-Way Song, as opposed to the elegantly compact manner in which he states it in “What is ‘Difficult’ Poetry?,” is perhaps what is most significant about it. To “access” this message, Lewis’s reader must endure a harrowing test of his interpretive skills. He must survive the narrative complexities of “Engine Fight-Talk”; must work to resolve the apparently contradictory discursive victories of Percy Burke and the Militant Romantic; must puzzle over the clashing manner and matter of the Militant Romantic’s persuasive song—only, in the end, to discover finally that these contradictions must remain “unresolved and floating”; that the competing positions are “paradoxically wedded” and “cunningly compromised in an equivocal, an impossible, association.”

In polemical works like Hitler, Lewis had allowed the spirit of athletic prizemanship to triumph; as the opening poems make clear, in One-Way Song Lewis did not make the same mistake.

_The Electric Hare That’s Me_

In the context of One-Way Song as a collection, “The Song of the Militant Romance” presents, alas, yet another complication. As we have seen, this poem, which the dust-jacket calls “a lyrical statement of the Romantic attitude in art,” presents its argument in a manner conspicuously “classic and clear.” It is, however, paradoxically the only poem in One-Way Song to possess such argumentative clarity. “Engine Fight-Song,” a narratological hornet’s nest in which neither the schoolmaster nor his students are free to say what they think, is a decidedly “murky,” impenetrable poem. The concluding “One-Way Song,” with its involved philosophical arguments, “makes hard reading” to say the least (Bridson, “Sound,” 167). But “If So the Man You Are”—the poem that the dust-jacket informs us is intended to “effect [. . .] the necessary contrast” to the Romantic perspective of “The Song of the Militant Romance”—is the perhaps most enervatingly muddled of
them all. One is reminded of the chiasmic reversals in Stephen Spender’s *Vienna*, in which the mutually antagonistic Unemployed and Executive are made to inhabit one another’s perspectives. “Song of the Militant Romance,” espousing verbal chaos, is engaging and accessible; “If So the Man You Are,” *One-Way Song’s* putative defense of poetic stability and serenity, is delivered in all the sentence-sabotaging spirit of the Militant Romantic.

“If So the Man You Are” is a poem about the self—about “what kind of man you are.” Lewis’s reviewers were quick to identify the specific “self” in question. Spender described the poem as “a very personal confession” exemplary of Lewis’s “passionate egotism” (“Lewis as Poet”). John Wain, reviewing the second edition in *The Spectator*, argued that the poem spoiled *One-Way Song* by demonstrating its author’s “all-pervading, utterly wearisome inability to forget himself and his likes and dislikes for a moment” (328). D. G. Bridson, in a similar spirit, said that the poem “[went] a long way to support the contention that Mr. Lewis is the victim of a persecution mania” (“Sound,” 167). These reactions would seem to place the poem comfortably in the “Classical” spirit defended in *Time and Western Man*. If you are the sort of man to engage in polemical attacks on works that “disparage the reality and individuality of consciousness”—if you set yourself up as a champion of “conscious, willed and decisive behaviour” (Edwards 465-6)—then you are probably the sort of man to defend the integrity and individuality of your own self, to whatever absurd ends. If you have employed musical analogy to describe the insidious consequence of “Time-philosophy” as destruction of the coherent personality (“you are no longer a central self, but a spun-out, strung-along series, a pattern-of-a-self, depending like the musical composition upon time” (*TWM* 172)), it would make sense in your own “Song” to assert your unique and inviolable identity.

Lewis, however, does no such thing. The narrative complexity of the “I” that opens *One-Way Song* serves only as a dim foreshadowing of what lies ahead in “If So the Man You Are.” In this third poem in the collection, Lewis moves from the verse forms of “Engine Fight-Talk” and “The Song
of the Militant Romance” to something more closely resembling poetic drama. The first twelve cantos belong to an unnamed speaker (we will call him “Speaker”) who in the thirteenth introduces “The Enemy.” This figure speaks in the first person (and without quotation marks) for eighteen cantos, before passing the microphone back to the Speaker for the last four. Both the Speaker and The Enemy are interrupted by a variety of “antagonists,” with whom they engage in arguments, in the course of which the speech of both parties is rendered in quotation marks. Arranging this unwieldy cast of characters is a figure—anonymously through most of the poem—who provides occasional but substantial stage directions.

The Speaker opens the performance with a negative definition of himself: “I’m not a He-man you know, I’m not a He” (39). By this he means that he is not conventionally, aggressively masculine, as he explains in some of the most memorable passages in One-Way Song:

I am the apostle of an ancient peace
Even spurn the provocation of my fleas.
I am the man that holds his hand. I am
The quixote-fingered mild-horned coptic ram. (39)

I cannot be the man
To sport in summer gauntlets of astrakan.
I cannot be the man therefore to be
What a man is as a conventional He. (40)

The Speaker’s position, clearly and coherently expressed, elicits little confusion from the reader—except, perhaps, from one who comes to One-Way Song expecting the assertively masculine, aggressive style for which Lewis is best known. This confused response is, in fact, incorporated into the text in the figure of the “young marine” who appears in the fourth canto. When the Speaker says, “The man am I to exact what is due to men, / The man to exact it only with the pen— / The man to let the machete rust,” this disconcerted interlocutor materializes from nowhere:

“Not the machete!” screamed the youthful sailor.
“No. Bullets now!” I answered like a saviour:
“I heard he was with you boy, so I blew over.”
And Death was there indeed, bailiff and drover. (38)
The saintly Speaker (the “Bullets now!” line belongs to the marine) is thus able to dispose of his inarticulate and militaristic antagonist, and proceeds to further declarations of his peaceful philosophy before he is interrupted by the appearance of The Enemy.

There is no confusing voice of the peaceful Speaker with that of The Enemy. When the latter arrives onstage, a stage direction describes him not only as shouting, but also as “cloaked, masked, booted, and with gauntlets of astrakan” (43)—the last an item of combat apparel specifically repudiated by the Speaker. Indeed, when The Enemy has finally departed the scene, the Speaker complains

this “Enemy” counters all my song.
His is a battle all the way along.
With him the machete never seems to rust.
No room with him for thoughts of the ultimate dust.
Confucian philosophy and arms
Seem equal partners in his iron charms. (60)

The Speaker had wanted to sing a gentle, peaceful, reflective song, but was prevented from doing so by the entrance of the warrior-philosopher Enemy. We cannot confuse the Speaker and The Enemy; we are, however, encouraged to identify The Enemy with Lewis—himself a well-known warrior-philosopher, a mixer of “Confucian philosophy and arms,” and of course the publisher of a magazine called The Enemy. “The Enemy” of “If So the Man You Are” shares with Lewis, for example, a list of personal enemies: neither his complaint “The Shaws of this world, they are safe, that’s it!” (44) nor his satirical portraits of Eliot, Pound, and Joyce in the thirtieth canto would be out of place in Men Without Art. He also shares Lewis’s grievances: “no man you can name / Has had so much to huckster for mere fame,” he says (52); “I peddle solar bombshells in the rain” (54). He has arrived in this vexing position of neglect, moreover, by writing the same books as Lewis. When, in the eighteenth canto, the Enemy complains of the suppression of Snooty Baronet and discusses the effects of “my Hitler Book,” the identification seems taken for granted:
All that I know is that my agents write
“Your Hitler Book has harmed you”—in a night,
Somewhat like Byron—only I waken thus
To find myself not famous but infamous. (47)

Following a nineteenth canto in which The Enemy delivers a recognizably Lewisian defense of this reputation-ruining book (“I gave but an impression / Of the Berlin scene, in very impartial fashion” (48)), the reader of the first edition of One-Way Song would have encountered a strikingly peculiar element of book design which appears to reinforce the identification of The Enemy with Lewis. Flipping the page, they would have met not the expected 24-line stanza but a telegram from the author, printed beneath the numeral XX:

The phantom-canto, removed at the request of Lewis’s editor F. V. Morley, had contained a potentially libelous attack on a German publisher. “If So the Man You Are” does not suffer from its omission, however; the substitution of this signed telegraph is indeed among the most interesting elements in its investigation of personal identity. On the one hand, it serves as a reminder that—behind the endless characters and personae, the unresolved ambiguities and ideological conflicts—Lewis remains very much in control. The forceful, unified personality of the author, guaranteed by his signature, descends here to banish an entire canto in a powerful act of will. On the other hand, it introduces ambiguities of its own. It would seem that we should read “Delete that canto enemy” with an em-dash before the terminal noun, “Delete that canto. —Enemy.” While this would only
further associate Lewis and his Enemy persona, the compression of telegraphic style also makes possible the opposite reading: that its sense could also be, “Delete that Enemy canto,” implying that the Enemy is merely a character in the poem, not the poet himself. Then there is the telegram’s paradoxical status as an act of will: while it is a tour-de-force of layout, while it carries Lewis’s signature, it also signals Lewis’s concession to the will of his editor and to the laws of libel. One can hardly imagine the boastful, uncompromising Enemy of this section yielding thus. The inserted telegram is, like much of One-Way Song, showily indeterminate: it raises conspicuously a question it leaves conspicuously open.

In his final cantos, The Enemy is engaged by a spectral presence identified on his entrance as a “shade” and on his exit as “Antagonist of Enemy.” Their showdown, I would argue, bears a closer similarity to the dramatized self-questioning of Leopold Bloom in the Circe chapter of Ulysses than it does, say, to the sham-dialogue with the Schoolmaster in Day Lewis’s The Magnetic Mountain. If, as I have argued, the form of One-Way Song can be understood as attempting to escape the monologic forms of works like Hitler, this section attempts to come to terms with the subject matter of these works. Though at times a mere travesty of The Enemy’s (and Lewis’s) critics, the Antagonist is also able to strike genuine blows, poking at the wounds already enumerated in the Enemy’s monologue. He directs his most damaging sallies at The Enemy’s imprudent publication of Hitler (“What swastika is that you planted and flew?” [54]) and the consequent damage to his reputation (“If so you be the authenticated sage / Of our epoch, why aren’t you all the rage?” [55]). The Enemy eventually dispatches his opponent by declaring him “but half-real” (57)—an accusation that does nothing to counter the sense that he was all along an emanation of The Enemy’s guilty conscience. The stage direction describing the Enemy’s subsequent exit does much to call his own ontological status into doubt:

(The Enemy rises and stretches, in the role of Dr Faustus, and smiles in our direction, and bows as if to say, ‘Have I played my part to your satisfaction?’ I bow to show my appreciation [. . .] I bow again, and the
It is a thoroughly “dramatic” exit: the Enemy not only leaves “in character” as Dr. Faustus, but also acknowledges with a bow that his whole section had been a mere performance. Even more disorienting, however, is the use of personal pronouns in the remainder of the stage direction. At first it seems as if there might be an error in the text (a quotation mark inserted too soon), or that we may be witnessing another incursion of Lewis, speaking this time as “I.” Eventually we come to realize that “I” is the Speaker of “If So the Man You Are,” who is revealed here also as a sort of playwright: that in addition to speaking in Roman-faced verse in his own cantos, he has the ability to express himself graphically in italicized prose when the action requires it. The moment of carefully-achieved confusion before this identification is made, however—the few seconds in which we become lost in the tangle of shades, personae, discourses, typefaces, and layout devices, and cannot say who “I” is—serves as yet another of the formal maneuvers by which “If So the Man You Are” succeeds in conveying its patently non-centralized conception of the self.

In Blast 2, Lewis asked, “[w]hy try to give the impression of a consistent and indivisible personality?” (91). “If So the Man You Are,” Lewis’s bizarre “Song of Myself,” does not quibble with the implied answer to this rhetorical question. Far from an assertion of the stably-centred self Lewis advocated in his contemporaneous polemical works, it is both an interrogation of the self and an assertion of its inevitable and irreducible multiplicity. Where the first two poems of One-Way Song lead their reader through a prolonged clash of Classical and Romantic form only to show the two as irresolvably entwined, Lewis is here both the meek Speaker and the violent Enemy; both the Enemy and his enemies. As the Speaker concludes in the closing cantos, “I scratch the Enemy’s back, do overtime, / And he with no less vigour scratches mine” (61). Even more ostentatiously than in the first poems, Lewis makes his reader work to come to this paradoxical realization, exploiting every
possible tool of irony—the differentiated speaking voices of the poetic drama, stage directions, typefaces, handwritten telegrams—available to him in his hybrid form.

Too Terse This Form of Art

When the speaker of the concluding “Envoi” describes the “Me” of “If So the Man You Are” as “A Me that blots out for the moment You” (91), he recognizes something important about all three of the opening poems of One-Way Song: that while they present the reader with many challenges, lead them through a tremendous tangle of formal complexities, they are in a sense self-involved. Where Lewis intended for the “manifold byways” of the style developed in The Art of Being Ruled to encourage the reader’s active engagement, the speaker of the “Envoi” raises the possibility that the stylistic experiments of One-Way Song are motivated by entirely personal ends: the desire to escape from monologic polemical styles and to express the complex self obscured by such styles. “One-Way Song,” the eponymous concluding poem, focuses on the reader, and presents a very sober assessment of the relative utility of this new form to the reader—to “You.”

The speaker of “One-Way Song,” like Lewis, believes in the connection between cultural forms and modes of thought. Manifesting the same assumptions that underlay Lewis’s analysis of Stein’s “prose-song,” he says, “‘Emergent’ or ‘Creative’ Evolution / Has got some bearing on ‘red’ revolution. / Time, that fleshless concept, gets a corpus / Upon the social plane, and puffs like any porpoise” (86). He has little faith, however, in the efficacy of the forms developed so far in One-Way Song to address this situation. Where the first three poems manifest an implicit confidence in the ability of complex forms to engage their readership, the argumentative complexities of “One-Way Song” present a reductio ad absurdum of this technique, teasing their reader with needless reversals. G. W. Stonier describes this poem as presenting a straight-forward argument against “Fronts” and “one-way” thought: “The time-slaves of Mr. Lewis’s satire—one-way machines, ape behind and robot in front—are driven across the page” (710). But the speaker’s position is not nearly so
coherent. Often he speaks clearly in favour of “Fronts” and “one-wayness”: he opens the poem, for example, by declaring “Let me sing the song of the Fronts! [. . .] Always Eyes-front! Creatures of Progress! Suited / Only for one-way travel, in Time bodily rooted.” (67), and later makes the ostentatiously unequivocal declaration, “I am the song bird / Of the dogmatic one-way Front man” (70). Against this, however, he introduces occasional support for “Backs” and “backness”; in one instance, he calls upon the reader to “praise the reverse of what we are out to sing” (74). Eventually he admits his incoherence. The twentieth canto begins, “The tongues of nineteen cantos now have smote / Upon the sodden air. I’ve changed my coat / As many times, you may have thought old son!” (79). One of the clearest signs that this narrator has no faith in the affective efficacy of dialogic form is the fact that he consistently addresses his reader as “Master One-Way” (68) and “you, One-Way” (84). The implicit sense that the reader is not sophisticated enough to follow (and benefit from) a complex argument is made very explicit in the twenty-first canto:

Are we poor One-ways not of such a stuff  
As words are wasted on? One word’s enough,  
Any crass epithet, to express our lot,  
Of stucco Fronts, under sentence to be shot,  
That strut and pant in insect packs—what’s that  
To agitate a serious pen? (79)

Though politely employing the plural pronoun “we,” this stanza—echoing Lear and Macbeth, but without the enthusiasm for Shakespearean tragedy Lewis evinced in The Lion and the Fox—gives a clear characterization of the implied reader of “One-Way Song”: they are the mesmerized masses discussed in Time and Western Man, the people “to whom things are done” of Men Without Art—those who “strut and pant in insect packs.” Such “one-way” readers, he says, stuck in their “one-way” modes of thought, stand no chance of being able to benefit from the complex form developed in the first three poems of One-Way Song. Words are wasted on them—they’re not worth the effort.

This speaker, moreover, is less willing than those of the first three poems to set aside the philosophical arguments of Time and Western Man. He continues to believe in the need to debunk the
“time-philosophers”—the mesmerizers themselves, the producers of the lulling forms that make the “one-ways” what they are. And from this belief he finds another reason to criticize the form developed in the first three poems of One-Way Song. Poetry, he argues, is unsuited to abstract argument:

> In any medium except that of verse
> Forthwith I could enlighten you. Too terse,
> And as it were compact, this form of art—
> Which handles the finished product only—the hard
> Master-material of selected sound. (82)

In an argument very much like Bakhtin’s, the speaker complains that ideas must be worn down to be fitted in to verse, and that this process of translation precludes the sort of philosophical argument that he believes he must make in order to wake One-Way from his passivity. On the one hand, he says, the verse form, presenting a well-polished “finished product,” is incompatible with serious reflection: “The brain-that-sweats offends, it breaks our spell” (82). On the other hand, the encoding of his philosophical arguments in the arbitrary conventions of rhymed and metred verse may serve to obscure his meaning: “I can only release, as elegant as deer, / A herd of wandering shapes, which may go straight, / But are just as likely to have grandly strayed, / Before we write finis out of sight and reach” (82). To demonstrate his point—and demonstrating none of the genius of the previous speakers to hybridize his verse forms with elements of narrative prose or verse drama—he proceeds to deliver two cantos of utterly terrible, incomprehensible philosophic verse, featuring such lines as “For the time-man, then, t might in fact be d. / Should you ignore that fact, you remain at sea” (82)—lines that would make Edmund Wilson reconsider whether all generic restrictions were “artificial” after all, and force Trevelyan to rethink his case for philosophy as a suitable subject for poetry. Having thus tried and failed to express himself in verse, the speaker of “One-Way Song” concludes his section by admitting defeat: “Ah well, my One-way, there you have my song. / I
cannot now this argument prolong. / I have a date with another book” (89). We can only assume it will be in prose.

As the “Envoi” expressed it, “One-Way Song” is “the lament of Not-to-be” (91)—it is a sobering, wet-blanket response to the formal exuberance of the first three poems. It says to these other poems, in effect, “Good stuff, nice mix of genres, real tricky, lots of ironic potential, interesting to see you working in verse—But who’s gonna read it? Will anyone get it? And what if you want to talk about philosophy—is it any good for that?” There is, of course, much truth in this response. One-Way Song never did find its readers, and did not succeed in waking from One-way slumber any statistically significant portion of the English-speaking reading public. Indeed, the rather pathetic body of criticism on the poem only confirms the lack of faith expressed in “One-Way Song” in the interpretive ability of its readers: most weren’t even clever enough to get past its misleading dust-jacket description. The voice of the closing poem, however, is only one among many, and by no means the most convincing. Like Woolf’s “Ode to Cutbush” and Eliot’s The Rock, One-Way Song was a volume with much potential, however unrealized. Having long meditated on the connection between artistic style and political practice, but having fallen himself into the Bakhtinian trap of attacking hypnosis-inducing, monologic styles in a manner that was itself monologic, Lewis discovered in the hybrid One-Way Song a form capable of expressing and instantiating the mental dexterity that had long been his artistic end.

1 See 60-62 and Lewis’s later claim that Eliot’s “dogmatic insincerity” is “moved by a desire to effect a total separation between what he regarded as fine in his personality from what he regarded as unsatisfactory” (72). Lewis, who was close friends with Eliot throughout his life (and despite this essay) may well have derived this reading in part from his personal contact with Eliot.

2 The full text of Richard’s footnote is: “by effecting a complete severance between poetry and all beliefs, and this without any weakening of the poetry, he [Eliot] has realized what might otherwise have remained largely a speculative possibility, and has shown the way to the only solution of these difficulties. ‘In the destructive element immerse. That is the way’” (64). The quotation is from Conrad’s Lord Jim. The resonance of Richard’s footnote can be gauged from the fact that Stephen Spender titled his 1934 work of criticism The Destructive Element.
democracy. Summarizing Lewis’s views, Mao writes, “If the human material could be reshaped, induced by whatever deep pessimism toward democracy as it was practiced in his

In “A Shaman in Common,” an analysis of Lewis’s and Auden’s shared “liberalism,” Douglas Mao presents Lewis’s with left hand, the gentleman on my right with my right hand. I

“I take my stand exactly midway between the Bolshevist and the Fascist were two sides of the same coin It was a commonplace of Lewis’s criticism, from the 1920s through the 30s, that Fascism and Soviet Communism presents them negatively, and with a tone of distaste” (“what is taken with one hand is returned with the other. [. . .] Lewis approves of the pro

an exciting book” (305). 

and hence rhetorically very effective, but lacked the dizzying shifts of perspective that made

the first issue (January 1927)

Civilization in a state of defence?” (120). 

Lewis served as bombardier at Ypres. He is not in Hitler advocating national enmities between European nationalities, but rather arguing that all European are of a single race and ought not, consequently, to engage in such things as class- or sex-war. “Why not all of us draw together,” he says at one point, referring to Europeans, “and put our White Civilization in a state of defence?” (129).

At one point Lewis states, referring to the chaos of Europe between the wars, “under compulsion of such emergency conditions, values change, and we are forced to admit arguments which, in other circumstances, we might regard as unsound” (129).

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For a discussion of Lewis’s nationalism, see Edwards, Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer, 381-433. For an excellent overview of Lewis’s politics, see Gasiorek, 77-99.

Paul Edwards argues in Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer that Lewis switched definitely from the dialogic movement characteristic of The Art of Being Ruled beginning with the publication of The Enemy. The polemical articles published in the first issue (January 1927) such as “The Revolutionary Simpleton,” Edwards argues, “were [. . .] more single-minded, and hence rhetorically very effective, but lacked the dizzying shifts of perspective that made The Art of Being Ruled such an exciting book” (305).

Paul Edwards uses this passage to demonstrate Lewis’s dialectical method. “As often with Lewis’s arguments,” he says, what is taken with one hand is returned with the other. [. . .] Lewis approves of the process he describes. Yet he also presents them negatively, and with a tone of distaste” (Painter and Writer, 291).

It was a commonplace of Lewis’s criticism, from the 1920s through the 30s, that Fascism and Soviet Communism were two sides of the same coin. Responding to a political survey in the October, 1934 issue of New Verse, he wrote, “I take my stand exactly midway between the Bolshevist and the Fascist—the gentleman on my left I shake with my left hand, the gentleman on my right with my right hand. If there were only one (as I wish there were) I’d shake him with both hands.”

In “A Shaman in Common,” an analysis of Lewis’s and Auden’s shared “liberalism,” Douglas Mao presents Lewis’s deep pessimism toward democracy as it was practiced in his day, but acknowledges that Lewis supported the idea of democracy. Summarizing Lewis’s views, Mao writes, “[i]f the human material could be reshaped, induced by whatever
means necessary to think, democracy might yet have a chance” (217). *One-Way Song*, as I will argue, both participates positively in this attempt, and is also pessimistic about the likelihood of its success.

It should be noted that Lewis later ardently supported democracy. His little-read (because virtually unobtainable) *Anglosaxon: A League that Works* (1941) is an explicitly anti-Fascist and passionately pro-democratic work. See the Conclusion.

In *Painter and Writer*, Paul Edwards agrees with Dasenbrock regarding the “double perspective” of *The Art of Being Ruled* (300) but calls the occasional changes of argumentative tack in Hitler “opportunistic” (385).

The note continues by explaining that these contemporaries ought not to have been so surprised—that Lewis had in fact started off his artistic career as a writer of verse, and that his subsequent turns as a painter, critic, and novelist could as justifiably be regarded as generic surprises. In *Rude Assignment*, Lewis’s second autobiography, he recalls having written in his youth sonnets “so like Shakespeare’s that as I recall lines in them I am never quite certain whether they were Shakespeare’s or mine” (123).

Armitage goes so far as to declare “Lewis is generally a better versifier than Byron” (17).

For more analysis of the unexpected connections between Lewis and “the Auden group,” see Mao, “A Shaman in Common,” and Stan Smith, “Re-Righting Lefty.”

Lewis calls it *Time*-philosophy because its proponents celebrate evanescence and mutability, and because in Lewis’s view the school derived primarily from Bergson’s writing on time and *durée*.

Lewis says in *Rude Assignment* that this passage “epitomize[s]” a significant part of his argument. He continues by arguing that contemporary libertarian ideology is close to the truth of human nature: that most people do in fact desire “the poetry of the mass” rather than the “prune of the individual” (194).

Lewis writes in the preface, “[i]t has been my ambition to assist in the breeding of a race of transformed ‘hurried men,’ in the anglo-saxon world, who handle ideas as expertly as any other people, and whom, in consequence, it is less difficult to fool with transparently shoddy doctrines” (xvi). The epigraph to Book One, “The Revolutionary Simpleton,” draws a direct connection between literature and political ideas, though it stops short of explicitly detailing the relationship of causal efficiency established in the introduction to *Men Without Art*: Lewis quotes from his great rival, A. N. Whitehead: “It is in literature that the concrete outlook of humanity receives its expression. Accordingly, it is to literature that we must look, particularly in its more concrete forms, namely in poetry and drama, if we hope to discover the inward thoughts of a generation” (1).

For Lewis’s objection to a different kind of hybrid—painting mixed with writing—see his autobiographical “Beginnings,” where he describes his story “The Ankou” as “the crystallization of that which I had to keep out of my consciousness while painting.” In Lewis’s work, he says, “there has been no mixing of the genres” (374).

As Lewis writes in *Men Without Art*, “if you ask yourself how you would be able to tell a page of Hemingway, if it were unexpectedly placed before you, you would be compelled to answer, Because it would be like Miss Stein! And if you were asked how you would know it was not by Miss Stein, you would say Because it would probably be about prize-fighting, war, or the bull-ring” (24).

The first *Blast* manifesto specifically praises Shakespeare: under “Bless English Humour,” Lewis writes “Shakespeare […] for his bitter Northern Rhetoric of humour” (26).

In Eliot’s Foreword to the 1960 edition, which included a full transcription of the dust-jacket description, he says, “The publishers’ note on the jacket of the first edition is itself a good introduction. Composed in the style of editorial anonymity suitable to book-jackets, it yet bears signs which lead me to suspect (I was out of England at the time and had no hand in it) that the author supplied his publishers with material. For this reason I transcribe it in full” (7). Eliot was right about that: as Munton shows, Lewis wrote the description at the behest of F. V. Morley, who was filling in for Eliot (207). But he was wrong in his claim that it was “a good introduction,” as this section will show.

“*The Bailiff* in L’s novel *The Childermass* (1928) rules the after-world with all the techniques of control I believed were used in European democracies. He uses his charm and ‘bursting conceit’ to manipulate a crowd of appellants wishing to proceed to ‘Heaven’” (Munton 207).

The *OED* defines a “cake-walk” as “A walking competition among negroes, in which the couple who put on most style ‘take the cake’” (1a). Lewis is here putting on something of a Classical cake-walk: a showy demonstration of his plain, colloquial style.

The one possible source of confusion in this passage—the one element that is not “clear”—nonetheless reinforces just how “classic” it is. “Ridiculous Miss,” according to Munton, is a play on Horace’s “ridiculus mus” (219).

The vast majority of the criticism of *One-Way Song* is in the form of reviews (of its 1933 first edition and 1960 second edition.) I have also drawn material from two special issues published in honour of Lewis: those of *Twentieth Century*.
Verse (1937) and Agenda (1969-70). The poem is seldom discussed today; it is, for example, one of the very few works not discussed in Paul Edwards’s encyclopedic Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer.

36 The Locofocos were the radical wing of the American Democratic Party in the mid-nineteenth century. Tammany Hall was the seat of the moderate portion of the Democratic Party.

37 This interpretation was so widespread that Lewis wrote a letter to New Britain on December 13, 1933, denying that he had the New Signatures in mind (he said it was a parody of Pound.) D. G. Bridson wrote, “we may or may not accept Mr. Lewis’s assurance that the class is not drawn mainly from among the contributors to New Signatures” (166).

38 Lewis says of Mussolini “when that very able if theatrical person leaps upon a cannon, in full war-paint, inflates his chest, and delivers himself of what is called in America a ‘fight-talk,’ he is proving himself a child of Darwin” (179). There is no entry for “fight-talk” in the OED.

39 This name combines Lewis’s given name (Wyndham was Lewis’s legal middle name) with the surname of the reliably “Classical” Edmund Burke.

40 Alan Munton argues, quite simply, that “Percy Burke puts L[ewis]’s point of view” (209). Another hint that we are not entirely to believe Percy Burke, however, is provided in his imagery: the simile “like light in Boston” suggests a similarity to the Classical-minded Eliot, always a figure of fun in Lewis’s writing. (Indeed, The Enemy makes fun of him in “If So the Man You Are”: “I seem to note a roman profile bland, / I hear the drone from out the cactus-land: / That must be the poet of the Hollow Men: / The lips seem bursting with a deep Amen” (58).)

41 G. W. Stonier describes this section thus: “This off mechanist ballet, with surgical surprises as it were and vast transformation scenes [. . .] is projected wholly in the back-chat of the Author, the Enemy, the Bailiff, and those even more mysterious figures who answer back” (710). Stonier, in his capitalization of Author, seems to be suggesting that this figure too should be read as a character in the drama.

42 Gilbert Armitage, the overly enthusiastic reviewer of One-Way Song for New Verse, spoke of the volume’s “easy and masculine assurance in the use of words” (15)—apparently not recognizing the numerous and widely diverging styles in the poem, many of which, like that of the narrator of “If So the Man You Are,” are specifically anti-masculine. Bonnie Kime Scott reads Lewis as representative of “masculine” modernist style in Refiguring Modernism.

43 This may be a reference to Pound’s “Canto XLV,” in which he writes “Usura rusteth the chisel / It rusteth the craft and the craftsman” (230). If it is, it seems to miss Pound’s point.

44 Even the most passionate defenders of One-Way Song found this section trying. The otherwise sycophantic Julian Symons wrote that “[t]he blemishes in the poem” were “most obvious [. . .] in the philosophy-art-politics section which is the Song itself” (132). His antagonists disliked it too. D. G. Bridson used this section to support for his contention that One-Way Song was no more than “pamphleteering in verse” (166). (He also said that of the two thousand lines in the poem, “at least eighteen hundred [. . .] are flatter than any pancakes tossed in the Essay on Criticism”).
Conclusion

Thoughts on Genre in an Air Raid:
The Hybridizers in 1941

The twelvemonth beginning December 1933 was a period of convergence for “The Hybridizers of 1934.” But while Woolf, Eliot, and Lewis all wrote that year in hybrid forms that elicited the active engagement of their readers, they had very different conceptions of what they were hybridizing and why. For Woolf, the social usefulness of poetry lay in its suggestivity, which served to break up the stable meaning upon which dictators depend; and its rhythm, which harmonized the discordanies of modern life without resolving them. Hybridity was useful to Woolf because it infused these poetic qualities into a “democratic” prose medium capable of dealing with the full range of experience. For Lewis poetry was not necessarily socially desirable; indeed, he focused—like Bakhtin, and very unlike Woolf—on the regulating, disenfranchising qualities of rhythmic language. Hybridity was not valuable because of the inherent qualities is combined, but rather for the mental “squint” that the unharmonious clashing of genres was capable of producing in the reader. Eliot, because he was already a poet and because he was extremely reticent, was less interested in theorizing poetry’s advantages than in describing the benefits of its combination with the drama, which he valued both for its ability to reach a wide and various audience and for its capacity to engage this audience in collaborative participation. While each of these writers believed that hybridity could serve socially valuable ends, the works they produced were very different. Woolf’s “Ode to Cutbush” allied poetic rhythm and suggestivity to novelistic FID to inculcate recognition of the ungraspable richness of unknown passersby. Lewis’s One-Way Song pitted genre against genre in its quest to activate the critical intelligence and cultivate an active mind capable of seeing through, as Lewis himself sometimes could not, the tortured illogic of dictators’ narratives. Eliot’s The Rock, perhaps unintentionally, staged a free competition of a dizzying range of ideologies and styles—a cacophony resolvable only through the active collaboration of the viewer, whose task it became to make sense
of the spectacle for himself. In a period in which democracy was threatened and totalitarianism threatening, these writers provided three different views of the social usefulness of hybrid genre.

The moment of convergence, however, was brief. After 1934, the “Hybridizers” went off in different directions. If we look, for example, to the second year of the war—to the traumatic period of the London Blitz, from September 1940 to May 1941—we find our protagonists in very different places. Auerbach, as we have seen, was in Istanbul, not yet started on *Mimesis*. Things had improved somewhat for Bakhtin: his exile was over, he was living near Moscow, and he was writing his dissertation on Rabelais. “Discourse in the Novel,” the fruit of exile, was now something to reflect upon and summarize, as he did in 1941’s “Epic and Novel.” Woolf, Eliot, and Lewis had all been living in London in 1934, but by the time of the Blitz only Eliot remained. He served during the Blitz as an air raid warden, watching the German bombers fly over—“the dark dove[s] with the flickering tongue[s]” of “Little Gidding” (217)—and reporting the location of resulting fires. Among the bombed buildings were Woolf’s current and former London homes. Until her death in March 1941, Woolf spent the war primarily in Rodmell in Sussex, itself directly in the path of the raids. Eliot’s “dark dove” would likely have flown over Woolf in Rodmell on its way to London; she described its sound in “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” (1940) as “the zoom of a hornet, which may at any moment sting you to death” (173). Lewis, his reputation ruined by Hitler, left for North America on September 2, 1939 and by 1941 was living miserably in a dreary apartment in Toronto.

Though the war dispersed them, however, all three writers produced important work in the first years of the war: Eliot the final three poems of the *Four Quartets* (1940-2); Lewis his novel *The Vulgar Streak* and political pamphlet *Anglosaxony* (both 1941); and Woolf her lecture “The Leaning Tower” (1940) and last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941). These works provide us with an opportunity for assessing the lasting value of the Hybridizers’ experiments. The works of 1934 had been published in the context of the rise of Fascism, and their social usefulness was evaluated in that context. But
with the Fascists risen—flying overhead, dropping bombs on London—what use did these writers make of their hybrid forms?

“The Leaning Tower” shows Woolf’s social analysis of genre unchanged from 1934. The onset of war in fact only strengthened her convictions. Delivered to the Brighton Workers’ Educational Association on April 27, 1940, “The Leaning Tower” developed some of the ideas of A Letter to a Young Poet to argue that the Thirties Poets were failing in their efforts to fight Fascism because they were misusing their chosen form. Like A Room of One’s Own, Woolf’s talk stresses the social significance of the suggestive poetic voice by contrasting it with the denotative Fascist voice, here illustrated by Hitler’s voice on the radio (164). The Thirties Poets, she says, are complicit with this monologic voice. Speaking of the “pedagogic, the didactic, the loud-speaker strain that dominates their poetry” (175), Woolf argues that whereas the Thirties poets ought to fight monologic Fascist style with poetic openendedness, they did not. Woolf quotes Day Lewis and Spender and reflects, “[w]e listen to oratory, not poetry. [. . .] We are in a group, in a class-room as we listen” (175). Woolf also repeats the charges that the Thirties Poets have failed productively to mix prose elements into their verse. Theirs, she says, is “bastard language” both in its excessive prosaicness and in its awkward combination of class dialects. Whereas she earlier accused Auden of failing adequately to integrate “Mrs. Gape,” here she speaks of the Thirties Poets’ jarring juxtaposition of “the rich speech of the aristocrat” and “the racy speech of the peasant” (176)—the dialects of the public schools where they were educated and of the proletariat whose cause the Communist-aligned poets sought to advance. What is needed, Woolf argues, is a “pool[ing of] all the different dialects” (179). In a utopian closing exhortation, Woolf calls on her middle- and working-class audience to effect this discursive mixing through an active and independent engagement with literature. “[M]ake yourselves critics” (180), Woolf says:

[Literature] is not cut up into nations; there are no wars there. Let us trespass feely and fearlessly and find our own way for ourselves. It is thus that English literature will survive
this war and cross the gulf—if commoners and outsiders like ourselves make that country our country, if we teach ourselves how to read and to write, how to preserve, and how to create. (181)

It is a conclusion strongly reminiscent of the Ode’s: shifting pronouns from “I” to “we,” insisting that literature is a common inheritance regardless of social class, and foregrounding the role of literature in breaking down social barriers literal and imagined, it shows the continued relevance in wartime of Woolf’s hybrid project.

_Between the Acts_, published the next year, can be read as the fullest realization of Woolf’s long theoretical and practical engagement with the politics of generic hybridity. _Between the Acts_ was conceived from the start as a hybrid work: in a diary entry of August 1937, Woolf wrote, “[i]ts to be dialogue: & poetry: & prose” (D 5:105); in April 1938 she envisioned “a perpetual variety & change from intensity to prose. & facts” that would move beyond the “I” to a “‘We’ … composed of many different things … we all life, all art, all waifs & strays—a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole” (D 5:135); in December 1938 she called it “[a] medley” (D 5:193). In its finished form, the array of genres and styles is dizzying: it is a novel into which a play (a pageant, in fact, like _The Rock_) is embedded; poetry appears in the narrator’s voice, in the voices and thoughts of the characters, and in the embedded play; and the reactions of the audience present a form of literary criticism. Melba Cuddy-Keane, noting this generic mixing, argues that the hybridity of _Between the Acts_ should be read as Woolf’s direct aesthetic response to the war. Citing Woolf’s May 1940 diary entry, “the army is the body: I am the brain. Thinking is my fighting” (D 5:285), Cuddy-Keane suggests that _Between the Acts_ “constituted the form her ‘fighting’ took.” Through its “loose and hybrid mix of genre,” Cuddy-Keane argues, it “articulate[d] a pluralism of style and vision antithetical to the concentrated obsessions of power and aggression at the roots of war” (Introduction, _Between the Acts_, xlv).
The hybrid form of *Between the Acts* grows directly out of the “Ode to Cutbush.” Words and phrases from the Ode echo throughout the novel. The passive-voiced, subject-free language of John’s gala poem appears, for example, in the narrator’s description of the luncheon, where “[w]ater boiled. Steam issued. Cake was sliced” (70) and “[c]orks popped. Grouse, ham, chicken were sliced. Lips munched” (115). Louie’s “how cook will say” returns in a nurse’s “How cook had told ‘im off about the asparagus” (8). Each of the principle poetic sources I emphasized in my reading of the Ode—Byron, Whitman, and Baudelaire—is invoked in the novel. John himself appears thinly disguised as “Billy, Mrs. Sands’s nephew, apprenticed to the butcher” (24). The main poetic voice of *Between the Acts* is that of Isa, and the lyrical style of this middle-class character must be contrasted with working-class John’s predominately epic voice. But Isa shares John’s enthusiasm for Romantic poetry and performs many Cutbushian alternations between the exalted and mundane subject matter. At one point, quoting Shelley and contemplating lunch, she murmurs: “The moor is dark beneath the moon, rapid cloud have drunk the last pale beams of even. … I have ordered the fish” (13).

*Between the Acts* also includes several instances of epic. A passage from the pageant’s first scene—

> “Armed against fate / The valiant Rhoderick / Armed and valiant / Bold and blatant / Firm elatant” (55-6)—continues to ring in the mind of one character, William, almost to the end of the novel (76, 109). Rhoderick, who figures in Byron’s *Childe Harold*, goes some way toward linking this epic voice with John’s. Like the Ode and “The Leaning Tower,” however, *Between the Acts* performs a complex ideological critique of such “bold and blatant” voices. A memorable line from the pageant’s conclusion, “Let’s break the rhythm and forget the rhyme” (127), provides an excellent demonstration. On the one hand, its stylistic iconoclasm is appealing: without subjecting all rhythm or rhyme to Bakhtinian condemnation, it suggests the need for new styles to suit new historical conditions. On the other hand, the message is undercut by the medium in which it is delivered. The audience hears this voice not from an actor’s mouth but from a gramophone hidden in the bushes; the narrator
describes the line as “a megaphonic, anonymous, loud-speaking affirmation” (127)—one decidedly reminiscent of the “loud-speaker strain” in “The Leaning Tower.” This situation demonstrates how, as in the Ode, the reader of Between the Acts must hold together a heteroglossian medley of forms and ideologies and accept, to some extent, their irreducibility to a coherent reading. The concluding scenes of Between the Acts both stress the importance of such semantic openendedness and propose it as a basis of social cohesion. Having first noted the principal characters’ divergent interpretations of the pageant (“They all looked at the play; Isa, Giles and Mr. Oliver. Each of course saw something different” (144)), the narrator closes by envisioning them as a “circle of readers” (147) held together not by a common interpretation, but by shared participation in the interpretive act itself. Stressing process over product, discussion over final answers, it presents a wonderfully condensed image of what democracy means to Woolf.

Eliot’s literary activity after 1934 presents a more ambiguous case than Woolf’s. In the years following publication of The Rock, Eliot continued his dialogic editorial practice; most notably, in 1937 Eliot was responsible for publishing Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood—a work whose hybrid form critics like Jane Marcus and Robin Blyn have read as challenging Fascist monologism. In his own literary work, however, it is possible to read Eliot as retreating from the chaotic heteroglossia of The Rock. Eliot’s principal hybrid act in 1934 was the combination of poetic and dramatic forms; during the period of World War II, however, he abandoned the drama and produced only poems: the final three Quartets, “East Coker” (1940), “Dry Salvages” (1941), and “Little Gidding” (1942). The last play he completed before the war, The Family Reunion (1939), has, moreover, often been read as a dramatic failure—as an insufficiently hybrid poetic work ill-suited for performance and incapable of engaging an audience. Virginia Woolf read it in precisely these terms, calling it “a failure: proof he’s not a dramatist. A monologist” (D 5:210). David Chinitz offers a similar assessment: The Family Reunion, he says, is “at once a self-concealing and self-advertising piece of high art—a somber,
paradoxical, challenging work of poetry” (142). A possible narrative of Eliot’s career after *The Rock*, then, is one of gradual retreat from hybrid dramatic forms followed by return to pure poetry.

The reception of the wartime *Quartets* complicates this narrative, however. These were, as Chinitz notes, among Eliot’s most “popular” works—“East Coker” alone sold some 12,000 copies and went through five printings in less than a year (182). They sold so well, Chinitz argues, because they served an important social function: they “were read, at the time of their publication, as inspirational works that offered strength and solace at the most disheartening moments of the Second World War” (182). They were able to perform this function, I would argue, because their language benefited from Eliot’s experiments in hybridity. This development can be described in terms of the differing uses of train imagery in *The Rock*, “East Coker,” and “Dry Salvages.” In *The Rock*, the otherworldly voice of The Rock uses an everyday image to deprecate the emptiness of everyday life: “The desert is not only around the corner,” he says, “[t]he desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you” (9). In the context of *The Rock*’s numerous and ideologically varied voices, the one-sidedness of the Rock’s statement cannot stand; the reader or audience member must struggle mightily, however, to put the Rock in its place—it can feel at times like what “East Coker” describes as “the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” (198). In “East Coker” itself, the mystical and the everyday coexist more easily. The image of the tube is used here, in fact, precisely to assert a connection between the two: the speaker likens the quotidian moment

> when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations
> And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
> And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
> Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about (200)

to the dark night of the soul (the moment when “the dark come[s] upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God” (200)), a step toward divine transcendence. While both the Rock and the speaker of “East Coker” describe an experience of spiritual desolation, the former is accusing and remote,
while the latter is suffering and sympathetic. This sense of horizontality between Eliot’s speaker and his fellow rail-travellers is more pronounced still in “Dry Salvages”:

> When the train starts, and the passengers are settled  
> To fruit, and periodicals and business letters  
> (And those who saw them off have left the platform)  
> Their faces relax from grief into relief,  
> To the sleepy rhythm of a hundred hours.  
> Fare forward, travellers! (210)

Chinitz reads these lines as exemplary of an important shift in the attitude of Eliotic speakers from *The Waste Land* to *Four Quartets*: “Eliot’s persona,” he says, “now takes the ‘tube,’ eats dinner, prays, fears, and suffers alongside his fellow citizens” (182). It is indeed as a citizen-poet that Eliot presents himself in these poems. Reflecting on some lines in “East Coker,” the speaker declares them “not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study in worn-out poetical fashion,” and concludes, “The poetry does not matter” (198). In the wartime *Quartets*, Eliot wanted his poetry to matter. And, in part because his experiments with hybridity had made him more comfortable with a broader range of styles and subject matter, it did.

There is little ambiguity in the situation of Wyndham Lewis. The onset of war had two very pronounced effects on his writing: first, it led him to announce his categorical support for democracy against Fascism; second, his desperation to be understood as pro-democracy and anti-Fascist led him to abandon completely his experiments in hybrid style. *Anglosaxony* : *A League that Works*, the political pamphlet Lewis published in Toronto, demonstrates this twofold situation most clearly. Abandoning all nuance, Lewis describes democracy as “a very good thing indeed” (10), praising in particular what he calls its “non-absolutist character” (29) and flexible, elastic concept of citizenship. Where the Fascists root their identity in the soil, he says, the English-speaking democracies base theirs on the sea, “with all that the ocean-wave takes with it of elasticity and freedom, of intangibility and in a sense of rootlessness” (50). Anticipating the arguments of his post-war *America and Cosmic Man*, Lewis employs his “oceanic” politics to praise democratic “respect for
the other fellow” (26) and to call for “the dissolution of racial barriers” (68) and an end to class “snobbery,” which he describes as a “great blot upon [. . .] democracy” (69). *Anglosaxony* also underpins its arguments for political pluralism with support for pluralistic literary styles. Lewis now strongly objects, for example, to Hitler’s slogan, “[h]e who would save a nation must learn to think heroically.” “There should be no heroic thinking,” Lewis says: “It kills, maims, and ruins great masses of people, and then it ends with great suddenness, like all epics, and leaves nothing behind it at all, except a bumper chapter about mass bloodshed in the history books” (70). But while Lewis praises democratic elasticity and condemns epic violence, his own style in *Anglosaxony* is rigid, straightforward, direct, and self-assured. Lewis excused his tortured logic in *Hitler* on the grounds that in “emergency conditions, values change, and we are forced to admit arguments which, in other circumstances, we might regard as unsound” (129). Lewis would perhaps defend his dogmatism in *Anglosaxony* the same way: owing to emergency conditions, he needed to make himself as clear as possible. He would perhaps say the same of his novel, *The Vulgar Streak*.

I have described *One-Way Song* as representing an attempt to escape from a monologic voice; *The Vulgar Streak*, which can be compactly described as *Pygmalion* retold as a tragedy and set during the Munich Crisis, is about an attempt to escape from a class-bound voice. The protagonist, Vincent Penhale, is an actor from a working-class East London family who has taught himself to speak like a gentleman, and successfully employs his skills of ventriloquy to seduce and marry a rich young woman, April Mallow. Symbolizing his false self, Vincent survives by passing forged bank notes; but when this scheme is discovered and Vincent arrested, his past is revealed. When April dies in childbirth, Vincent commits suicide. The novel intersperses its action with numerous analyses of the politics of language and of voice. Vincent describes Cockney English as a “slave jargon” (133) that structures negatively the imaginations and identities of its users. He describes the lower classes as a “dark and tonguetied multitude” (31): neglecting, like Eliot, the richness of rhyming Cockney slang,
Lewis’s protagonist says “[t]he poor are afraid of words […] It would never enter their heads to play with them” (17). An impoverished dialect and lack of verbal dexterity, Vincent argues, has served politically to keep the working classes in their place: “That’s the way our rulers wanted us to speak,” Vincent tells his brother (137); and in a line later quoted by George Orwell, Vincent describes himself as one whose “very tongue is branded” (38). The analysis of voice applies not only to class politics but also to the war. In a lengthy scene, the protagonists gather around a radio in a Venice hotel and listen to Hitler’s September 26, 1938 speech from the Berlin Sportspalast announcing the imminent bombing of Prague. Hitler’s voice, with its “tone of melancholy half-expostulation, half-defiance” (54), speaks with all the unanswerability of a Bakhtinian tyrant:

The famous voice droned on. April sat in a bored and melancholy dream, wishing that that horrible voice would stop. Four other English guests listened sternly and blankly to the voice of Fate. But since Fate unfortunately spoke a language which they were unable to understand, they inclined their ears towards the instrument in the hope that they might at least discover if fate was in a bad temper to-night. (54)

Speaking an incomprehensible tongue, Hitler’s voice becomes to its listeners form without content—a powerful, monotonous, decisive voice that admits no rejoinder. “And this was the voice that was pronouncing the verdict,” the narrator says, “[o]f war for everybody, or peace for everybody” (54). D. G. Bridson has argued that it was this same speech of September 1938 that finally turned Lewis against Hitler; “the broadcast,” Bridson says, “came as a sickening revelation” (Filibusters 209). But in responding to this voice in works like Anglosaxony and The Vulgar Streak, Lewis spoke just as decisively. As Paul Edwards notes in his afterword to The Vulgar Streak, this novel “can be seen as marking a great change in Wyndham Lewis’s fictional writing” (242); it was the first of his straightforwardly realist novels, and marked the end of his long period of narrative experimentation. Faced with the historical urgency both of countering the Nazis and of recovering his reputation, Lewis set aside his belief in the value of clashing styles. He spoke instead in an inverted variant of the monologic voice from which hybridity initially promised escape. Lewis’s
wartime strategy, however, was as unsuccessful as his prewar one. Anglosaxony, published in a tiny edition and away from the centres of power, sold so poorly that most copies were pulped. The poor reception of The Vulgar Streak, published in England, was due in part to the fact that much of its small edition was destroyed in an air raid during the Blitz.

But we mustn’t conclude on such a negative note, however temptingly emblematic. For if the Hybridizers of 1934 did not succeed in preventing World War II—and if, in 1941, the fabulously hybrid Between the Acts did not stop the bombing, Lewis’s Anglosaxony was not carried into the beaches of Normandy,7 and Eliot’s wartime Quartets, however reassuring, did not stop Hitler’s heart beating—this is not to say their experiments are irrelevant today. In his 1937 autobiography Blasting and Bombardiering, Lewis called the Men of 1914 “the first men of a Future that has not materialized.” In his account, World War I prevented the historical realization of his cohort’s utopias: “We belong to a ‘great age’,” Lewis said, “that has not ‘come off’” (256). Perhaps now is a more propitious moment for the modernist utopia. 2011 has proven thus far exceedingly unkind to totalitarians and dictators; it has seen already the establishment of several new democracies, and more seem likely to follow. But as the writers in this dissertation have shown us, democracy is not just a form of government, but also a way of thinking, of imagining, of writing and speaking. If the newly democratic states of 2011 are to develop into democratic societies, they will need what Hirschkop calls “the depth that culture has to offer” (58). The Hybridizers’ forms remain as suited to this purpose today as in 1934. They have seldom been more relevant.

1 “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid,” whose title I have adapted into the title of this conclusion, in an important work in its own right. It shows Woolf recognizing that there won’t be peace until young male soldiers can be persuaded to give up their guns in favour of creative work: “if we are to compensate the young man for the loss of his glory and of his gun,” Woolf writes, “we must give him access to the creative feelings” (176). I have omitted a longer discussion here only because the essay is not primarily concerned with genre.

2 There is a perhaps unexpected connection between Woolf’s sense of the “school-room” strain of the Thirties Poets and Lewis’s similar implied depiction in “Engine Fight Talk” and indeed throughout One-Way Song.

3 See McWhirter 256-7 for the correspondences between The Rock and Between the Acts.
Melba Cuddy-Keane’s edition of *Between the Acts* notes allusions to Whitman’s “Tears! Tears! Tears!” (205), Byron’s “She Walks in Beauty” (153), and Baudelaire’s “Au Lecteur” (211). The latter reference is made via T. S. Eliot; Cuddy-Keane also shows *Between the Acts*’s extensive allusions to Eliot.

Jane Marcus calls *Nightwood* “the representative modernist text, a prose poem of abjection, tracing the political unconscious of the rise of fascism” (231). Robin Blyn argues that *Nightwood* “performs an immanent critique of fascist instrumentality” (507).

In his 1942 essay “The English People,” Orwell wrote, “[t]he English working class, as Mr Wyndham Lewis has put it, are ‘branded on the tongue’” (5).

While Lewis’s work was not carried into battle, one of Woolf’s novels was. *The Years* (1937) was published in an Armed Services edition, in a format designed to fit into a soldier’s pocket.


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