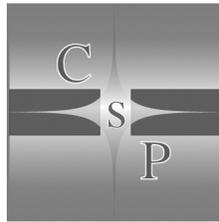


Right / Left / Right
Revolving Commitments
France and Britain 1929–1950

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1929–1950

Edited by

Jennifer Birkett and Stan Smith



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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INTRODUCTION

RIGHT LEFT RIGHT: REVOLVING COMMITMENTS

Stan Smith and Jennifer Birkett

By the close of the 1920s, the European mood had changed from the nihilism and apolitical hedonism that followed the Great War to serious engagement with a politics of crisis generated by economic collapse and the social and cultural disintegration which accompanied it.¹ After the Wall Street Crash in October 1929 inaugurated the Depression years, it became increasingly difficult for writers in Britain and Europe to remain aloof from political concerns. Political loyalties remained surprisingly fluid, however, until at least the triumph of Hitler in 1933. Politically naïve, writers often shifted allegiance several times between the opposing positions of Left and Right, convinced only that the status quo was uneasy, and would not last. Revolving commitment intellectually and morally, many also found that the idea of revolution was a revolving door through which they passed to emerge, at the end of the decade, confused, baffled, disenchanted, their convictions transformed or subverted by the whirligig of a rapidly changing history.

The chapters in this book address a range of reactions by Anglophone and French writers to the turbulence of the 1930s, its immediate causes and aftermath, and analyse the variety of forms in which writers confronted the politics of the age. The abject surrender to Capital of Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government in 1931, leading to the formation of a "National" coalition government, was matched on the continent by the emergence of right-wing totalitarian movements modelled in part on Mussolini's Italian Fascism, and poised to capture power in Germany under Hitler, in Spain with Franco, and throughout Eastern Europe, to which the short-lived "Popular Front" governments of the mid-decade provided no sustainable answer. In reaction, an increasingly authoritarian, Moscow-dominated Communist movement extended its influence throughout the European Left in the 1930s. The early years of that decade found the European intelligentsia in ferment, intensely aware that neither ivory tower aestheticism nor the frivolity of the "bright young things" of the post-war years was any longer a viable response to

crisis. The deeply ambiguous mood of the years preceding Hitler's pseudo-democratic seizure of power in 1933, caught for ever in Christopher Isherwood's Berlin novels, led many intellectuals and writers to espouse authoritarian and radical allegiances as the only way forward. In the period 1929–1933, political commitment could be inflected to Left or Right; indeed, many writers vacillated between extremes. Much of the writing of the period reveals this deep ambiguity. This was reinforced by the postures of Comintern policy, which, until Hitler's succession, had taken an "ultra-leftist" line, condemning all political policies on the Left not dictated by the Comintern as "social fascist." After Hitler's accession, Comintern policy shifted to endorse the class collaboration strategies apparently vindicated by the election of Popular Front governments in Spain and France in 1936.

The disillusioning experiences of Popular Front governments and the Spanish Civil War, the brutality of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and Hitler's triumphant *Drang nach Osten* (the *Anschluss* with Austria and the seizure of Czechoslovakia in 1938, the invasion of Poland in 1939), put these strategies under intense strain, until they were destroyed by the Hitler-Stalin Pact of August-September 1939. The outbreak of the Second World War, and the fall of France in 1940, saw the final dissolution of the old Left consensus, bringing new disillusion, or the hardening of commitments to rigid dogmas, or renunciation of political commitment altogether.

Extending from the origins of the European crisis in the late 1920s to its consequences in the immediate aftermath of the War, these chapters examine the complex and contradictory responses in British and French intellectual and cultural circles to that key political moment of the twentieth century, when, as Leon Trotsky put it in 1932, history was poised like a ball on top of a pyramid, and "the slightest impact [could] cause it to roll down either to the left or to the right."

Stan Smith's chapter opens the collection by scrutinising radical left-wing politics of the period in Britain in relation to the shifts in Comintern policy throughout the 1930s, and the attempts to accommodate to them by individual British writers, both Communist Party members and fellow-travellers, until the moment when the Hitler-Stalin Pact made it impossible for all but the most unwavering devotees of the Party line to maintain their support. Martyn Cornick gives a parallel view from a French perspective, analysing three key moments in the interwar years when the *Nouvelle Revue française* opted to review the competing demands of fascist and communist ideology and the prejudices of nationalism, and pointed its influential readership towards the possibility of a collective reconstruction of republican ideals.

Alan Munton and John Lucas, in their respective studies of Wyndham Lewis and E. M. Forster, enable us to juxtapose two very different individual voices: the forceful rhetoric of Lewis, here shown in the course of a negotiation between Proudhon and Marx, and the deliberately low-pitched tones of Forster's liberal voice, seemingly private, but nevertheless speaking up for all those under threat, and for the intellectual freedoms prized by the liberal tradition. Joseph Pridmore and Simon Goulding provide contrasting studies of writing from the heart of class politics and social experience in Britain: the proletarian communities evoked by the working-class writers Jack Hilton, George Garrett, James Hanley and Jim Phelan, who explore the ramifications of "mass protest" and "mass violence" in the streets and homes of provincial cities, and Patrick Hamilton's *déraciné* middle-class, semi-bohemian London, the breeding-ground for several home-grown varieties of fascism.

Angela Kershaw returns discussion to a wider European horizon, studying the political connections and consequences of the travels undertaken by French and British women writers in the Soviet Union in the interwar years. In the context of the Second World War, the ideological commitment to Communism took on very different resonances, as Angela Kimyongür shows in her examination of Louis Aragon's epic novel, *Les Communistes*, and the dilemmas posed for the Communist Party in France by the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Responses to the resurrection of Germany as a global power are the theme of Peter Tame's chapter on the writing of two novelists and polemicists, the right-wing Robert Brasillach and the radical socialist André Chamson, which shows how and why their respective attitudes to Germany switched differentially during the 1930s, between antagonism and the desire for conciliation and cooperation. England is the focus for Gilbert Millat, who traces the contradictions in the career of Robert Briffault, a British national with a French diplomat father, who during his lifetime switched from vituperative critique of the British establishment and aristocracy, levelled in the name of justice for the working classes, to (selective) support for the ethics and politics of Vichy. An outspoken Anglophile until the mid-1930s, and thereafter a virulent Anglophobe, this "radical outsider" devoted the second part of his writing career to the indictment of the "English myth," on which he blamed the collapse of Western culture. Jean-Christophe Murat examines Cyril Connolly's accounts in *Horizon* of France and French culture, between 1939 and 1949, showing its connections to an – at best – ambivalent political stance, moving between commitment and "disengagement," and ending in Connolly's "Comment" in the July 1947 number describing a change in editorial policy, "expressed in our belief that the honeymoon between literature and action, once so promising, is over."

The collection closes with two complementary studies of the implications of commitment in this period, one perceived in its institutional implications, and one seen from the perspective of a writer concerned primarily with the aesthetic demands of his work. Gisèle Sapiro's study of the post-Liberation Purge Trials in France describes the consequences for individuals of choosing the wrong side in the ideological struggle, but also brings out the wider implications of the State's settling of the score with its writers. The strategies of counsel for the prosecution and defence, Sapiro demonstrates, undermined the concept of the responsibility of the intellectual, just as Resistance writers such as Sartre were reasserting commitment and responsibility to form a new paradigm of engaged literature. David Walker's chapter gives a detailed account of André Gide's negotiations in the 1930s with the issue of commitment in general, and the Soviet Union and Communism in particular. In his diaries, essays, and fictions, Gide is shown responding to the challenges of events, seizing initiatives, engaging in lengthy self-examination, reviewing the complex interactions of political, social and ethical issues, assessing the balance between submission to political imperatives and the critical spirit ("l'esprit critique"), but most of all, establishing the connection of all these with his creative strategies as a writer. Between the process of writing and the impulse to political action, Walker identifies the emergence of a shadowy terrain, where the successful completion of a text can leave the writer "purged" of a political passion which, unresolved, would have taken him into engagement with the maelstrom of history.

Whirligig or whirlwind, as these chapters show, the 1930s and what came after them saw a conflict of ideologies that divided Europe with an intensity unequalled since the Enlightenment. The Great War had been, in essence, the titanic clash of empires over which national adjective would dominate, at victory, the same unchanged political, social and cultural status quo ante. By contrast, the coming war, the 'Thirties writers realised, would dispute the very nature of the civilisation that would emerge from the maelstrom – whether, indeed, it would still be civilisation at all, rather than some form of totalitarian barbarism of the Left or Right. For these writers, the same principles were at issue as during the Enlightenment: intellectual freedom, social justice, and the dignity – and security – of human lives. The challenges were the same: to identify bigotry and oppression in its new contexts, to speak out against them, and to find the new forms of expression that could carry home the urgency of the challenge. The dangers and temptations, as for many of these writers, was to surrender to the short-cuts of uncritical commitment and unthinking partisanship, defending, as it was often seen, the bad against the worse. For that short, heady period, responsibility to letters and politics were identified. Writing, years later, in her autobiography, and regretting its passing, the London

President of wartime PEN, Storm Jameson, summed it all up: “Nothing,” she wrote, “Nothing is more ridiculous than a writer, an animal whose response to disaster is a phrase.”²

Notes

- 1 These chapters are revised versions of papers delivered at the conference *Right Left Right: Revolving Commitment: France and Britain: 1929–1950*, held in the University of Birmingham, 20–21 April 2006, and organised by Jennifer Birkett for the Department of French, in collaboration with Martyn Cornick (French, Birmingham), Angela Kershaw (School of Languages and Social Sciences, Aston University) and Stan Smith (English Section, School of Arts and Humanities, Nottingham Trent University). The Coordinating Committee would like to thank the Institut Français of the United Kingdom and the University of Birmingham for their generous sponsorship and support.
- 2 Margaret Storm Jameson, *Journey from the North*. Vol. II. London: Virago Press, p. 142. First published London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1969.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM “CLASS AGAINST CLASS” TO THE HITLER-STALIN PACT: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE UNWAVERING LINE

Stan Smith

1939–1941: It’s Probably All Right Really

Rose Macaulay’s 1940 novel *And No Man’s Wit* tells the story of a middle-class English family searching in the immediate post-bellum turmoil of Franco’s Spain for a son who has disappeared while serving with the International Brigade.¹ On a day dated precisely as 24 August 1939, the Marlowe family and their Spanish host, a young right-wing aristocrat who despises Franco as a vulgar upstart, hear the first incredible news of the Treaty of Non-aggression signed in Moscow between the Soviet and German Foreign Ministers, known variously as the Ribbentrop-Molotov, Nazi-Soviet or Hitler-Stalin Pact. The Marlowes’ younger son, Hugh, a well-meaning “University communist,” tries to dismiss the report as Fascist propaganda and “obvious nonsense,” and, when this fails, to rationalise the treaty as astute diplomacy by Stalin because the western democracies had let him down in not opposing the Nazi menace. Stalin, he says, “‘had to turn to Germany instead,’” and “‘you can’t well blame him. Besides, he probably has some scheme of getting Hitler on a string; it’s probably all right really.’”

The Marqués, by contrast, finds some personal amusement from his own point of view in the discomfiture which his fellow-countrymen will suffer when they learn of this “‘alliance of our gallant saviours with the Red Devil.’” Hugh himself, “red with surprise and dismay,” has turned “moody and disagreeable,” the Marqués suggests, because the coming war will not now be “‘the anti-Fascist war, but the imperialist, capitalist war against democracy.’” When asked how he makes that out, the Marqués is brutally to the point: “‘M. Stalin has just told him so [...] by siding with your intended foes’” (314–16).

For Hugh “‘It’s the wrong war’” because it overturns all his generation’s ideologically charged narratives. Making an unexpected appearance at the end of the novel, his missing brother Guy opines that Hugh has always been “‘Russia-mad [...]’. He’s been shouting for the anti-Nazi war ever since he

could shout for anything but his bottle, and now it's come he's ratted because his dear Joe Stalin's on the wrong side.” By contrast, the response of this recent combatant in the anti-Nazi struggle parallels the Spanish aristocrat's amusement, thinking it interesting to watch British Tories “arranging with their patriotism to hate Hitler and his gang. It's the wrong war for them too; they'd have liked it to be against Russia” (372–4).

Claud Cockburn, at that time a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, recalled of this moment in his 1958 memoirs, *Crossing the Line*, that, while “that ‘hammer’ Molotov and champagne merchant Ribbentrop were together in Moscow, arranging to be friends for evermore,” in London, “Witty, encouraging and inaccurate to the last,” a British Foreign Office spokesman had observed that now, “All the Isms are Wasms” (39). In September 1939, the British Communist Party found itself in a similar dilemma to Hugh Marlowe. For a month it continued to campaign for “Peace Blocs” to defend democracy against fascism. “How to win the War,” a pamphlet written by Harry Pollitt, the Party's General Secretary, published two weeks after Chamberlain's declaration of war, described it as “a just war which will be supported by the whole working class and all friends of democracy” (King and Matthews; and see the trenchant review of their book by Fryer). Pollitt was shortly obliged to resign. Thereafter the Party propagated the orthodox line that this was an inter-imperialist war, in which “the struggle of the British people against the Chamberlains and the Churchills” was “the best help to the struggle of the Germans against Hitler.” (It continued however to call in Popular Front terms for a “People's Government” and a “People's Peace.”) On 24 August 1940, the *Daily Worker* even celebrated the anniversary of the Pact by reproducing an article from *Izvestia* that translated opportunism into the new historical orthodoxy:

For a number of months before the Pact Britain and France made persistent attempts to harness the Soviet Union in their chariot, to use the Soviet Union for their imperialist aims. Above all they strove to provoke armed conflict between the USSR and Germany [...]. The good neighbourly and friendly relations between the Soviet Union and Germany was not based on fortuitous considerations of a transient nature, but on the fundamental State interests of both the USSR and Germany. This truth has long been understood in the USSR and Germany.

Proletarian patriotism only returned to the British Communist Party after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 and the signing, on 12 July, of an Anglo-Soviet Mutual Aid Pact. Pollitt was now reinstated as General Secretary, and the “imperialist war” reverted to being a war to defend democracy, requiring a “fight for a united national front” to give “the most

whole-hearted support to the Churchill government in every measure it adopts." In a variation on a familiar formula, opponents of the war were now dubbed "fascists in disguise."²

Harold Laski's explanation of Stalin's motives in *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* in 1942–1943 demonstrates how sections of the British intellectual Left were able to recuperate their position once the Soviet Union was safely in the "democratic" camp, courtesy of Operation Barbarossa. Chamberlain's appeasement policy, Laski wrote,

convinced the Soviet Union that Great Britain no longer had the will to resist aggression. The outcome [...] was the conclusion of a non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union. The one thing that might have deterred Hitler from risking a war for European domination was the fear of being attacked on two fronts; the agreement with the Soviet Union removed this fear. (20–21)

According to Laski, the reason Britain "deliberately cold-shouldered the Soviet Union" in the five years from 1934 lay in the psychology of Chamberlain's class:

Their whole outlook on life was built upon hatred of its philosophy. They may well have regretted the more brutal habits of Hitler and Mussolini. But the Fascist dictators had left untouched the class-structure of their societies. To risk their overthrow [...] was to risk revolutionary upheaval, perhaps Communist upheaval, in Italy and Germany. If peace was a major objective of Mr Chamberlain, so, also, was the avoidance of any policy which might further the coming of socialism. (22–3)

Certainly, as late as April 1939, the Soviet Union had suggested a mutual defence pact with Britain. But Laski, the co-founder of the Left Book Club and future General Secretary of the Labour Party in 1945–1946, is being somewhat disingenuous. If Chamberlain's foreign policy aimed to set the totalitarians of Left and Right against each other, Stalin's strategy equally was that of fomenting inter-imperialist conflict, between Germany and the capitalist democracies, as Laski himself acknowledges, observing that fear of "attack from some alliance of capitalist states" meant that Soviet policy "was built upon the assumption that its safety lay in the division of its enemies" (26–7). The argument that Stalin "made terms with Hitler which assured it, at least temporarily, of neutrality from that quarter" (27) is certainly correct. But it hardly explains why, when the German *Blitzkrieg* was released in 1941, Stalin greeted it with disbelief and military unpreparedness. The fear of "some patched-up peace in western Europe," Laski argued, "drove Stalin and his associates into exactly that cynical policy of brute force they had, for long years, been foremost in denouncing" (29).

“[T]he policy of Stalin, between the Finnish attack and Hitler’s assault on Russia, went a long way towards dividing and confusing working class opinion in the democracies,” he continued, a policy not “defensible to any save those for whom all Soviet action has the character of a religious dogma it is unnecessary to defend,” “accompanied by a vituperative hypocrisy which [...] before the Russo-German treaty [...] Stalin would have been the first to condemn in phrases that would have been obediently echoed by Communist parties all over the world” (29).³

When I was young, exponents of that “religious dogma” still deployed the formula of “the unwavering line” to assert the consistency and continuity of Communist policy in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, when I recently typed in the phrase on Google, with a variety of link words such as “Communism” or “Stalin,” I could find only one precise instance of this specific usage. The phrase appears to have been airbrushed from (at least electronic) history. The exception occurs, not unexpectedly, in an article on the website of “The Istitutes [sic] Of Marxist-Leninist Studes [sic], at the CC Of The PLA, Tirana 1980,” ostensibly from Enver Hoxha’s *Memoirs*, about the visit of Albanian delegates to Moscow at the time of Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in February 1956. It reports on “The struggle of the delegates of the Party of Labour of Albania, the representatives of the Communist Party of China and of some other party” (charmingly, they don’t appear to have made note of which) against “the revisionist theses” of the Khrushchevites, proclaiming that “In Moscow we were to expound the unwavering line of our Party, and display the ideological and political maturity and the rare revolutionary courage which has characterized our Party throughout its whole heroic existence.” (“Unwavering,” qualifying such nouns as “fight” and “stand,” recurs through all three parts of these *Memoirs*.) There was one other half-apposite instance of the formula, in what is clearly a nostalgic and possibly ironic harking back to earlier days. This was in a *Moscow Times* report by Natalia Yefimova about the re-election to office, in 2003, of “A controversial former chief judge of the Constitutional Court, who quit in 1993 after unsuccessfully opposing President Boris Yeltsin in his violent stand-off with rebellious lawmakers.” “The mild-mannered but fiery-eyed Zorkin,” we are told, affirmed the court’s continued resolution to keep its nose out of politics: “This will be the court’s unwavering line. Nobody should bother hoping that we can be pulled to the left or the right or to the political center. We are in the legal center [...]. ‘History never repeats itself.’”

Steering an unwavering line between Left and Right deviations in the name of History was an essential part of Comintern rhetoric during the interwar years, through all its policy contortions. John Lehmann, editor of *New Writing*

and a dedicated fellow-traveller with strong Moscow connections in the 1930s, writing on “The Influence of Spain” in a 1939 pamphlet originally published in Moscow, preserves a faint trace of this rhetoric when he speaks of those who discovered in Spain, for all their “original enthusiasm,” that adjusting to “the realities of modern warfare and modern political struggle was a much more complex and painful process than was generally admitted, while their loyalty to the anti-fascist cause never wavered” (20).

But let me go back to the beginning.

1929–33: Someone Near the Border of Sanity

I have started this story at the end, because it is only in retrospect that the shifts and accommodations of the British literary Left in the 1930s can fully be understood. There is, though, some danger in hindsight as foresight, as is exemplified by such Cold War recantations as those of Stephen Spender, Gide and Silone in the volume edited in 1950 by that former Comintern agent, Arthur Koestler, *The God that Failed*, and we should always bear in mind that these writers lacked the benefit we have of knowing what happened next.

In the decade before the Hitler-Stalin pact, there were two key phases to Comintern policy. The first was that of the so-called “Third Period” strategy, which ran from 1928 until Hitler’s accession to power in 1933 required a major ideological revision. This gave rise, some time in 1934–1935, to the policy officially announced at the Comintern’s Seventh Congress in 1935 as that of the “United Front Against Fascism,” more commonly known as the “Popular Front.”

The “Third Period” strategy was adopted by the Communist International at its Sixth Congress in 1928, following the failure of its China policy, which had culminated in the disastrous 1927 Shanghai Uprising. André Malraux’s fictionalisation of this, in *La Condition Humaine*, published in 1933, with an English translation in 1934 under the title *Storm in Shanghai*, is probably the outstanding literary representation of “Third Period” ideology. This ultra-left policy argued that capitalism was now entering its third and final period, following the ascendancy challenged by the revolutions in the wake of the Great War and its temporary stabilisation after 1921. National Communist parties were now called on to denounce all other worker and socialist organisations as “false lefts,” and reject collaboration with them or participation in all “United Front” strategies. A cult of armed insurrection was favoured, irrespective of local circumstances, logistical capacity, or the likelihood of success. “Class

against class” was the slogan adopted for this phase of the struggle. The French Communist Party in 1932, for example, declared that

The tactic of class against class [...] tested in France during four years of economic or political struggles will be firmly applied by the whole of the Party during the course of this electoral campaign. The responsible organisms of the Party, from the cells up to the Political Bureau, will be on the alert so that there nowhere re-occur the defections and compromises with the Socialist, or even the Radical, Party, as occurred in certain regions in 1928 [...].

During its electoral campaign our Party must be on the alert so as not to fall into the error where right opportunism allies itself with the most narrow-minded sectarianism [...]. It must once again be repeated that far from being a sectarian tactic, our tactic of class against class, which prohibits any electoral bloc in any form with the Socialist Party, supposes and signifies a united front at the base with Socialist workers [...].

The objective current conditions are very favorable for convincing Socialist workers to fight in common with their Communist brothers against the bourgeoisie and its principal supporter, the Socialist Party [...]. The objective situation has never before so pushed the Socialist chiefs down the openly reactionary path at the same time as it pushes the Socialist workers onto the path of revolutionary struggle. This is the material, objective basis for our entire tactic of a class against class united front. (French Communist Party)

“United front at the base,” or “from below,” was contrasted with the allegedly “revisionist” and “opportunist” imposture of the “united front from above,” at the level of party leaderships. Orthodoxy lay in maintaining this unwavering line between “right opportunism” and left “sectarianism.”

There was a certain rationality to such a strategy at a time of apparently terminal capitalist collapse. The Wall Street Crash in 1929, and the economic and political crisis it generated for social-democratic parties – many, as in Britain and Germany, then in government – gave some credibility to the apocalyptic rhetoric, while the example of Ramsay MacDonald, who in August 1931, faced by a bankers’ ramp, led his Labour government into a coalition with Baldwin’s Tories, seemed to confirm the worst representations of social-democrat behaviour.

The “Third Period” policy explains many of the apparent political confusions in W. H. Auden’s strange early text, *The Orators: An English Study*, first published in 1932 and again, in revised form, in 1934. To T. S. Eliot, early in 1932, Auden had explained that “The central theme is a revolutionary hero” (Carpenter, 122), but he confided to a reader shortly after publication that the book was “far too obscure and equivocal. It is meant to be a critique of the fascist outlook, but from its reception among some of my contemporaries, and

on rereading it myself, I see that it can, most of it, be interpreted as a favourable exposition" (Carpenter, 129–30). Its obscure narrative imagines a military-style insurrection beginning in a public school, and led by a T. E. Lawrence-like charismatic Leader, the Airman. One of its Odes envisages the arrival of this leader, like Lenin, in a special train, but he also, like Mussolini, leads a march on the capital.

In his Foreword to a revised edition in 1966, Auden conceded that "My name on the title page seems a pseudonym for someone else, someone talented but near the border of sanity, who might well, in a year or two, become a Nazi." But he went on to argue that "it is precisely the schoolboy atmosphere and diction which act as a moral criticism of the rather ugly emotions and ideas they are employed to express," and his own "juvenile" discourse, he says, was intended to "make it impossible to take them seriously." "In one of the Odes, I express all the sentiments with which his followers hailed the advent of Hitler," he confessed, but he hoped this was rendered innocuous "by the fact that the Führer so hailed is a new-born baby and the son of a friend" (in fact, of Rex Warner, at that point also a Communist fellow-traveller).

Auden's allusion to Wyndham Lewis in this 1966 apologia suggests that there are other undercurrents to the original text, in particular, the favourable impression of the future dictator Lewis gave in his 1931 monograph, *Hitler*. For Auden in 1932, as for Lewis the previous year, Hitler was still an iconoclastic rebel, inveighing against the dilatory and corrupt Social Democratic regime of the Weimar Republic, in hock to capitalist interests. He could be seen, therefore, as a wrong-headed but sympathetic figure. But the putschism of *The Orators* also has its Third Period analogies.

In the immediate pre-Hitler Berlin that Auden knew well, there had been much talk and some practice in left-wing circles of a "Red-Brown" coalition against the supposed common enemy, the Social Democrats. In line with the policy of winning all proletarian militants at the base, irrespective of political alignment, KPD leaders had sometimes condoned practical and tactical collaboration at street level between Communists and Nazis, in demonstrations, strikes and similar insurrectionary activities, against the "social fascism" allegedly represented by the Weimar Republic's ruling SPD. Eric Hobsbawm, in a chapter of his autobiography entitled "Berlin: Brown and Red" (62–77), recalls the illusions of an "ultra-sectarian Party line" which, in "the extremes of the 'class against class' policy," could countenance a "temporary common front between red and brown in the dying weeks of the Republic," in a transport strike in which the Communist RGO (Red Union Opposition) collaborated with the Nazi workers' organisations, observing, by way of explanation, "Nazis and communists were parties of the young, if only because young men are far

from repelled by the politics of action, loyalty and an extremism untainted by the low, dishonest compromises of those who think of politics as the art of the possible” (69–71). (His echo of Auden’s famous indictment, in “September 1 1939,” of “a low, dishonest decade” is slyly to the point.) Christopher Isherwood in *Christopher and his Kind* in 1977 recalled writing to Stephen Spender on 3 November 1932 of that same strike, in which, he said, “Nazis and Communists are assisting each other on the strike pickets.” His retrospect explains to the reader that “The Nazis had forced themselves into this uneasy temporary alliance because they couldn’t let the Communists take credit for being the sole supporters of the striking transport-workers, just before an election. The strike resulted in widespread public violence against strike-breakers and others” such as that he described in *Goodbye to Berlin* (89). What Isherwood doesn’t add is the Communist motive for such collaboration: fostering violent agitation in such a way that divisions of Left and Right at the base might give way to the solidarity of insurrection. July and August 1931 had already seen collaboration between the KPD and the National Socialists to oust the Social Democratic-led Prussian state government in the notorious “Red-Brown Referendum” (which the KPD preferred to call simply the “Red Referendum”).

Similar instances can be multiplied throughout Europe in this period. On 6 February 1934, in the wake of the Stavisky corruption scandal, several thousand armed fascists and Royalists marched on the French Parliament building. Members of the ARC, the Communist ex-servicemen’s organisation, marched alongside the extreme right *Croix de Feu*. For several days Paris was the scene of riots and street fighting. The Communist newspaper *L’Humanité* seemed to suggest at first that any onslaught on a bourgeois parliament should be supported from whatever quarter it came. Any repression it induced would simply prove the secretly fascist nature of the government. On the evening of the 6th, Maurice Thorez refused a proposal from the Social Democrats for collective working-class mobilisation against the prospect of a fascist coup. Under increasing pressure of events, the PCF eventually called for a joint demonstration on 9 February. The PCF and the French Socialist Party were not formally to sign their “Unity in Action Pact” until July 1934 – the first indication that the “Third Period” strategy was on its way out.

The Orators’ birthday Ode for John Warner also reflects Third Period strategies. Auden’s biographer Humphrey Carpenter misread the book’s stance when he claimed that the Ode takes a “neutral and mocking attitude to politics,” attacking both “Mosley’s extreme right-wingers” and the ILP (which he incorrectly describes as “a breakaway group from the main Labour movement” – their secession came later), and concluded that “Auden as yet made no distinctions; all politics appeared equally absurd to him” (134).

Rather, in prioritising direct insurrectionary action, the Ode lumps together the Labour Party rump that survived Ramsay MacDonald’s defection, the left-wing Independent Labour Party, and Mosley’s “New Party,” the political complexion of which in 1931–1932 was still ambivalently on the left, as simply varieties of a generic “social fascism.” Despising all these “false lefts” equally, *The Orators* opportunistically grafted on to Auden’s Sorelian anarchism the *idées reçues* of orthodox Stalinism he would have heard from Gabriel Carritt, the dedicatee of the book’s second Ode, and an intimate of the inner circles of the CPGB, at whose Pembrokeshire home, the book records, Auden was staying, in “The week the Labour Cabinet resigned.” *The Orators*, that is, has a precise political signature.

1933–36: Talking Excitedly

Auden’s poem later called “1929,” written probably between late 1929 and early 1930, tells of workers’ street demonstrations and running battles with the police in Berlin, “Shooting and barricade in street,” “a friend / Talking excitedly of final war / Of proletariat against police,” and ends with a vision of revolutionary apocalypse in October 1929, the month of the Wall Street Crash (*Poems*, 61–6). Critics have nevertheless consistently sought to dissociate its chiliarism from any immediate political application. It is more difficult to deny the political implications of the poem first published as “A Communist to Others” in *The Twentieth Century* in September 1932, though Auden’s later repudiation of this embarrassing text has been generally approved. Its publishing history tracks the decisive shift in Comintern policy that took place during the course of 1934. Julian Symons, reading it when it first appeared, thought its intention “straightforward: an appeal to join the Party. We never doubted that the poet was himself a Party member” (Bucknell and Jenkins, 178; see also Smith, in Bucknell and Jenkins, 186–91). At this stage, the poem is indeed a straightforward piece of “Third Period” recruitment literature. The “Others” it addresses are, to begin with, those non-Communist workers who have to be persuaded that it is in their “objective” interests to join with the Communists. But it also addresses another “Other,” one Auden is much happier to confront, gloatingly informing the bourgeoisie that the future is “not in love with you at all,” but with us, the Communists. It goes on to address an even more insidious enemy, what the poem calls “That army intellectual / Of every kind of liberal / Smarmy with friendship but of all / There are none falsier.” Such petty-bourgeois “false lefts” will “fade away like morning dew” once the revolution begins in earnest, exposed as what the original title of his

1934 essay on his old school called “The Liberal Fascist,” published under the title “Honour” in Graham Greene’s collection *The Old School* in 1934. There is little doubt about Auden’s hard-line leftism at the time he was writing these poems. Harold Nicolson, who had been a minister in MacDonald’s cabinet, and had quit the Labour Party with Oswald Mosley and John Strachey to found the “New Party,” recorded in his diary for 4 August 1933 a very similar indictment, in another poem of Auden’s:

Wystan Auden read us some of his new poem in the evening [...]. It is not so much a defence of communism as an attack upon all the ideas of comfort and complacency which will make communism difficult to achieve in this country. It interests me particularly as showing, at last, that I belong to an older generation. I follow Auden in his derision of patriotism, class distinctions, comfort, and all the ineptitudes of the middle-classes. But when he also derides the other soft little harmless things which make my life comfortable, I feel a chill autumn wind. I feel that were I a communist the type of person whom I should most wish to attack would not be the millionaire or the imperialist, but the soft, reasonable, tolerant, secure, self-satisfied intellectuals like Vita and myself. A man like Auden with his fierce repudiation of half-way houses and his gentle integrity makes one feel terribly discontented with one’s own smug successfulness. I go to bed feeling terrible Edwardian and back-number, and yet, thank God, delighted that people like Wystan Auden should actually exist. (153)⁴

By the time “A Communist to Others” came to be collected in *Look, Stranger!* in 1936, Auden had revised it considerably, dropping the combatively sectarian title, deleting several stanzas, and substituting, for the “Comrades” of the opening address, the less contentious “Brothers.” These revisions are usually interpreted as evidence that he was already backing away from Communist commitment (though he had yet to go to Spain). There is an alternative explanation. The revisions certainly soften the aggressively militant tone of the original, but with a specific political purpose in mind. “Comrades” spoke only to the converted, whereas the ecumenical “Brothers” opens out to the wider Labour and trade union movement, where it was the customary mode of fraternal address, with Christian rather than explicitly Communist associations. What we see in these changes is the emergence in poetry of the political line associated with the Popular Front strategy initiated by the Comintern at its Seventh Congress in 1935.

There is little sign of a retreat from Communist commitment anywhere in the volume. Rather, in a book which merges homo-eroticism with spilt Christianity, “communism” masquerades under the buzz word of universal “love” (the “Charity” of Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians). The book is all atremble with the expectation of apocalypse, and of renewal the other side of catastrophe. Its

"Prologue" evokes some "possible dream" that, in Leninist terms, will "lay on our talk and kindness / Its military silence, its surgeon's idea of pain," emerging "out of the Future into actual [and capitalised] History." Its second poem, "Out on the lawn," rebukes "Our metaphysical distress" and liberal "kindness to ten persons" in the name of "The gathering multitudes outside / Whose glances hunger weakens," and welcomes the "crumpling flood" of revolution that will overwhelm this bourgeois complacency. The third poem invokes an anonymous Lenin's description of the Communist militant's preparedness "To hunger, work illegally, / And be anonymous." In "The chimneys are smoking," the "political orator" (originally "Communist orator") lands at the pier to proselytise. "Here on the cropped grass" concludes in Marxist terms that "men are changed by what they do," while "August for the people," addressed to Isherwood, speaks of "this hour of crisis and dismay" which will "Make action urgent and its nature clear," as "all sway forward on the dangerous flood / Of history." The volume's "Epilogue" invokes Lenin again anonymously as "the neat man / To their east who ordered Gorki [the city, that is] to be electrified" as the figure of the future's "really better / World," echoing Lenin's formula that "Communism equals soviets plus electricity." Auden is not retreating from Communism here. He is simply converting the tone of his polemic into a more inviting, even seductive idea of Communism, as did that symptomatic volume of the Popular Front to which he, John Cornford and many other left-leaning intellectuals had contributed in 1935, *Christianity and the Social Revolution*, published by the fellow-travelling Victor Gollancz and edited by the Christian Communist John Lewis.

The most revealing instance of the way *Look, Stranger!* toes the Party line can be found in what is now an almost completely opaque allusion in "Out on the lawn." In later years the poem was severely edited, shortened and rewritten by Auden to become an instance of his first inklings of a return to Christian communion, a cover story insistently explicated in his 1964 Introduction to Anne Fremantle's book *The Protestant Mystics* (Auden 1974, 69–70). In its initial form, however, it is clearly a *political* revelation that the poem affirms. Exactly halfway through the original version, it speaks guiltily of "we / Whom hunger cannot move," enduring self-indulgently only "The tyrannies of love," who "do not care to know / Where Poland draws her Eastern bow, / What violence is done." Most readers have lazily conflated this allusion with Hitler's invasion of Poland six years later, which provided the impulse for the subsequently suppressed "September 1, 1939." In this scenario, this is "brave little Poland," subjected to Nazi tyranny. But in June 1933, when "Out on the lawn" was written, Hitler had only just come to power, an electoral success followed a day later, on March 6, by Polish occupation of the "free" but largely German

city of Danzig (Gdansk). Indeed, despite this, relations between Poland and Germany initially improved so much after Hitler's accession to power that on 26 January 1934 the two countries signed a mutual non-aggression Pact scheduled to last for ten years (King-Hall, 205–6; 712–14). Poland was itself seen by most people on the Left at the time as a semi-fascist regime, ruled by General Josef Pilsudski, from 1926 until his death in 1935 de facto dictator of the state resurrected from the ruin of empires by the Treaty of Versailles. Read properly, "Out on the lawn" makes it clear that it is Poland that is the aggressor, Poland which does the violence. This is a real tyranny, in contrast to those "tyrannies of love" and the merely "metaphysical distress" suffered by the well-meaning English liberal. That drawing of an "Eastern bow" – one, that is, pointing towards the Soviet Ukraine – is the key. The conundrum is illuminated by a passing reference in John Cornford's essay "The Struggle for Power in Western Europe," published in *Cambridge Left* in Spring 1934:

Fascism exploits the Nationalist feelings of the petty bourgeoisie to divert their hostility towards the existing regime by whipping up a chauvinist frenzy against some foreign scapegoat – in Germany, the Jews; in Poland the Ukrainian minority. (Galassi, 64)

The ultra-nationalist Polish state instigated, during 1932–1934, a series of brutal assaults on the predominantly Ukrainian civilian population of Galicia, in eastern Poland, allegedly in reprisal for anti-Polish terrorist activities by the secessionist "Ukrainian National Army." Whatever the rights and wrongs of this conflict, Soviet *Realpolitik* in this period cynically and self-interestedly encouraged such secessionist movements among Poland's Ukrainian minority. Auden's poem evokes what his left-wing readers would have immediately recognised as a cause célèbre of Communist propaganda. That Stalin was at the time himself responsible for massive repression and famine in the Ukraine is an irony more apparent in hindsight than it was to fellow-travellers of Auden's and Cornford's day.

Poem 21 in *Look, Stranger!*, later called "A Bride in the 30s," written in November 1934, is perhaps the most interesting illustration of this volume's ideological transition from Third Period to Popular Front mindsets. The recollection of a trip to central Europe, including Nazi Germany, in the summer of 1934, the poem deploys a classic image from the decade:

Ten thousand of the desperate marching by
Five feet, six feet, seven feet high:
Hitler and Mussolini in their wooing poses
Churchill acknowledging the voters' greeting

Roosevelt at the microphone, Van der Lubbe laughing
And our first meeting.

It goes on to construct a textbook Audenesque convergence of personal and political, speaking of:

The voice of love saying lightly, brightly –
"Be Lubbe, Be Hitler, but be my good
Daily, nightly."

When the poem was written, Comintern policy was volatile and uncertain, in transition between Third Period and Popular Front strategies. By the time *Look, Stranger!* appeared in 1936, the Popular Front rationale had been formally in operation for nearly two years. This explains, I'd suggest, the ambiguity of a list which includes Hitler, Mussolini, Churchill and Roosevelt. With hindsight, we think of the latter two names as on the side of liberal democracy, and therefore as necessary antagonists of the first two. In the Third Period rhetoric, however, they had been reviled as prospective fascists. The writing of Auden's poem is exactly contemporary with, for example, Fenner Brockway's book, *Will Roosevelt Succeed? A Study of Fascist Tendencies in America* (1934). The poem leaves astutely unclear precisely what political complexion it gives to the Anglo-American politicians: are they with us, or against us? Stalin's name, though, is significantly absent from this list of dictators and demagogues, as is, perhaps more interestingly, that of the Bulgarian Communist Georgi Dimitrov, jointly charged at the Leipzig show trial with the Dutch anarchist Marinus van der Lubbe with burning down the Reichstag. Van der Lubbe was executed by the Nazis, while an orchestrated international outcry ensured Dimitrov's acquittal.

At the time, the name of Van der Lubbe was inextricably linked with that of Dimitrov, so that one would inevitably have called up the other to any contemporary reader. As Claud Cockburn observed three decades later, in 1958:

Nothing prods and stimulates one's time-sense more healthily than the realization that some figure, some name which was a household word and played a major role in your own thinking and living for years, means precisely nothing to almost anyone more than about fifteen years younger than oneself. It is that way, I suppose, with Dimitrov.

In the blackness of 1933, with Hitler triumphant in Germany, the heroic figure of Dimitrov at the Reichstag Fire trial was a signal rocket, seeming to tell the world that the blackness had not after all triumphed wholly and for ever. He was the first man to show the dictators that, however big they were, a man with

an idea could still take the stuffing out of them. Dimitrov, in fact, symbolized not only the struggle against Fascism, but the struggle of the thoughtful and the civilized against the philistines. Millions of people who were not Communists, millions, even, of anti-Communists, were inspired and rallied by him. (145)

Perhaps Auden's omission was strategic, since the allusion to the tragicomic figure of Van der Lubbe, seen at the time as a buffoon or madman, almost inevitably carried with it a subliminal association with the heroic Communist icon of that Trial. This would be consistent with the poem's stress on the secrecy and duplicity by which "love" "through our private stuff must work / His public spirit," to "perform / The programme that we think of merit," as "Crooked to move as a moneybug or a cancer." "Programme," after all, is here a charged word, in an era of Soviet Five Year Programmes.⁵ But the word could also, given that verb "perform," be a theatrical usage, apposite to the ethos of the poem, in which the earnest and the histrionically self-dramatising jostle each other.

It was Dimitrov who in 1935, as General Secretary of the Communist International, proposed at its Seventh Congress, in a speech entitled "The Unity of the Working Class against Fascism," the programme of anti-fascist unity subsequently known as the "Popular Front." This policy went further than collaboration with the leadership of the previously reviled "social fascist" parties. It now involved collaboration across classes with what was henceforth called the "progressive" bourgeoisie. The foremost literary-critical expression of this programme is probably Georg Lukács's reaching out, in his 1936 study *The Historical Novel*, to what was now seen as the objectively "progressive" interpretation of history in the novels of the (subjectively) ultra-conservative Sir Walter Scott. Such a cross-class alliance required, as many on the Left both within and without the Communist International made clear, that a brake be imposed, in the interests of "anti-fascist" unity, on the radicalisation of working-class expectations. And indeed, the Communist-backed Popular Front governments elected in France and Spain in 1936 sought strenuously to suppress the proletarian insurrections, factory occupations and land expropriations which accompanied their victories. In Spain, the class accommodations required by Popular Front strategy opened up the major divide between the Moscow-backed Communists and the non-Stalinist Leftists of POUM, the Anarchists and other socialists, resolved only by the murderous Barcelona pogrom George Orwell records in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938).