Statement for the Literature/Sociology Conference on '1936' at Essex University, July 1978

EDWARD UPWARD

It may seem presumptuous of me, at a conference on the year 1936, to talk almost entirely about my own writings, and I'm afraid I have no excuse for this, other than that I know them better than those of any other nineteen thirties writer. I'd better say something at the start about my name, Edward Upward. The word "Upward" as a surname is somewhat uncommon, and its half-rhyming combination with the forename "Edward" helps to make it sound odd to some people, though not to me who am used to it. A recent book on contemporary fiction states that it is a pseudonym, and that my real name is Allen Chalmers. But in fact Edward Upward *is* my real name, and Allen Chalmers is a pseudonym, given to me by Christopher Isherwood, in his early autobiographical book, *Lions and Shadows*.

In the nineteen thirties I was thought of as being a member of a group of young left-wing writers, of whom the best known were W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis, Louis MacNeice and Rex Warner. There were considerable differences in style and outlook between these writers, but they had certain characteristics in common, characteristics which I shared. None of them was of working-class or petty-bourgeois origin. All of them were born into the middle class, or into the upper middle class. Auden's father was a doctor, a medical practitioner. So was mine, and I have a photograph, dated 1892, which shows them both in the same football team at Christ's College, Cambridge.

Christopher Isherwood came from a county family, and his father was an officer in the regular army, who was killed in the First World War. Day-Lewis and Rex Warner were sons of clergymen. Stephen Spender's father stood as a Liberal candidate for Parliament, and when he died he left Stephen a private income sufficient in the nineteen thirties to live on.

All these writers were educated at expensive so-called "public" boarding schools – except Spender, who was sent to a well-known London day school – and all of them had a university education at either Oxford or Cambridge. Stephen Spender, in his autobiography,

World Within World, says that the First World War knocked the ballroom floor from under middle class English life. People resembled dancers suspended in mid-air, yet miraculously able to pretend that they were still dancing. We were aware of a gulf, but not of any new values to replace old supports. He also says that his parents looked back to pre-war days as a golden age.

I think it's true that after the First World War and the Russian Revolution of 1917 the bourgeoisie never fully regained their former self-assurance and optimism. There was a feeling that the old beliefs and moral standards had been undermined, a feeling of hollowness which T. S. Eliot expressed during the nineteen twenties in his poems *The Hollow Men* and *The Waste Land*.

The young writers of the thirties grew up under the influence of Eliot's vision of a civilisation in decline. We did not like the look of the society in which we found ourselves, and we did not want to live the kind of lives that most of our elders wanted us to live. We regarded these elders as "the old gang", to use Auden's phrase. But we were slow to arrive at the idea that we ought to take part in political action of any kind. We were inclined to regard politics with distrust, because we saw it as something which "the old gang" engaged in; we saw it as humbug or worse. Some of us looked first to psychology for a solution of our problems. W. H. Auden, for instance, became an enthusiast for Homer Lane, whose doctrine was "There's only one sin: disobedience to our desires". Others of us looked for a solution to aestheticism. Imaginative writing became an end in itself, the supreme thing in life for us. I would say that Christopher Isherwood was one who took this view, and so was I.

A story called *The Railway Accident*, which I wrote at the beginning of 1928, when I was 24, is very much a story written for its own sake. I had no intention of publishing it. For one thing the language was in places too obscene for publication then, and in fact it wasn't published till 1948, in an expurgated version. It has been called surrealist – incorrectly, I think. I had not read any surrealist writings when I wrote it, and although the story is elaborately fantastic and violent and perverse, there is nothing dreamlike about the style, which parodies and mocks the mannered literary styles of such writers as Henry James, Proust, and Joyce – writers whom, however, I greatly admired.

I will read you part of the opening paragraph, in which the Proustian long sentence is mocked by being led into a very illogical kind

of psychological super subtlety. The opening scene is at a railway terminus, where Gunball, a middle-aged sportsman, is saying goodbye to Hearn, the "I" of the story, who is about to travel to the village of Mortmere. The paragraph begins with Gunball offering to buy Hearn a second cup of coffee from the refreshment vendor on the platform.

> "'One more.'
>
> 'Thanks no, really.'
>
> But Gunball had already signalled with a slow regardless movement of his forefinger to the girl wheeling a dumb-waiter on rubber tyres quietly through the tin wailing of milk-cans and the drawl of trolleys. I leant on the wood of the lowered carriage window, observing with the sharpened pleasure of an anticipated farewell the metropolitan morning striking down through risen straw specks, dust of horse dung, beneath the glass arch of the Terminus roof. A horse-drawn mail-van flickered red at the interstices of the platform barrier, there was frost in the air and I had, not intellectually but sensationally, a conviction of warmth which remembrance of the falsely tender coaching lithographs in Gunball's sitting-room would not have destroyed, since they would have been irrelevant to what seemed an impression quite unassociated with the past. Beyond the barrier a soldier in khaki carrying full marching kit was watching one of the horses. Another soldier had passed the ticket collector and had begun to walk up the platform. More were coming.
>
> 'What's the idea, I wonder?'
>
> 'Idea or no, the whole pack of them are getting on your train', said Gunball."

I will re-read one sentence: "A horse-drawn mail-van flickered red . . . ". Well, it almost seems to be saying something rational, but in fact it isn't. It gives a foretaste of the deliberate pseudo-logic and pseudo-realism which are increasingly evident as the story proceeds.

Christopher Isherwood has described this story as a parody of parody, a satire on satire, and as anarchic mockery of all literary values whatsoever.

There's one other passage from it I want to read. It describes the actual accident. There are two trains involved, and the narrator of the story is in a carriage in the first of these trains, together with a man named Gustave Shreeve, headmaster of Frisbald College, who has blackmailed one of his assistant masters into attempting to wreck the other train, in which a hated sexual rival of Shreeve's is expected to travel. However, something has gone wrong, and the train in which Shreeve himself and the narrator are travelling is the first to reach the points that have been tampered with, and is diverted along a disused sideline where it is derailed at speed. Just before the derailment, the narrator goes to look out of the carriage window. The train has entered a deep cutting. In the following passage, note that several of the sentences consist of one word only. This parodies the type of abbreviated sentences Joyce uses in Ulysses.

> "I had rammed down the sash, leant out. Like a canyon the cutting deepened among organ-pipe rocks towards the still distant mouth of a tunnel. The English Rifles were walking on the carriage roofs. Some had already reached the engine. Exceeding sixty miles an hour it visibly left the rails, jogging the foremost coaches through spraying wood from ploughed sleepers, mowing the reeds. A blinding jolt had us into the inverted rack, dazzled with glass showering like luminous fish, ricocheting between punching upholstery. Jump. The brakes savaged the wheels. Calvary. Mater. The roses. Vesperal. Burial at sea. Slowing down. Shreeve stood at the uncertain door. He jumped like a rat. Had jumped, falling softly, not stunned, not even bleeding, my spine uninjured, my eyes safe. Buried in reeds. Shreeve called, close by. On my knees I peered, saw the train entering the tunnel. Slowly. It had almost pulled up.
>
> 'Quick. Out of this.'
>
> An iron echo approached us. Clambering the lower rocks I turned. The express had taken the points. Booster-fitted, excessively rolling, the racing Mogul engine rounded the curve, bounded into the rear of the carriage we had left. Coaches mounted like viciously copulating bulls, telescoped like ventilator hatches. Nostril gaps in a tunnel

> clogged with wreckage instantly flamed. A faint jet of blood sprayed from a vacant window. Frog-sprawling bodies fumed in blazing reeds. The architrave of the tunnel crested with daffodils fell compact as hinged scenery. Tall rag-feathered birds with corrugated red wattles limped from holes among the rocks."

This description, of course, has no basis in my own experience. It is sheer invention. The whole plot of the story is highly fantastic. At the treasure hunt in the Mortmere rectory garden, to which Shreeve and the narrator are travelling, there is a duel with pea-pistols between Shreeve and his rival, an architect named Wherry. But Shreeve's pistol turns out to be a real revolver, and Wherry is gravely injured.

There is something amoral and heartless about the whole story, as I see it now. Perhaps it could be described as a product and a reflection of the post-war breakdown of bourgeois standards. My intention in writing it, however, was not to comment on life, but to invent a story which would seem as amazing and unusual as possible. Nevertheless, I was unable to take this kind of fantastic writing very seriously. I regarded it more or less as a game, as an exercise to keep me in practice, till I could write a serious story, embodying an emotional attitude – a philosophy if you like – which would be an answer to, and not just an evasion of, the problems I was encountering in my real, everyday life.

The story from which I am going to read a brief extract now attempts to give such an answer. It is called *The Colleagues*. The setting is a preparatory boarding school for boys between the ages of seven and fourteen, the sons of middle-class fee-paying parents. There are two contrasting main characters, both young masters at the school. One is an extroverted sporting type, Lloyd by name, who feels thoroughly at home in this kind of school; and the other a recently appointed man called Mitchell, an introverted and rather poetic type, who feels ill at ease with the whole system of education here. However, he can think of no way of revolting against it, and at the end of the story we see him finding a way of accepting it, a way which has resemblance to religious mysticism. You will note that the Joycean abbreviated sentence is still in evidence. Lloyd has just persuaded Mitchell to agree, very unwillingly, to help him with the school boy scout troop next day. Here are Mitchell's thoughts as he

stands in the yard, outside the school buildings:

> "I shall be here. Grinning at breakfast, amiable at lunch and supper, always agreeing. Imagining myself a spy of manners. Wholly scientific. Stopping without disgust to watch Lloyd punt a ball across the yard. Telling him I like cricket. Seriously discussing the sermon. I shall become less and less convinced that I dislike anything. I acknowledge his prestige. The enormous inescapable weight and dullness of his impersonal backing. The sanction of thousands of the dead. It would be futile to resent. No, I want to applaud. Lloyd had regathered the ball. He's perfectly aware that I'm watching. Receiving a long pass and holding it neatly he began to run. He swerved, sold the dummy, fended off a tackle, punted well over the head of the fullback. Knee up, rigid, a clean full punch with the instep. He sprang, he raced towards the tennis courts. Bucking, heavily agile with jerking shoulders. Baboon or antelope. Going all out, broad-backed in a tight sweater. How terrific. How electrically vile. He plunged, he touched down, stumbling among tree roots. It's a vision. I am palpably standing here. There are no other witnesses. If there were they would have nothing to report except that a young preparatory schoolmaster has kicked a football. I have seen a horror which no one else here would have been privileged to see. For an instant I must have been authentically insane. Bunyan saw mountains shining above the houses. I've had a hallucination. Probably voluntary. It's a reward. It's going to happen again. In the night. At lunch. Everywhere. An award of power. This is only the beginning. A genuinely religious delusion. I am very glad."

However, in actual experience I found that a para-religious acceptance of things as they are, was no more possible for me than evasion of them by means of fantasy. I reached a crisis, in which I was unable to continue writing. I was able to start again only after I had decided that writing must no longer be the most important thing in life for I me, and that I must put the struggle for Socialism first. This decision I embody in my story, or perhaps it would be more accurately called a

poetic prose piece, *Sunday*. It begins in the first person, goes on in the second person, and ends in the third person. This change of persons corresponds to the development in the attitude of the character whose thoughts make up the story, an office-worker who dreads returning to work on Monday. His thoughts begin on a neurotic and self-centred note, and end with his decision to contact the workers' movement, in other words, the local Communist Party, and to devote himself to a cause outside himself. Here are two extracts from the opening paragraph, in I which the neurotic state of the office-worker is established:

> "I am going back to lunch. There is no ambush, no one will ask me to show an entrance ticket, I have not tampered with the motor-mower, no butcher-boy has chalked my name on the basin of the fountain. This is a public path, no discrimination is made against persons not moving on a definite errand, against women without tennis shoes, men who aren't easily called Freddy by their colleagues. I have as much right to walk here as anyone. I am invited, everyone is invited, we are expected to stop and look at the mandarin ducks, to use the less direct path up the side of the valley, smell the lupins, poke groundsel through the wire meshes of the aviary."
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> "There will be no inquisition at the park gates, no one is curious about your face, it is quite unnecessary to cross the grass in order to avoid seeming to follow the women who happen to be walking in front of you. Probably no one here knows anyone else. And suppose someone who did know you came up to you and suddenly asked what you were doing, you could say quite naturally 'I am going for a walk' or 'I am looking at the ducks'. You wouldn't have to pretend that you were exercising a terrier or going to buy a Sunday newspaper. That's the advantage of a place like this in a large town. There's no need to suspect that people are watching you from behind window curtains and wondering what you are doing. If anyone looks at you, you can see that he is looking at you, and you know he thinks you are merely walking through the park. And suppose everyone here were actually staring at me, suppose I were dancing or wearing sensible clothes, I should probably feel

> rather exhilarated. But as it happens I shall not be accused of anything, there is no kind of danger, not the least need to want to escape like a cat under the laurel bushes. I can't even flatter myself that I'm ill."

As the office-worker continues his Sunday morning walk, his thoughts eventually reach the conclusion that he must stop trying to solve his problems in the mind alone, and must take action in the external world. The man who does not prefer suicide or madness to fighting, must join with the revolutionaries, who are out to destroy the more obvious material causes of suffering in the world. This is how the story ends:

> "He will go back to his lodgings for lunch. He will read the newspaper, but not for more than a quarter of an hour. He will look out of the window and see the black hats and rolled umbrellas, but he will no longer be paralysed by disgust or apprehension. He will go out into the street and walk down to the harbour. He will go to the small club behind the Geisha Café. He will ask whether there is a meeting tonight. At first he may be regarded with suspicion, even taken for a police spy. And quite naturally. He will have to prove himself, to prove that he isn't a mere neurotic, an untrustworthy freak. It will take time. But it is the only hope. He will at least have made a start."

My first novel, *Journey to the Border*, published in 1938, takes the same theme as *Sunday*, but treats it very differently. I tried to make use, in a new way, of the fantasy technique I had developed in *The Railway Accident*. In *Journey to the Border* the central character, who has a job as a tutor in the country house of a well-to-do landowner, Mr. Parkin by name, is aware of the futility and hypocrisy of the fairly comfortable life he leads, but he is convinced that any other job he might succeed in getting would be equally dishonest and subservient. Unable to find a real solution to his problem, he attempts to escape from it by living in his imagination. Outwardly he submits to his employer. Inwardly, he tries to console himself with day-dream fantasies. He unwillingly accompanies Mr. Parkin and Mr. Parkin's son, the boy who is the tutor's pupil, to a race-meeting. He would have liked to have the day on his own, free from the boy, and on the way to

the race-course in Mr. Parkin's car he succeeds in deliberately inducing in himself a derangement of the senses, so that his fantasies are translated into external-seeming hallucinations. He has no need of material aids such as drugs to achieve this derangement; he uses a very effective form of auto-hypnosis. He has a vision of the modern world, which he sees in terms of the race-course. The vision promises happiness at first, but ends in horror. Finally, he is able to de-hypnotise himself, and to recover his sanity. He renounces fantasy in favour of political action.

The passages I will read from *Journey to the Border* are part of the description of how the tutor, while he is sitting in the car, beside Stokes, the chauffeur, deliberately sets about trying to alter his consciousness of his surroundings. He begins by arguing with himself that the world has no reality outside the individual's thinking and feeling, and he goes on to argue that if thinking and feeling can be changed by an act of will, so can the impressions received by the senses of sight, hearing and touch.

> "Any opinion, any theory, was as good or as bad as another. Think of Mr. Parkin as a devil or a devil-worshipper or a hero – it didn't matter. Thinking was only an exercise, a weaving of decorations. You looked through the windscreen and saw something and thought 'beech hedges', and imagined they were brown, but you might as well think 'parrots', and imagine they were black. You looked and saw the miles of country and a river and you thought 'the North of England', but you might as well think 'Switzerland'. Hence the futility of all travel. Why go to Switzerland and say 'mountains' when you can just as easily say 'mountains' here and now? Why go anywhere, why *be* anywhere? You look through the windscreen now and you think – 'There is a river, there are corrugated iron roofs of farm buildings, there farther off is a mining town, there very far off a harbour, here the road reaches the top of a hill' – but all these names are only mental decorations foisted by you and other 'thinkers' upon a non-human world which, but for your interference, would have had no names.
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> The tutor must kill thinking and he must really kill feeling,

> which still lingered on in spite of his first attempt to kill it. Because if he killed thinking and feeling he would automatically destroy the world of his serfdom, the only knowable world, which after all was nothing more than an evil decoration created by thinking and feeling. He believed that he was beginning to succeed. He sat slack as an old sawdust-filled doll beside the rigid idol Stokes. Or didn't he believe he was succeeding? Was it just another pretence, a faintly interesting affectation of madness? But even if it was an affectation, that very affectation was a sign that he had become mentally queer. Yes, he was beginning to succeed. First the blurred landscape went grey, then it stopped moving, then it went white. Voices at the back of the car became thinner and thinner. Feeling persisted for a time, but at last Stokes dwindled from beside him, slowly, as though he had been withdrawn by the hand of a thoughtful chess-player. Feeling shrank inwards from the extremities of the tutor's body, left his hands and arms nerveless, his eyes unseeing, his ears deaf. Thinking moved outwards. Thinking moved in widening circles, getting slower and slower, vaguer and vaguer, like the movement in a cup of tea which has been stirred with a spoon. The violent vortex became smooth, the outer circles moved more and more sleepily."

But the tutor finds that he cannot kill thinking and feeling. Deep in the core of his consciousness, he is aware of them still, as a burning area of misery somewhere in the centre of his body, which becomes more and more intolerable, until he recognizes that unless he can get back to where he was before he started this experiment, he *will* go mad. He succeeds in getting back. Then he attempts not to kill thinking and feeling, but to change them, and also to change his seeing and hearing.

> "He would change his so-called surroundings, he would not only think and feel differently, he would see and touch and hear differently, as he wanted to, happily. Was that fantastic? He could only know after he had tried it. Better try it at once. Make a bold attempt, look at something, listen to something, see and hear what you really want to. Try. Try.

It was almost a success, seemed at first altogether a success. The landscape, seen through the windows of the car, had lengthened and broadened, become a tremendous panorama. It was like an infra-red photograph. The tutor had the impression that he could see at least fifty miles. And not only had details at a great distance become extraordinarily clear but colours also had become far more vivid. Emerald green and earth-red and ink-black and sea-blue. White insulators on telegraph poles and new copper wires gleamed along the coast road. Behind the town rose a wooden brewery tower and farther off up the coast double-wheeled pithead gear. A moving coal-conveyor crawled with rattling buckets to the top of a power station. A small lighthouse stood at the end of one of the stone arms of the harbour. Motor-coaches advanced along the coast road, leaving the town. A crowd of walkers extending over the whole visible length of the road, here scattered and there concentrated in groups, moved in the same direction. At the top of a wooded slope, not very distant now, the grandstand of the racecourse was visible. Far out from the coast a motor-driven fishing-boat showed ink-black on the mounting dead-blue sea. In the foreground a small ivy-grown church stood isolated among variously coloured rectilinear fields. The sky was quite cloudless. The racecourse at the top of the wooded slope appeared to be on a kind of tableland. The tutor noticed, to the right of the grandstand, a large marquee. Its sloping canvas roof was very white. Flags were flying from the roof. The lower part of the marquee, which did not receive the full light of the sun, was grey rather than white. But the roof itself was not so dazzling as the tutor had at first supposed. It seemed to grow dimmer as he looked at it. The sun remained as brilliant as before. The shape of the marquee was changing, was becoming less distinct against the sky. Finally, he was aware of two marquees – one large and beflagged and white, the other small and dull and grey. And the large, the original marquee, seemed to be imposed on the small one, like a superimposed photograph. But the large one grew fainter, became a mere bit of whited gauze,

hardly visible."

This first attempt to change his seeing fails. But he tries again, and comes nearer to success this time. He explains his first failure as having been due to insufficient faith.

> "But he had lacked faith. At the back of his mind he had been unable to believe that the new perception was anything more than a fake. Well, suppose it was a fake - wasn't the old perception just as much a fake, a foisting of human consciousness on to a non-human world? What he had to do was to substitute one fake, the more vital, the happier one, for the other, the habitual one. But could this be done by an act of the will, by mere wishing?
>
> He certainly wished hard enough. He looked again through the car window at the marquee on the tree-surrounded table-land. The gauze outline was still there. It was like a white reflection on the glass of the window, very faint. It was much nearer to him than the other, the grey and smaller marquee. But, as he looked, the larger marquee moved farther away from him, keeping the same size though now seeming outside the glass of the window. It was about half-way between the car and the top of the wooded slope. It was moving, approaching the smaller marquee. And as it moved it grew more distinct, more solid. And at the same time the smaller marquee began to fade. Yes, the smaller marquee was fading, but the tutor could not make it disappear. Behind the brilliance and the flags of the white marquee it showed small and grey, like a dingy tent seen through a luminous transparent screen. And the tutor was aware that he must not for an instant relax his effort to suppress this small grey remnant. If he did the new vision would fade to a bit of gauze. He must go on wishing the old vision away. But for how long would he be able to go on wishing? He would get tired in the end. Wishing was not enough. There would have to be some change greater than any change that could be brought about by the conscious will. The new vision would have to be independent of his will, would have to be there

whether he wished the old vision away or not, would have to be there even if he changed his mind and wished the old vision back."

"The tutor had time to look carefully at the steam-roller. He looked carefully because it reminded him of something. After his shock he saw it at first as something dangerous, but he soon realized that it was not a danger – it was a power. It was simple and bold and powerful, crested in front with a rampant brass unicorn, thumping with its pistons like a thumping heart. The echoing of its roller over the stones was like the hollow sound of skates on ice. It was bold with the gala boldness of engines stared at by children from a nursery window - big traction engines dragging gipsy caravans to a fair, engines with wire guards over their funnels and with funnels protruding through their long decorated roofs, engines with their long roofs supported by gilded pillars and with dynamos in front of their boilers for making lights on roundabouts in the evening. It was bold with a reminiscent boldness. It was bold with the naïve boldness of a child who sticks out his stomach and makes piston movements with his arms in imitation of a big locomotive. It was bold, too, with a maturer efficient boldness, with the boldness of its tall austere-looking driver. It was simple with a generous mechanical simplicity, with the simplicity of its whirling governor and of its ponderous flywheel, of its burnished steering-wheel, and of the wheel at the back for lowering and raising its steel road-breaking teeth. It was powerful with the chuffing indifferent power of a train carrying away a boy to a school which he hates and fears but which he knows nothing can save him from. It was powerful with the gay sun-glittering power of a motor-coach in which a middle-class young man sets out for an unfrequented part of the country where he thinks he is going to live the just life, like Socrates. It was powerful with a steaming sighing power, a power not of despair but of compassion and understanding, as though someone were saying gently to the tutor: 'Remember your past. Look how you have

> betrayed yourself, wasted yourself, you poor blunderer. How you have brought disaster upon yourself, trying to go your own way. But from now on you will go my way, will be iron, be new.' It was powerful, more powerful, far, far more powerful with the power of a great mountain which no apathy, no forgetfulness, no wishing can ever destroy. It was the victory of the new vision. Its boldness, its simplicity, its power, were what the tutor had wanted to see, had struggled to see, and now they were here before him, outside him, wholly independent of his wanting and struggling. Now he could cease to want and to struggle and the steam-roller would still be there, animating him from outside with its boldness and simplicity and power. The new vision was here and it was solid and real and it could not fade. It was here, it was everywhere. He hardly needed to look elsewhere to prove its ubiquity. He was certain of it. His eyes were full of tears. He had triumphed."

There follows the central story of the book, which consists of his visionary experiences on the racecourse. These experiences have been described by one critic as a political allegory, but I don't regard them as allegorical. They could be better described as a fantasised version of my own actual experiences in the late nineteen twenties and nineteen thirties, early nineteen thirties – the experiences of a middle-class young man who wants above all things to be an imaginative writer. The characters he meets on the racecourse, however fantastic they may seem, are all of them based on actual people I had met, or had been told about by my friends. The detective who stares so menacingly at him; Mr. Parkin's friend MacCreath, who offers the tutor a job, which the tutor sees as a bribe to persuade him to adapt himself to capitalist society; the racecourse tipster clothed in a maroon coloured dressing-gown who accuses him of being a hypocrite, of not really believing in the high-minded principles he professes, and of being "as keen to lay your hands on the goods of this world as the worst of us", but of being a cissy, afraid to take risks; the tin-mining engineer from Nigeria, who momentarily inspires him with a romantic wish to travel and to see the world, but who soon reveals himself as a person with extreme right-wing views, and from whom the tutor escapes into the

large white marquee, a vast refreshment tent, furnished with various astonishing appurtenances of upper-class luxury. Here he meets an overwhelmingly beautiful girl, who leads him on to believe that she is romantically in love with him; and as soon as he is completely under her spell, she casually rejects him, an experience which causes him to give up all hope of ever finding satisfaction in romantic love; just as his experience with the Nigerian tin-miner has caused him to lose his romantic illusions about foreign travel. Then he meets a psychologist, who tells him that disobedience to our inmost desires is the cause of all our ills, from physical diseases to world war, and that since our desires always appear unreasonable to us, the only hope for the world lies in unreason. Soon after the tutor's conversation with the psychologist, a Fascist leader comes into the marquee, and is greeted with Fascist salutes and with great enthusiasm by the upper-class crowd there. The tutor is filled with horror, and has a vision of world-wide tyranny and destruction. He escapes from the marquee, and then he tries to escape from the whole of the hallucination which he has been experiencing while he has been on the racecourse, a hallucination he has deliberately induced in himself as a means of evading the unpleasant reality of his situation as a tutor in Mr. Parkin's household. He has great difficulty in de-hypnotising himself, and in getting rid of the hallucination. But he succeeds at last. Then finally he recognises that no way out is to be found in the mind and heart alone; that madness and hallucination are more agonising than sanity, and that if the whole disaster which his vision has foreseen is to be prevented, political action in the external world is essential, and he must take part in it.

This novel, *Journey to the Border*, has been described by some critics as Kafkaesque, and before writing it I had in fact read Kafka's *The Castle*, though nothing else of Kafka's. I was later to admire his short stories much more than his unfinished longer books. Certainly I made my central character anonymous, as Kafka's central character was. However, *Journey to the Border* was intended to be an anti-Kafka book, a book *against* fantasy, *against* irrationality. But is it possible to write a fantasy against fantasy?

Before I had finished writing *Journey to the Border* I had already decided that fantasy of any kind, even if it was presented as a hallucination, experienced by a real person in a real situation, like the tutor in Mr. Parkin's household, was impermissible for me. I had by this time become a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

In fact, it was only my turning to Communism that had enabled me to write the short prose piece *Sunday*, and the short novel *Journey to the Border*. Turning to Communism had enabled me to break out of the crisis of literary unproductivity which had followed my writing of *The Colleagues*. This period of unproductivity, though it did not in real life lead me to the verge of madness or suicide, was an extremely distressing period for me. Turning to Communism not only made life bearable for me again, but also gave me a subject to write about, and I tried to do this in a literary style which I developed out of the style I had used in my pre-Communist writings. It could be called a modernist style, and I think that *Journey to the Border* owes almost as much to James Joyce and to Proust as my pre-Communist story, *The Railway Accident* does.

As I continued in the Party, I felt increasingly that this modernist style would not do. Then I decided I needed to develop a new style. My decision was partly, but by no means wholly, due to the influence of the official Soviet view that a socialist-realist style was the only fitting one for a Communist to use. I was just as much influenced by my own recognition that an allusive, modernist style, such as that of *The Railway Accident*, or even *Journey to the Border*, would make my work difficult for an intelligent working-class man or woman to read. I asked myself how an intelligent railway-worker would respond to *The Railway Accident*, if he found it comprehensible at all, and I decided he would regard it as unrealistic and lacking in human sympathy.

Modernists might take the view that the artistic quality of a modernist work of art cannot be judged by whether or not it would appeal to intelligent members of the working-class, but I disagreed with this view. I had come to think that twentieth century art is diminished in quality *as art* if it is capable of appealing only to other artists, or to a ruling class who recognize that, however innovatory and subversive of previous art-styles it may be, it is politically unrevolutionary.

After finishing *Journey to the Border*, I had come to think also, that in order to be comprehensible to intelligent members of the working-class, I needed to develop an objective style instead of the subjective one I had used in that novel. I wanted to write primarily about the external world, and about the part played by the workers' movement in that world. I wanted my imaginative prose to have something like the selflessness of the poems of the First World War poet, Wilfred Owen, whom I admired more than most other poets of this century.

His poetry was wholly unself-centred, was deeply concerned with the lives and deaths of other people. That was how I hoped to write about Communism, and about the revolutionary struggle – unself-centredly.

But between 1938, when I finished *Journey to the Border*, and 1954, when I began *In the Thirties*, which is the first novel of my recently published trilogy, *The Spiral Ascent*, I wrote only one very short prose piece in the new objective style. It was called *New Order*, and was in praise of the resistance movement in countries invaded by the Nazis during the Second World War. I think it is the only piece I have written which could properly be called socialist realism. As it is quite short, I would like to read the whole of it to you.

> "The invaders can march no farther. Post-office, power-house, banks, all have been occupied, and the traitor mayor sits at work in the town-hall. Smoke and the corpses have gone from the streets; the trailing telephone wires, the amputated tram standards and even a few windows, have been repaired. The oppressor's soldiers have offered soup from their field-kitchens to those among the inhabitants who are utterly destitute. The old night-life of the cabarets in the whorehouses has begun again for a new clientele. There are still men, women, boys, girls whom the invaders can shoot, starve, hang if they choose, but nothing further can be gained by that, and the sufferers have only their wretchedness to lose. Oppression has reached its limit, is mature and entire, can destroy no further without diminishing its own empire here; and now, out of its ripeness and out of the fullness of its own nature, an enemy is born. You, few at first, rebels, saboteurs, guerrillas, marked with the birthmark of oppression and of death, born merciless as your enemy and begetter is merciless, but with far to go now while he can go no farther, are born to be the death of death, the oppression of oppression. At night in private houses, and if possible never twice in the same house, you meet briefly, and always one of you is set to watch at the outer door.
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> From the gallows in the market-place, near the old stone horse-trough, a body hangs with bent head peering down. Broad-backed and with insolent faces the soldiers pass in

twos and threes. But they are never more insolent than when they are amiable, when one of them stops to help a blind woman across the road. A man sells postcards in sight of the gallows. The faces of the women are numbed and as though blind. Shock and despair have shut out even the consciousness of oppression from the minds of many of the people. Though they suffer they do not dare to know why. You who are conscious, to whom hate has brought life, must begin your fight with little support. The drilled confidence of units in a huge well-equipped army is not for you. No hourly wireless, daily newspapers, will inject you with courage. Though you have friends and comrades in other countries they cannot easily or often get in touch with you. You are alone, and your strength is your own. You do not sit and ask one another – 'What is going to happen?' You do not anxiously consult your feelings as though they were prophetic oracles and find them one day exuberant with hope, the next day in the depths. You act to make things happen. And in the morning on the walls, under doors, in telephone kiosks, your leaflets announce: 'Inhabitants . . . On June the twenty-fifth at the government arsenal there occurred a terrible explosion. It was our work. Fires at the oil-refinery were also our work. Because we did not want this oil, those arms, to help to kill our brothers. Fellow-countrymen, the derailing of the ammunition train in the mountains was the work of true sons of our country. . . . Join with us, and together we shall destroy the invaders.'

They are watching; their agents are looking for you in the streets; at any hour you may hear the thudding on the door; when you sleep you must be light and fitful sleepers; it is possible that not one of you now active will escape them. You are aware and were aware from the start that there's no guarantee of success attached to your activities. It was not the certainty of victory that made you begin your enterprise. It was not your understanding of the irremediable weaknesses shaking the heart of the highest control-centres of the enemy, it was not even faith in the

> final coming to power here and everywhere of the people – though you have that faith. It was more, it was stronger than that. It was your nature, the nature of men and of women, the human nature which in every recorded century and in all places – and even when and where success was wholly impossible – has asserted itself in war against inhuman conditions. The workers walking or cycling here in the darkness of the morning to work in the factories where arms are manufactured for the use of their enemies, the seller of postcards and the women numbed by terror, the people in uninvaded countries to whom knowledge of the horror here comes only from wireless and newspapers, the millions even in the invaders' country who have been bribed and drugged with promises, these are of the same stock as you are, will not in the end submit to the rule of suffering, are capable of the same contempt of death. You are the evidence, the assurance that men have not lost their nature in these times. You, few at first, rebels, saboteurs, guerrillas, you yourselves are the guarantee that others over the whole world will strike with you to destroy the oppressors."

This prose piece, *New Order*, was written in 1942. I was able to write nothing else which satisfied me at all during the period of sixteen years from 1938 to 1954.

I think the cause of my unproductivity during these years was, to begin with, and even before I had consciously become critical of the British Communist Party, I could no longer feel as strong an enthusiasm for it as I had felt when I first became a member. I had wanted to write objectively in praise of the external struggle of the Party against capitalism and for socialism. But already in 1938 there were signs, although I was far from being fully aware of them then, that the Party was beginning to take the political road which was to lead it, after the war, to call for a production drive in British industry, and to oppose all strikes, and to adopt a theory that Britain under Labour Government was in transition to socialism. This seemed to me an abandonment of revolutionary Marxism and a move towards social democratic reformism. And as a result of my openly opposing the new policy I was forced to leave the Party in 1949.

Leaving it was a desolating experience for me, and not till nearly four years afterwards was I able to start writing again, and I was able to do this only by re-introducing subjectivism into what I wrote. I had wanted to write selflessly, in glorification of the Party which I had believed to be conducting an external struggle for socialism. But my disagreement with the Party's post-war line in Britain made me write primarily about my own individual struggle to be a politically active Marxist *and* to be an imaginative writer.

Although the style of my trilogy *The Spiral Ascent* cannot properly be called socialist realist, it is deliberately anti-modernist – that is to say it is a plain style, and as lucid as I can make it. It tries to avoid literary allusiveness, and all types of ambiguity. One critic has described it as a reactionary style. Possibly he is the kind of critic who would regard the style of Ezra Pound as revolutionary. In my view, however, technical novelty and experimentation, however *formally* subversive they may be, do not in themselves make a work of art revolutionary. The counter-revolutionary poetry of Marinetti and the revolutionary poetry of Mayakovsky were both stylistically futurist. I admit that at times I regret not having been able to continue writing in the richer style I was capable of in the nineteen thirties. But I think that the loss has been compensated for by a gain in strength and artistic wholeness in my later work.

The style of *The Spiral Ascent* cannot properly be called socialist realist because it is essentially subjective. Almost everything that happens in the trilogy is shown through the eyes and feelings and thoughts of one central character, Alan Sebrill. It's true I aim to give a sociologically and historically accurate picture of the events and institutions which are the external basis of Alan's experiences, and the political episodes in the first two novels of the trilogy contribute towards the forward movement of the narrative. For instance, the first novel, entitled *In the Thirties*, shows in its successive political episodes the developing struggle of the left-wing forces against the advance of Fascism, and against the steadily increasing threat of a Second World War.

The political episodes in the second novel, *The Rotten Elements*, show the development in the British Communist Party of policies and attitudes which were later on to lead to the more or less open repudiation by the Party of Lenin's theory of the state.

Nevertheless, the forward movement of the narrative in both these

novels – as also in the third novel, *No Home but the Struggle*, although this too contains political episodes – depends primarily on the development of Alan's *own* political struggle, and of his attitude to the school-teaching job by which he earns his living, and of his love for his wife and his children, and of his struggle to be an imaginative writer. I'd better end this talk by saying that my trilogy is not strictly autobiographical. Although it makes use of my actual experiences, it seldom reproduces these exactly as they were. It amalgamates incidents and disguises persons, and is sometimes just invention. My central character, Alan Sebrill, is intended primarily as a type, representing a generation of British-born imaginative writers, who were young and politically left-wing in the nineteen thirties. But he is also an individual, and he develops differently from the others.