



Rewriting the Thirties

Modernism and After

Keith Williams
and Steven Matthews



REWRITING THE THIRTIES

Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature

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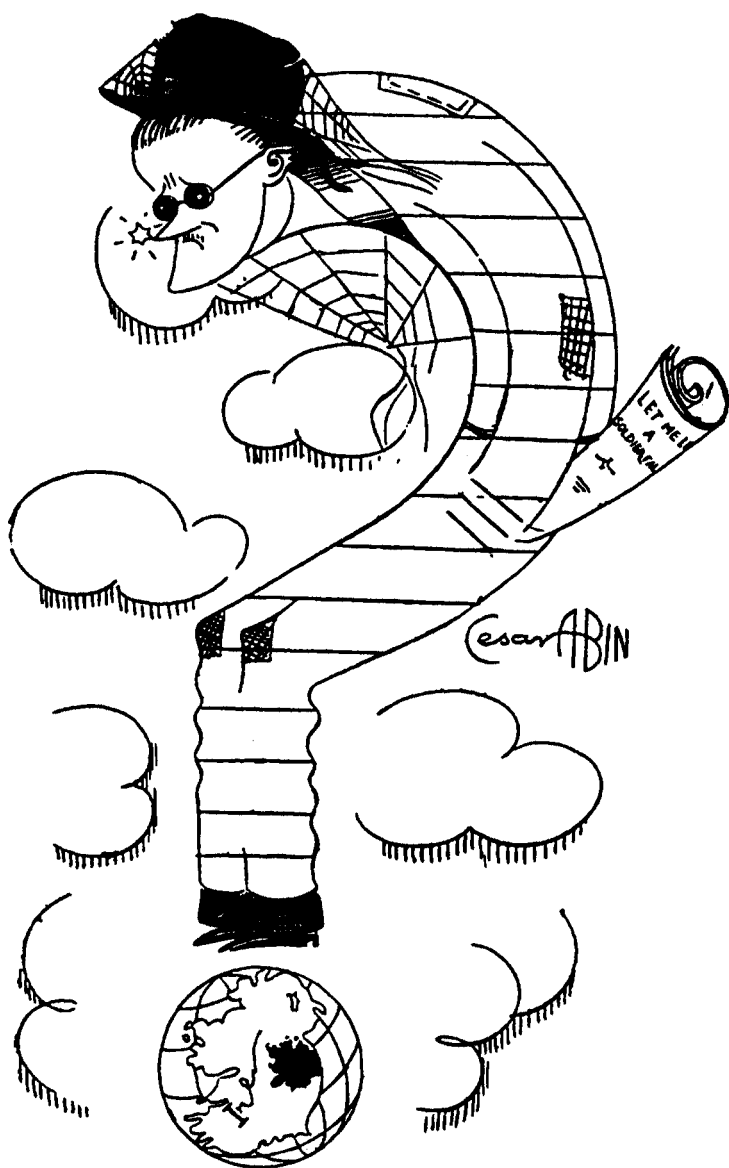
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By Cesar Abin. A caricature of James Joyce which first appeared in the magazine, *transition* (issue 21, 1932)

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Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After

Edited by

Keith Williams and Steven Matthews

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

KEITH WILLIAMS AND STEVEN MATTHEWS

Our reason for putting this anthology together is that we thought it long overdue to challenge the persistent aftermyth of the thirties as a homogeneous anti-modernist decade. Outdated cultural maps of the time sustain a damagingly restricted canon centred on a narrow genealogy of polarised relations between aesthetics and politics, or between difficulty and accessibility, textuality and content. According to this tradition, let us say, Auden fathers out of Socialist Realism a prodigal generation whose lasting literary value resides in subsequently recognising the disastrous inadvisability of their own attempts to mix writing and 'commitment', and in disowning their immature output. Against this distortive narrative, this book seeks to configure an alternative history – that, at least in terms of the avant-garde aspect of their culture, the thirties were more accurately a troubled but symptomatic transitional phase between modernist and postmodernist writing, art and politics, a complex mutation that defined itself within, and in some ways against, the wider background of the popular writing and mass culture of the time. Following on from this, it is vital to locate any reassessment of this kind within a suitably broad and contested cultural context.

Ezra Pound famously declared that 'We do not all inhabit the same time.' Such a sense of mutiplicity blows apart the homogeneous chronology which has dogged our sense of the period: the idea that cultural history is a mosaic is especially applicable to the culture of the thirties. There were many overlapping, competing and contradictory theoretical tendencies and practical alignments in the decade. So-called High Modernists, such as Pound himself, were still writing both 'impersonal' high art and egregious political propaganda. Joyce, in drafting *Finnegans Wake*, and Woolf, in writing *The Waves* and *The Years*, were moving into extended explorations of the possibilities of formal experiment, which for Woolf became, paradoxically, increasingly indivisible from ever-closer engagement with sexual politics, whatever the arguably more open-ended nature of the Joycean project.

As for the popular literary audience, they were still largely dieted on texts in the pre-modernist modes of Ian Hay and Edgar Wallace. A growing

'middle-brow' (to use the period term) sector of the population, on the other hand, were busily making best-selling authors of novelists such as J.B. Priestley and poets such as John Betjeman. But despite such mediating figures, the mass-civilisation/minority-culture split, diagnosed as the chief condition of cultural ill-health by the Leavises, was all too apparent. As demonstrated by Jeffrey Richards' chapter, this was particularly the case in relations between literature with a big 'L' and popular cinema, though it was being gradually (albeit ambivalently) modified by poets, prose-writers and dramatists increasingly fascinated and enthused by the artistic potential and popular impact of modern media forms. On the other hand, paradoxically, the attitudes of feature film audiences (rigorously policed as the industry was by the British Board of Film Censors) were, in terms of their sensibility, morality and expectations about narrative form, still largely located in the nineteenth century. Similarly, there were few signs of modernism arriving at all in mainstream British theatre.

Writers as different in themselves as Auden, Orwell and Winifred Holtby, whose careers are virtually synonymous with the thirties, were under the 'anxiety' of modernist influence – as much a case of repressing some aspects of it as admitting others. This made them often ambivalent towards the presumed cultural entailments and political responsibilities of innovative form. Conversely, the role of Joyce, Woolf and Eliot as mentors and – in Woolf and Eliot's case at Hogarth and Faber – literary midwives to the younger writers of the thirties should not be underestimated. In turn, as Stan Smith's and Steven Matthews' essays argue, the work of High Modernists was being modified by its rewriting in, and by their reading of, the texts of the next, upcoming generation. This is not only true of Eliot and Auden, but also of the serial encounters between Yeats, Pound and Bunting. All of these parameters and trends throw into question the neat paradigms of ending which have been imposed on the decade. Such periodising, as Peter McDonald shows, is essentially myth-making and drastically inadequate for the task of illuminating the actual matrix of creative relations between MacNeice, Auden, Spender and their High Modernist precursors.

For themselves, writers such as Auden, Orwell and Holtby were on the one hand anxious to adapt pragmatically the legacy and, indeed, currency of modernism, and on the other to resist its perceived obscurantism and indifference to social and economic facts. They adopted a whole variety of self-consciously *ad hoc* theoretical formulations and provisional solutions in their practice, which cannot simply be subsumed by any single aesthetic or political category because they stemmed from such a plethora of hybridised elements. Freud, Marx, Catholicism, Homer Lane, D.H. Lawrence, I.A. Richards, the Leavises, the Surrealists, Socialist Realism, Documentarism and Epic Theatre, to name but a few of these elements, all jostle in uncoordinated

chorus for the attention of thirties writers. The sometimes unstable positions that resulted from volatile mixtures undoubtedly anticipate more fully postmodern thinking about the relations between culture and politics. For example, Lynette Hunter's essay shows how Orwell's precocious hunches that ideology is 'naturalised' by processes of historical dismembering and obliteration, as well as about the torturous negotiations between private self and public space, foreshadow post-structuralist debates in this area.

This thirties polyphony of ideas, issues and discourses was also being played out – in underlying rhythm, if not to exactly the same score – in the theory and practice of many proletarian writers, as Valentine Cunningham and Peter Marks demonstrate in their case studies of Joycean novelist James Barke and the heterogeneous editorial 'line' of *Left Review* on what would constitute a properly proletarian kind of writing. No less symptomatic of the leading contemporary debate about the nature of 'realism' and the real, as Keith Williams shows, are the self-conscious aesthetics of documentary form. Whatever the myth-making says to the contrary, thirties writers did not necessarily proceed in a vernacular naturalistic vein, anymore than in a prescriptive Sovietised one. Indeed Andy Croft argues that Randall Swingler, in many ways close to the nominal centres of committed cultural activity in the period, was representative precisely because he confronted the perplexing nature of modernity neither as a modernist nor a hard-line Socialist Realist, adapting instead the home-grown, more populist poetics of Georgian accessibility and place to the contemporary scene. However, there is little doubt that through the work of both bourgeois and working-class writers, definitions of the political underwent significant metamorphoses in practice. Besides the public 'macropolitics' of the decade – the clashes between Fascism and Communism, dictatorship and social democracy – a whole new agenda of 'micropolitical' concerns was being opened up, consciously or unconsciously, and addressed by writers. Take, for example, the explicit and implicit social values of style, and what they reveal about the material conditions and cultural ideology of the writer, as demonstrated by Simon Dentith's account of the poetry of suburbia, or Steve Nicholson's discussion of the shifts in the performance–audience relationship sought by the innovators of radical theatre. Not least, the politics of gender, unfairly regarded as neglected in thirties writing, were in fact continuously objectified and scrutinised in the later work of Virginia Woolf and of her acolyte/antagonist, Winifred Holtby and others, as Marion Shaw contests. In this way, the writing of the thirties emerges as both *less* and *more* political than hitherto assumed, in more complex and inflected senses.

The revised map of the period this collection plots is a topography riven by cultural fault-lines and by intellectual cross-currents of sometimes politically edgy, even indeterminate direction, though always dragged by the

unpredictably tidal influence of large-scale historical events. Moreover, to regard the British writing of the thirties as a resurgence of cultural 'Little Englandism' also ignores the wider geography of cosmopolitan modernist influences, continuous from the American and Irish, but also the European, spheres. Eliot and Auden's trajectories, for example, are parallel but inverted in this respect. Eliot naturalised both his statehood and critical assumptions in a cultural vision which, contradictorily, laid claim to both universal tradition and essential Englishness. Auden, in turn, began the thirties by deconstructing these assumptions and then took the opposite route at the end of the decade, by assuming American citizenship. Similarly, it is an error to marginalise or demonise the influence of Joyce in the period, because unlikely Joyceans, like the proletarian Glasgow Communist James Barke, brought into focus many of the key critical and political debates in their writing. By such unprogrammatic means, the cultural and linguistic hierarchy between the heteroglot 'margins' and mandarin, unitary 'centre' (to use Bakhtin's terms) was contested. The actuality of perpetual displacement of lives in travel and exile, of political alignments, and of forms of reading and writing patently defies the kind of canonical selectivity all too often imposed upon the thirties, and resists any master-theory about its nature and aftermath. The map is of course a favourite and most highly-charged metaphor in thirties writing. Since the last major collection of essays on the period appeared well over a decade ago, it is high time that it was culturally reconfigured: *Rewriting the Thirties* will provide an indispensable pathfinding chart for subsequent undertakings in this long overdue process.

CHAPTER TWO

The Age of Anxiety and Influence; or, Tradition and the Thirties Talents

VALENTINE CUNNINGHAM

Two large focuses or frames of analysis confront us in any approach now to thirties writing. The first is literary-historical, and involves a sort of traditional knee-jerk division between modernism and the thirties. This is the crude bit of historicising which defines the Thirties as an Age of Utter Reason, a period only of Political Art, of Documentary deviationism, a time of sad Realist cravings, of rampant anti-Formalism, anti-Textualism, and so a sort of unfortunate historical blip or bypass on which writing got snagged and slowed down in the good long march of the twentieth century from modernism at the beginning to postmodernism at the end. This view sees the thirties as a very unfortunate, even inexplicable, parenthesis, and one which we can now, especially since the fall of Eastern European Communism and all that, simply overlook as a species of shortsightedness, a deviant moment in a larger textualising progress, involving crude ideological preferences which history has not sustained and literary-critical category errors we can only wonder at our immediate literary and critical fathers for indulging themselves in. This is a reading of literary history greatly ministered to by seeing the thirties as thoroughly Leftist and so extremely, even absolutely, hostile to the modernism that flourished before it and continued despite it. And, of course, vice versa.

A symptom of this making of stark historical contrasts is the reissuing by Lawrence & Wishart of their 1935 volume *Problems of Soviet Literature* with the rebarbatively new title *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union* (1977).

The second large analytical frame which now inevitably has thirties writing in its grip has to do with value and values. There is a common reading of much thirties literature which concedes it a certain, even momentous,

cultural and historical value, but denies it anything like the highest literary merit. On this view the greats of our time are Eliot, Pound, Woolf, even – still – in our feminist age, D.H. Lawrence; whereas the thirties boys are scarcely up to snuff. Even if W.H. Auden, say, just about makes it into the pantheon of the great and good, Spender and Day Lewis (not to mention the raggletaggle army of poets who wrote for Spain or the gang of proletarian novelists of the period, or the women authors brought back into the light by Virago Books, Rosamond Lehmann and such), certainly do not get into the Premier Division. We certainly would not choose their sort to save our First Fifteen. This kind of demarcation is based, of course, on a very usual set of judgements about literary value, prejudgements or prejudices no less, heavily reliant on the very traditional assumption that overt political propaganda, in fact instrumentality of any kind, let alone sentimental disposition of materials, and simplicity of address to readers, will axiomatically mark a poet or poem down. According to these views, temporal or worldly interests and commitments automatically make a work of less importance than more formalist, or more language-centred, or (save the mark) more ‘eternal-verity’-centred writings – even if the ‘eternal-verities’ in question are, in the end, just as ideologically skewed as the propagandistic dispositions which are being disallowed.

What is at issue here, of course, sooner or later, is canonicity. Canon-making, questions of what constitutes canons, how canons get formed, were utterly central to the critical debates of the thirties, and they are main questions in the critical debate about the merits now of thirties writing. Not surprisingly then, certain positions in current canon debates seem to have particular force in the light they can cast on thirties materials. There is the case Michael Bérubé makes, for example, for the black American poet Melvin Tolson, involving a critique of how literary-historical modelling is done. Bérubé asks how an American version of modernism gets to be constructed so as to exclude Tolson, and along with him most Leftist US work of the thirties:

Richard Chase’s canonical ‘modernism’ allows him to conflate aesthetic experimentalism and social protest under one sign, that of an ‘insurgent movement’ which ‘defended “modernism”’ – which is to say that Chase’s account leaves no room for avant-garde social protest that attacked (or was at best ambivalent about) modernism, no room for Joseph Freeman, Michael Gold, *New Masses*, or, for that matter, writers of the Harlem Renaissance. More generally, Chase has no record of what happened to the insurgent movement in this country which defended the strikers at Passaic, New Jersey, in 1926, or the insurgent movement that made up the Abraham Lincoln Brigades a decade later; for him, these ‘insurgent movements’ have dropped out of sight, their oppositionality subsumed under the rubric of the Euro-American avant-garde.¹

Or there is Jane Tompkins questioning the circularity of the valuation processes that keep a populist classic of sentimental humane propaganda such as the anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* out of the high canon of great American fiction. Harriet Beecher Stowe's reformist text usually fails to get past the question 'But is it any good?', because it fails to live up to certain criteria of literary value which, however, and in the first place, consciously exclude its kind of thing from the top table. The merits of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are, Tompkins suggests, precisely ones normally downgraded. It is female, domestic, sentimental, pious. It is an evangelical and missionary fiction which works well precisely because it is moral, purposive, simple and thus popular. And if the traditionalists' canonical criteria deplore all that, it is they that are lacking, not the novel.²

The upshot of such canon scepticisms is that if the model, the current of historical-interpretative assumption, the regular literary-historical framing devices, the criteria of value don't fit, and in fact seem to miss entirely the literary phenomena in question, then one should try changing the model and the criteria rather than just turning a blind eye to those awkward phenomena. And I agree. And so, interestingly, does T.S. Eliot. That is a notable agreement not least because it helps bring sharply into focus the alleged gulf that divides our High Modernists, the likes of T.S. Eliot, from our thirties realists and propagandists. It is the position T.S. Eliot arrived at, quite openly, and I think actually in response to certain thirties Leftist discussions, in relation to Rudyard Kipling. Kipling is a stone of stumbling. He doesn't fit. 'I confess', says Eliot, 'that the critical tools which we are accustomed to use in analysing and criticizing poetry do not seem to work' on Kipling. But Kipling can't just be written off. So Eliot sets about making a case on some other grounds for this writer for whom, despite the normal judgements of the tradition, he feels certain strong admiration. And Eliot's scepticism about the literary history and the valuations and the canonicity that would keep Kipling out, at bay, is, I would argue, exemplary.³

I want to test my own scepticism about the ordinary rigidities of literary history and evaluation, and so of canonicity, as they relate to the thirties, by looking at what I take to be a pretty exemplary text of the period – a passage (pp. 122–5), from a novel by James Barke, *Major Operation: A Novel* (London: Collins, 1936), about a socialist celebration of May Day, a people's protest, a street demonstration in Glasgow. This section of the novel has, in common with every division of the text, a mock newspaper headline: 'RED MUSIC IN THE SECOND CITY'. The narrative voice is a very free sort of direct discourse, a dramatically outered interior monologue, the voice of many citizens and of none in particular; the people, that elusive desideratum of Leftist politics and poetics, is speaking; the text is inside, as it is with and for, the common mind.

RED MUSIC IN THE SECOND CITY

The flutes sounded shrill and distinct. The noise of the drums, flung back from the high walls of the tenements, gathered in force and in rhythm. Shopkeepers came to their doors, windows were flung up, children ran. On the sidewalks groups gathered, heads turned in the direction from which the music came.

A slight drizzle was falling: the weather was murky and unpleasant. But the citizens of the Second City had more to worry about than a miserable day.

For one thing, Labour was in control of municipal affairs of the City. Michael Mullrooney would be the next Lord Provost. Sir Michael Mullrooney. Nice name that for a future Lord Provost of the Second City, etcetera. What was it Derry's walls were built with . . . ? Top av the mawmin' to ye, Sir Michael—

O, Sir Michael was a gintleman:
He came av dacent pape'l.

What do you think Mr Timothy O'Rafferty with your white apron and your black lustre jacket? Apply for another licence, will you? Labour on the bench: Red Biddy in the Family Department! Arra me bhoy: there'll never be any Red Clyde so long as there's Red Biddy. Ah, the bhoys would rather have a night with Red Biddy than a night with Burns. With Labour on the bench, me bhoy. It's a darlin' party the Labour Party: a darlin' Party. I wonder, now, if them flutes will be Orange or Hibernian?

Now you, Mr No-mean-citizen-of-no-mean-city: you said something just now about boiling a can? Sorry and all that . . .

You're canned if you ask me.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan—

Kubla Khan? I've got you, mister. In the 3.30? I can take you on, sir, up to twenty quid. Pay out in the lavatory of Tim O'Rafferty's bar at six o'clock. James MacMaster, sir, a God-fearing bookie's runner at your service. Kubla Khan is a good thing.

What about Red Biddy?

Don't touch it, sir. Been a Jake drinker in my day. Meth – lavender water – green paint. Pain in the guts now. Think of the money spent on drink that might bring back a fortune – a double coming up once or twice a week . . .

Politics, thy name is acrimony. Let's have – music!

Sit, Jessica! Let the sound of music creep in our ears. Your name isn't Jessica by any chance?

Getting fresh, are you? My name's Sarah. Sarah Cannan. Call a flute band music?

Sorry, can't give you Henry Hall and His band. But don't despise the flute, dear lady. Orpheus and his lute – which, as you doubtless were told at school, is just the polite name for flute. It is the little rift within the flute . . . Afraid it's the flutes that are causing the rift, however. Suppose you'd rather hear a Mae West story? Ah, Mae West! Sex! Taboo! Wonder what Mrs Bloom would have thought about Mae West?

The Age of Anxiety and Influence; or, Tradition and the Thirties Talents

Or Mae West about Marion Bloom? Mummh! Bulged right out in his face! Seven miles! Guess I've nothing on you, dearie.

Labour on the bench and a smutty story round the corner: under the trees. Music down the street. Hold the mirror up to nature and you get – sex and politics (moonlight is extra, but always in request) . . .

Well, we don't mind a little sex, sir, providing it's treated in a light, aphrodisiacal manner and provided there's a high moral tone prevailing throughout. Nothing the public likes better in fact. But – no politics! No, siree. Keep politics out of literature.

A little bit of bread and no chee-e-e-se? Well, them flutes don't seem to be coming any nearer . . .

But the Mirror and Nature, you know. I must bow to your superior knowledge of what the public wants. The syndicate that runs your library in there . . .

Hold the Mirror up to Nature by all means. But hold it up to her face.

Ain't nature grand! (How'ma doin' boys?) You mean: put the blind eye to the telescope?

Unless you're a Peeping Tom.

Sorry you've been troubled. Rather afraid there's a spot of trouble coming to you all the same . . .

Fifty quid. That's my price. I've got to square another two. We have the majority vote. Guarantee the contract.

Ah! no sex or politics here. No holding the mirror up to nature. Just a little bit of business between friends. Well, well, well! If it ain't me old pal, Pro bono publico.

Did you say a hair, madam? *Infra dig, infra dig.* Our fish suppers, madam, have positively never been known to contain a hair . . .

A hair of the dog that bit me, you know. I was at a dinner of the Incorporation of Graftsmen – and mind you, I never thought I would live to be a Bailie . . .

The writing on the wall, Bailie. Can't you hear dem flutes?

I was never near the place. That was Bailie –

Now, now. No names: no pack drill. Don't think this is the complete low-down on the whole rotten situation here at hand. I'm only trying to find my feet in the flux of time: paddle my own canoe in the stream of consciousness: make ends meet: solve the jigsaw: earn an honest livelihood . . . Oh, you want to know what it's all about? Well: have patience. When dem flutes come into view I might be able to give you an idea. Who am I? I'm the Voice that breathed o'er Eden: I'm the Fly in the Ointment: I'm the Wet Blanket: I'm Safest o' the Family: I'm Here, There and Everywhere: I'm Gone To-day and Here Tomorrow: I'm Alpha of the Plough and Omega of the Furrow: I'm the Eternal feminine and Mr. Public: I'm Quantity changing into Quality: I'm the Negation of Negations . . . Ah, here comes the Bride.

Toot-toot, toot-toot, toot-toodli-oot . . .

You always find plenty of police at a swell wedding. Love's old sweet song. The world moves. Walk up, walk up! Walk up where? Cunarder finished. Are you weary, are you sad? Jog along, little dogie: jog along. There's a hell of a lot of you swell guys heading for the last round-up.

Think things are getting better a little: turning the corner? Bottom out of the depression? Nice to listen to Sir James Jeans, now. Got the breeze up a little back! Lawn Tennyson's (good lad Joyce) red revolution and the breaking up of laws nearly had you by the-throat! Never mind, son. Blow your nose. The bogey man won't get you this time. Zez you! The moving finger writes . . .

Something phoney about all this huey! You'll say there is, will you? Well, just what do you think about it all? All what? Just life on this little old planet. Gota job? Feel secure? Enjoy excellent digestion. Never known a day's illness? Trust in God and do the right? Once a week won't do a man any harm! What's that? Don't feel it's going to last for ever. So you admit your little world got a nasty jog there? Can't encourage you to be optimistic. Balance of imports over exports. What about a nice little reassuring speech by Ramsay over the air? No? Losing confidence, are you? Bring on the Welsh Wizard! What is a wizard? Please, miss, the inside of a hen.

But seriously: things can't go on like this. Damnation – sorry, m'dear, sorry, m'dear. Confound you, sir! The country's going to the dogs. What we need is a strong hand at the helm. (Chorus: We need a strong hand at the helm!) Record a bit worn, eh? You're all a bit worn. Things are beginning to prey on your nerves.

When the hell is it going to end? I'll be shrieking in a minute. Father's got the sack from the water works, the brick works, the rivet, bolt and nut works.

Where's the entrance out? Stop crowding, can't you! Take your bloody elbow out of my face, damn you. Another blind alley. Sally in our alley. Put a sock in her. Hit her across the gub with a beer bottle. How'd you like to live on the dole? Two bob to stop a bastard's grub trap. Apples and rusks: juice of orange if slightly costive? Shut it, you! Cut out the high haddin'. We'll bloody soon let you guys see where to get off. Done our little Lord Faunteroy too long. Problem of life, eh? Sir James Jeans on the wonders of the starry universe? Kant! Cut the dope clean out from now on. Problem of getting the next bit of grub. Sounds too simple and elementary. Rather do a spot of speculation: the World considered as Will and Understanding: or a little of Mr Beethoven and the BBC symphony orchestra. Cultural heritage of the workers. Comrade Beethoven's last quartets. Okay then! Time and place for everything. Rebel Song played by the Springburn Unemployed Workers' flute band.

Then we'll sing a rebel song
As we proudly march along . . .

So that's what all the noise was about? Well: see you later: also hear.

Major Operation is a Communist novel. It's about the need for a Communist solution to a terrible time in a very needy city – depression Glasgow, the Second City of Scotland, currently in grave economic crisis. The novel is written by a Communist, a so-called proletarian novelist, the son of a farm-worker who was himself a shipyard worker and engineer. Barke is a

writer who was conspicuously active in the public thirties debates about the role of literature in socialist and Communist politics, debates centred not least around the reports coming back to Britain from the Moscow Writers' Congress of 1934. These debates were promoted particularly in Britain by the journal *Left Review* which had been set up precisely in response to the Congress's summons to writers to get behind the cause of proletarian revolution, especially in the wake of Hitler's coming to power in Germany. Barke was a contributor to *Left Review*, and his novel takes its title from an already notorious long poem by a poet closely associated with the magazine, namely Cecil Day Lewis's Communist, or at least Ur-Communist, poem *The Magnetic Mountain* (1933). Section 25 of that poem ran:

Drug nor isolation will cure their cancer:
It is now or never, the hour of the knife,
The break with the past, the major operation.

The break with the past. In political terms the novel *Major Operation* is clear where the break will come. Its goal is socialist revolution. But for the writer there is a question of just what the break with the literary past might consist of. Where should that particular cut come? What exactly of the old culture is to be cut away? And what should the Communist literary surgeon's knife leave behind? What, in fact, is cancerous about the tradition, the literary past, the bourgeois and modernist past, which the Moscow Congress had tried so vociferously to root out?

What Barke's title announces in embracing Cecil Day Lewis's brisk vision of necessary surgery is that he accepts that he is working in a crisis time, an age which, for very good reasons – economic depression, threats of war, the rise and rise of Fascism – is deeply anxious, sunk in a set of anxieties writers and writing must respond to: 'it's now or never'. As Auden would formulate the matter: the writer is 'in this hour of crisis and dismay' ('August for the People'); he's 'in a late hour of apprehension and exhaustion' ('Oxford'). The writer, the epoch, the reader are all in it, and in for it. And for the writer this age of widespread anxiety inevitably includes the anxiety of influence – that is, the question of which tradition and traditions she or he will work in or against, variously promoting, revivifying, demolishing. What, in other words, in the formula Eliot issued in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, should be the nature of the individual writing talent in the thirties in relation to the many possible literary ways and means and models the tradition supplies? Is any of that bourgeois past worth saving? Should any of those dry bones be made to live again? Could any of them go on living? How much of the literary past should be blown up, blasted to smithereens, how much blessed and continued (in those muscular oppositions announced by Wyndham Lewis as the First World

War was about to break out)? How, in fact, is the thirties text to make the modern world possible for art? How, in such times as these, can art be made possible for the modern world?

These are all of them questions which in some senses all writers have asked, but they are ones which T.S. Eliot had most recently asked as the very essence of what survival and pertinence might amount to in a modern writing and for a modern writer. After Eliot's essays 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921) and 'Ulysses, Order and Myth' (1923), nobody could be in any doubt that the very nature of being modern was a raising of the question of what to do with and about the past. In *A Hope for Poetry* (1934) Cecil Day Lewis had agreed: the younger sons of poetry must acquire the right fathers, the right elder brothers. And if any doubt lingered about this on the Left, the Moscow Congress had confirmed the diagnosis. For his part, Eliot had suggested that the success of Joyce's *Ulysses* in 'making the modern world possible for art' had lain in its adoption of the 'mythical method' – its 'manipulating a continuous parallel' between ancient Greece and modern Dublin, 'between contemporaneity and antiquity'. This is the 'method which others must pursue after' Joyce. This is the only way of 'controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'.⁴ But could the thirties Communist writer go Joyce's way? Joyce looked to the classical, the mythical past. What past, what traditions, what fathers, what telos should the new, politically aroused thirties writer look to?

In 'RED MUSIC IN THE SECOND CITY', the great names of the British and European tradition are there in some number, available for the imitating and the serving in, as it were, the collective mind of Barke's Glaswegians, on his streets, on his page: Burns, Coleridge, Beethoven, Tennyson. Coleridge and Tennyson are supreme figures in the High Tradition of English Letters. But, quite clearly, what Barke's rhapsody of the popular street recognises is that the Great European Tradition, as we might call it, is one which the workers are estranged from except in some wry or queered and wrenched version, some ironically mis-taking and mis-conceiving trace. Burns is less of a delight than the booze. Kubla Khan is a race-horse running in the 3.30. The Springburn Unemployed Workers' flute band is hardly the musical equivalent of Beethoven's Last Quartets ('Call a flute band music?'). The Glasgow unemployed's musical efforts are a far cry from the BBC Symphony Orchestra. 'Dem flutes' (twice): darkie-speak has invaded the popular consciousness – Dem Bones, Dem Bones – negro spiritual stuff from the world of American popular culture. And it is echoes of that kind of demotic text – the films, the talkies, jazz, blues – that really animate the popular voice on the streets of Barke's Glasgow. And at such moments as this it is as if the

novel is wondering, with Auden's *Letter to Lord Byron*, 'what the Duke of Wellington / Would say about the music of Duke Ellington'. Or, more precisely, 'Wonder what Mrs Bloom would have thought about Mae West? Or Mae West about Marion Bloom?'

And, of course, what *we* are driven to wonder, in this opposing of these two modern sex symbols, Mae West and Molly Bloom, is what Karl Radek, the great Communist promoter of Socialist Realism, would have thought of the Communist James Barke thinking of Molly Bloom. And, what's more, about his trying to write not unlike Molly Bloom – apparently imitating (or paddling his own canoe in) her kind of stream of consciousness from *Ulysses*, quoting *Ulysses*, putting his novel into the tradition of *Ulysses* and the recyclers of the *Ulysses* method, of writers like the American John Dos Passos. 'Good lad Joyce': can Joyce possibly be, or become, part of the cultural heritage of the Scottish workers? The novel evidently wants its Scottish citizenry, however poor, to have some access to the real world of Beethoven and Burns and Coleridge. But Joyce?

It was simply normal on the literary Left to denigrate Joyce. Karl Radek, Prince Mirsky, Edward Upward, Ralph Fox, Alick West, Christopher Caudwell – they all lined up, eager to cast their stones at the unrepentant modernist and his keen sponsor T.S. Eliot. Joyce, according to Prince Mirsky, illustrated the extreme limits of decadent aestheticisation: 'the path of Joyce and the path of Soviet literature form an angle of 180 degrees'.⁵ The best that Joyce could do, suggested Edward Upward in his notorious 'Sketch for a Marxist Interpretation of Literature', was to distort reality and provide a limited field of social and human vision.⁶ Caudwell dismissed Dorothy Richardson and Proust and Joyce as the 'last blossoms of the bourgeois novel': they were depleting the important study of social relations into an account merely of the subject's experience in society, 'complete "me-ness"'.⁷ At the Moscow Congress Radek ranted lengthily against Joyce's investment in the wrong kind of realism, the wrong sort of heroic, the wrong kind of form – *Ulysses* was a 'phantasmagoria of the madhouse . . . delirious ravings. . . A heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus'; 'for him the whole world lies between a cupboardful of medieval books, a brothel and a pothouse'; his language is aberrant, comma-less – 'some kind of Chinese alphabet without commas'. (Radek had evidently heard of Molly Bloom's contribution to *Ulysses*, maybe he had even looked at the novel's 'Penelope' section, but just as clearly he had not paid too much attention to other parts of the novel with their massive amplitudes of punctuation.) And were you to imagine that Joyce's use of newspaper-style headlines and story-telling in *Ulysses*'s Aeolus section was at least a nod in the direction of quotidian history-making, you would be in error. John Dos Passos, imitator of the Joycean news-headline