

Edward Upward and the Novel of Politics

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Edward Upward, novelist, has enjoyed a second, fictional or semi-fictional life in the writings of his contemporaries for half a century. Under the pseudonym of “Allen Chalmers”, given to him by Christopher Isherwood, he appears in the autobiographies of Isherwood (*Lions and Shadows*) and Stephen Spender (*World Within World*). But Chalmers’ first appearance is as a character in Isherwood’s very first novel, *All the Conspirators*, published in 1928. Did Upward himself really exist? In the 1930’s some stories and a short novel, *Journey to the Border*, were published under his name. But for twenty years between 1942 and 1962 Upward published nothing except for one early story, *The Railway Accident*, which he partly disowned, and which therefore appeared under the familiar pseudonym, with an introduction, appropriately, by Isherwood, the inventor of “Allen Chalmers”.

Like another writer of the ’thirties, Jean Rhys, Upward disappeared from public view for many years. He has since explained the relation between this long silence and his engagement with and painful disengagement from the Communist Party. This relationship is itself one main theme of the trilogy of novels published since 1962 under the overall title of *The Spiral Ascent* (Onward and Upward?).

Even now that Upward can be perceived as a novelist in his own right, the relationship between Upward and Chalmers still flourishes in the material of the trilogy, as will be seen. Isherwood and Upward have enjoyed a kind of literary partnership, the most enduring among those writers who formed a recognisable group or generation in the 1930’s. These two writers have acted not only as critics and reviewers of each other’s work; they also share much of their raw material – common experiences, whose different treatment by each of them offers a fascinating study in contrasting literary personalities.

In that distant decade Upward/Chalmers enjoyed an extraordinary mythic status within the Auden group of mainly upper-middle-class young writers then in political revolt against an apparently decaying capitalist society. This elevated status was enshrined in various dedications,¹ and in *All the Conspirators* and *Lions and Shadows*. Later it was recalled in the autobiographies of Stephen Spender and John

Lehmann. To these younger writers in the group he appeared as a somewhat shadowy, but undeniably intriguing and potent figure:

“... just as Auden seemed to us the highest peak within the range of our humble vision from the Oxford valley, for Auden there was another peak, namely Isherwood, whilst for Isherwood there was a still further peak, Chalmers.”²

Even allowing for the element of adolescent hero-worship, it is clear that Upward did enjoy a special “guru” status, above all in relation to the writer who was closest to him personally, namely Isherwood. “Christopher had always regarded Edward as his literary mentor”, Isherwood wrote recently;³ while in *All the Conspirators* Chalmers is made to play the wise-young-man role to the point of parody.⁴ His influence over the novel’s central character, Philip Lindsay, is regarded by Philip’s tyrannous mother as “unwholesome”.⁵

It would be easy to mock this cult of Chalmers/Upward. Julian Symons is one commentator on the 1930’s who has been sardonic about it:

“Readers outside the particular literary swim in which the name of Upward was bracketed with those of Auden, Spender and Isherwood, were unable to understand this deeply respectful treatment of a writer who had not published a book.”⁶

This rather misses the point. Upward was respected and influential as a person as much as a writer, and his influence was as much moral and political as literary. The evidence of the recollections is that it was Upward’s seriousness, his dedication and integrity, both political and artistic, which impressed his friends.

Above all they were impressed by what has (I think) been the central experience of Upward’s life as a politically engaged writer, his commitment to the Communist Party. Most of these writers hovered on the brink of real commitment – Spender’s relationship with the Communist Party is a classic case in point.⁷ Upward was one of those who took the plunge. He did not merely flirt with Marxism. He became a Marxist and joined the British Communist Party, a step which was then the normal form for a commitment to revolutionary socialism to take. Isherwood has described himself as being “both attracted and scared”

by Upward's action,⁸ even as he was also both "thrilled" and "chilled" by "the austerity of Edward's tone"⁹ in his short story, *Sunday*, about a man who decides that his personal dilemma and unhappiness can only be met by becoming an active Communist.

Although many intellectuals joined the Communist Party at this time, most of Upward's immediate literary contemporaries did not. But they continued to feel guilty about the ambiguity of their position, and therefore respected and even admired Upward's leap of commitment while not making it themselves.¹⁰ Upward told Alan Ross in 1969:

"Later on I became interested in Marxism before any of my friends did, and when the economic and social crisis of the 'thirties reached its height, they perhaps saw me as a kind of authority, and there are poems by Auden and Spender which make use of ideas and emotions I had expressed to them."¹¹

It was only later, when most of these writers had discarded their left-wing beliefs that they claimed instead that Upward had, in Lehmann's words, allowed his "imaginative gift" to be "slowly killed in the Iron Maiden of Marxist dogma."¹²

Many of these writers, Auden above all, were subsequently most anxious to disown their 'thirties toying with Marxism. It was therefore irritating to them to find their names constantly coupled with that decade. There were, however, good reasons for this association. Some of them, including Spender and Isherwood, were at their most productive at that time, and it has been argued that even the perennially productive Auden did his best work in the 'thirties. Most important, for our purposes, is the fact that Upward and Isherwood have both continued to belong to that decade imaginatively to a great extent. Thus, of Isherwood's five novels published since 1940, three (*Prater Violet*, *The World in the Evening*, and *Down There on a Visit*) are largely or wholly set in the 'thirties, and he has returned to that decade once more in *Christopher and His Kind* (1977). Of Upward's trilogy, the title of the first novel, *In the Thirties*, speaks for itself, while the third, *No Home But The Struggle*, consists largely of a series of meditative recollections of the early life of the narrator, Alan Sebrill. These bring him round finally to the taking-off point of the whole book: the crisis of despair

which led him to join the Communist Party in the first place. Several of the episodes recalled by Sebrill also occur in *Lions and Shadows*, written nearly forty years before.

Together with the internal evidence of the trilogy, and what Upward has said about his own life, these overlaps establish clearly enough the autobiographical basis of *The Spiral Ascent* – although the significant thing is that it is not an autobiography (“I am not trying to write an autobiography – I wouldn’t be interested in that,” Upward told Ross), but a carefully shaped novel. More important is what the overlaps tell us about his literary relationship with Isherwood. Clearly some episodes in their early life had a lasting significance for both of them, although each interpreted them differently. Clearly both of them were, and have remained, fascinated by the theme of “being a writer”, or at least of becoming one. But the similarities and differences in their treatments of this theme are revealing.

A single episode can be taken to illustrate the differences between the two writers. Upward-Chalmers-Sebrill’s rooms at Cambridge are wrecked by a gang of drunken hearties, or “poshocrats” as Isherwood and Upward called them, and Isherwood (who appears in *The Spiral Ascent* as Richard Marple) is marginally involved. In *Lions and Shadows* the incident is treated as a farcical episode, the sinister undertones of which are outweighed by the gaiety with which the two of them incorporate it into the fantasy world of “Mortmere”, which they had constructed as a kind of fictional revenge on school and university life:

“Next morning I woke early. I was feeling wonderful: not a trace of sickness. Dressing quickly, I hurried round to Chalmers’ room and entered friskily, to find him dozing in an arm-chair. He had stayed up all night, packing: my reception was extremely cool. ‘Do you seriously mean to tell me you didn’t realise I that it was all a plot?’ he indignantly demanded . . . He then told me that, in the first flush of resentment, he had written me a drunken note, saying that I had betrayed him, we must part for ever. I was rather hurt; but soon we were laughing together over the whole affair.”¹³

In Upward’s version there is no mention of this merry post-mortem. Whereas Isherwood does not take Upward’s sense of betrayal seriously,

to Upward-Sebrill it is real and bitter enough. If he does not send the note, it is not because of Isherwood-Marple's "frisky" after-breakfast arrival, but mainly because

"the rage he had caused in me was wholly supplanted by another feeling which came over me while I was packing my trunk in my sitting-room after breakfast in preparation for my return home that day for the Christmas vac . . . My misery began from my realising as I packed my notebooks into the trunk that my seventh term at the university had ended without my having achieved a single poem in my lifetime yet which would have the slightest chance of surviving after my death. I had failed. I had failed in the one work I was fitted for, . . ." ¹⁴

Thus in Upward's narrative it features as an incident in his long, arduous struggle to be a writer.

Upward may be thought, by comparison with Isherwood, to make heavy weather of a trivial and absurd occurrence. But this is to mistake his purpose. He is not attempting to make a comedy out of his early life, but to evoke accurately what he thought and felt then. The "misery" – it is a well-chosen word – of the young is easy to brush aside retrospectively, but it is not the less real at the time. It is this immediate reality which Upward tries to convey.

For both writers the theme of "being a writer" is associated with the Isle of Wight (where Upward has lived for the past 20 years). That is where Upward's trilogy opens, using material which Isherwood used in chapter six of *Lions and Shadows* and in a short story, *An Evening at the Bay*. ¹⁵ Some of the differences between them again show Isherwood touching up reality for greater comic effect – compare the descriptions of the boarding-house sitting-room in *Lions and Shadows* (p.233) and *The Spiral Ascent* (p.3). But for both of them it seemed then to be a place where the dream of being a writer could be turned into reality, and this is strongly and beautifully evoked in the opening pages of *The Spiral Ascent*. ¹⁶ The island plays a similar role in Auden's famous *Birthday Poem* for Isherwood, in the final stanza of which Auden gives us an image of himself looking out over a harbour at night, much like that Upward creates, of himself and Isherwood talking of writing on their nocturnal verandah overlooking Freshwater Bay. Interestingly, in

the chronological sequence of Auden's early poems devised by Edward Mendelson, the poem which follows "August for the people and their favourite islands" is the one beginning "Look, stranger, at this island now". It has usually been assumed that the island referred to is England; but it may well have been the Isle of Wight.¹⁷

Auden's *Birthday Poem* closes with an exceptionally powerful image evoking the irresistible force of "history":

" In the houses
The little pianos are closed, and a clock strikes.
And all sway forward on the dangerous flood
Of history, that never sleeps or dies,
And, held one moment, burns the hand."

A sense of historical inevitability was particularly strong in the Marxism and near-Marxism of the 'thirties, and it is expressed with exceptional clarity in Upward's short story, *Sunday*. But what is especially striking about this story is Upward's, or the narrator's, awareness that history is not simply a matter of great events taking place elsewhere in England, in Fascist Germany or war-divided Spain; it is a force which is present everywhere, even in the humdrum life of an English seaside resort. So that even in so parochial a context, it is possible to side with history, and join with those "who are not content to suppress misery in their minds but are going to destroy the more obvious material causes of misery in the world".¹⁸ Isherwood readily grasped the point of the story:

"What made *Sunday* so intensely exciting to Christopher was Edward's declaration that 'history' – the force of revolutionary change – is at work everywhere, even in the dullest, stuffiest, most reactionary of settings, such as this seaside resort. Edward's message was 'politics begin at home'. You don't have to hover nervously on the outskirts of some publicised café in your own town. Behind it, you will find a small club where Communist meetings are held. Go inside. That is the first step . . ." ¹⁹

Alan Sebrill takes that first step in chapter two of *In the Thirties*.

This is the central point about Upward as a novelist of politics. The politics that he writes about is not the high drama of the Spanish civil

war, or the vivid panorama of Berlin on the eve of the Nazi assumption of power, but the routine business of small meetings, leafleting, fighting elections and occasional demonstrations – in a word, the day-to-day political activity which most of us know and don't particularly love. Upward is a novelist of the drabest kind of political struggle, the kind summed up so memorably by Auden in his poem, *Spain*:

“Today the expending of powers
On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.”

And so *In the Thirties* is unlike so many memoirs of that decade. It contains no exotic international dimension, no visits to Vienna or Madrid, no meetings, fictionalised or otherwise, with André Malraux or Hemingway or E. M. Forster. What we are given is a precise and plain account of the life of an ordinary CP member who also has to live, and earn his living, as a schoolmaster.

Does this sound dull? Perhaps it does. Certainly anyone who sees the life of either the writer or the Communist as inherently glamorous will find no comfort in Upward's work. He is a writer who is committed to the principle of telling the truth about everyday life. Since the life he has chosen to portray is not an especially colourful one, the project runs an obvious risk: those who write about boring meetings may end up being boring themselves. But clearly Upward knows what he is doing. The second novel of the trilogy, *The Rotten Elements*, was originally subtitled “A Novel of Fact” because, as Upward has said, “one of its aims is to give an historically accurate picture of policies and attitudes in the British Communist Party during the late 1940's.”²⁰

Does he avoid the pitfalls of the enterprise? I am not sure that he does altogether, and there have certainly been plenty of reviewers to say as much or more in tones of undisguised irritation and impatience. He has been accused of writing “stilted” dialogue, of “stiff and unimaginative language” and “leaden, deliberate, self-parodying bad writing”.²¹ The novelist Olivia Manning announced that “Mr. Upward has none of the obliqueness of the literary artist. He explains and over-explains”.²² Samuel Hynes has described him as “an arid, unimaginative, and unreadable realist”,²³ and there have been many complaints of Upward's alleged lack of humour.

Most of these comments either misconstrue Upward's purposes, or else hit the target by accident, as it were. The “stilted” dialogue

is so, not because Upward can write no other way, but because this was the way in which serious-minded Communists talked about what concerned them in the 'thirties and 'forties. Significantly, one of the reviewers with experience of the Left politics of the 'thirties was able to confirm this: "this is how it happened at the time, this is exactly how they talked" wrote John Sommerfield.²⁴ The usual treatment of 'thirties politics by ex-Communist and ex-socialist writers is all too familiar. It is to look back in a mood of, at best, rueful apology: We were young, naive and idealistic, led astray by our own inexperience, or, worse still, duped by the cynical manipulators of the Comintern. Invariably the intention is exculpatory. A plea of diminished responsibility is entered.

There is absolutely nothing of this in Upward's trilogy. He has been concerned to eliminate the patronising and distancing effects of hindsight as far as possible. He has sought to re-create the states of mind, the attitudes and feelings of his characters as they were then, rather than as they may appear to him retrospectively, filtered through a mesh of later experiences and judgments. Some commentators, including John Sommerfield, have understood this. Others have not. Philip Toynbee, for example, a more familiar type of ex-Communist, who complained that *The Rotten Elements* was "chock-full of a very direct kind of political propaganda", and that "the whole book sins grossly and preposterously by omission" in containing nothing about the crimes of Stalin and Stalinism.²⁵ This is to demand exactly the kind of retrospective apology that Upward is trying not to write. The "propaganda" that the book is supposedly "chock-full" of is, of course, not the author's: it is simply the stock-in-trade of argument within the Communist Party at that time. Upward's success in re-creating that past as it was gives his work a special documentary value which is not to be disparaged, particularly since it is not through memoir or documentary that this careful and precise re-creation is best achieved, but through the more complete imaginative form and structure of the novel.

The way in which Upward avoids the distancing effects of hindsight can be illustrated by his use of the verb "to know". We constantly read sentences which tell us that "Alan knew" this or that. And very often these directly contradict each other. Thus on page 37 we read that "He knew that he would not be able to write poetry again, and he knew what would happen if he forced himself to go on trying".

But by page 61 “But now, suddenly, . . . he knew he would be able to go on with the poem. More than that, he knew . . . that after the present poem he would be able to write many other poems”. Obviously Alan’s feeling of certainty, at these and innumerable other points in the narrative, is ill-founded, and there is an implicit criticism of his character here. But Upward, rightly, is content to allow the criticism to remain implicit, while he concentrates on re-creating the feeling of certainty itself. So far from this method involving a lack of obliqueness, it is a more complex and dialectical treatment of experience than one which encourages us to judge or to patronise the experience without also having to enter into it. The subjective and the objective are here finely held in balance.

This fidelity to the experience of the moment is dialectical in a further sense in that it generates a sense of constant movement, and even incompleteness, within the whole trilogy. To a large extent this movement is indeed circular, as the title implies. Alan wrestles again and again with the same problem or problems. His central preoccupation is with the proper relation between poetry and political commitment. More than once he thinks that he has resolved the problem, only to discover through the bitter experience of creative sterility that he has not. The situation then has to be thought through yet again. So that when at the end of this nearly 800-page trilogy Alan believes (knows?) that he has at last solved the problem, we cannot feel quite sure that a state of final rest has been reached: it is more likely to be one more point of temporary equilibrium in an unending struggle. Hence the title of the third novel, *No Home but the Struggle*, may legitimately be read more ambiguously than perhaps Upward intended. On the other hand the trilogy itself speaks for Upward-Sebrill’s success in resolving the problem. The “poems” which Alan writes or tries to write are, in fact, Upward’s own stories and novels. For example, “the poem I was suddenly able to write at the end of my second term” (p.770), which is then summarised on pages 771-2 of the trilogy, is in fact the story called *The Colleagues*, whose final words are quoted as the final words of Alan’s “poem”. Yet, as Samuel Hynes has pointed out, there is a further irony here. For Upward’s central theme is not politics as such, but the problem of reconciling politics and poetry:

“ . . . the question it (the trilogy) asks is this: what happens to the imagination in a world of political imperatives? . . .

but it offers no real answers. Upward has made his life's work out of the question."²⁶

But if Upward has not answered the question so completely at the formal level as have writers like Brecht or Victor Serge, it is one kind of answer to make art out of the question itself – quite apart from the fact that Upward's work is also about politics and political commitment.

What I have called Upward's "fidelity to the experience of the moment" has another important dimension – its materialism, by which I mean simply his alertness to the constricting circumstances of everyday reality. Upward constantly locates his characters in a real world, in which possibilities are limited by such mundane requirements as having to earn a living, look after children, find a house to live in, as well as by the constraints of the physical world itself. It is characteristic of Upward that the first chapter of *The Rotten Elements*, which closes on a scene of domestic serenity, should be given a final anti-romantic touch:

"'How glad I am that we've got children,' Alan said. He put his arm round Elsie's waist, but had to unarm her as they stepped in through the conservatory doorway which was rather narrow." (p.303)

There are many such deadpan touches, and I think they belie the accusation that there is no humour in these novels. The first sentence of the next chapter is also characteristic:

"They went up to town to meet Digby Kelsall during his lunch hour, a time proposed by him which was possible for Alan because he had a half-holiday and for Elsie because both of the children were at school all day now and had school meals." (p.304)

Again the flatness is obviously deliberate, and so far from being a case of "explaining and over-explaining", the point is Upward's concern to avoid giving the impression, so common in much fiction, that his characters exist in a luxurious void in which they can pursue their emotional lives – and the writer his narrative line – free from such normal limitations as jobs, children, and narrow doorways.

The plainness and immediacy which Upward has sought to achieve, the exclusion of what one reviewer rightly called “false hindsight”,²⁷ have misled some commentators into supposing that he adopts an uncritical attitude towards his “hero”, Alan Sebrill. This is not so. One clear, but implicit, criticism has already been mentioned. And the instability which is epitomised in Alan’s rapidly fluctuating certainties is contrasted, especially in *The Rotten Elements*, with the much calmer, less dramatising reactions of his wife Elsie. He is also a rather naive and self-satisfied person, especially in his early days as a Communist Party member, and this is brought out in his gauche relations with his fellow teachers, particularly in the way he is repeatedly “surprised” by their unexpected knowledge or shrewdness: “Surprised that Aldershaw knew at least something about Marx, . . .” (p.75); “Alan, a little surprised to find that Benson could be observant and humorous, . . .” (p.151); “. . . being put out at having once again underestimated Benson’s astuteness, . . .” (p.261).

Obviously criticism is implied, but we are not invited to a particular response. Upward does not set his “hero” up as a comic figure or a target for mockery. His seriousness may lead him into absurdity at times, but Upward still insists, through the absence of mockery or irony, that we recognise his seriousness, his dedication and sincerity. What readers have found disconcerting, then, is the absence of the distancing effects of irony and comedy; but it is clear that their absence is a literary device chosen, or used, for political reasons. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Upward has remained a committed socialist who continues to take active politics seriously. It is therefore not open to him to treat his own past with the kind of disowning literary techniques found in most retrospective evocations of the politics of the ’thirties. He still respects the motives and commitment of his earlier years, even if now his socialist commitment necessarily takes a different form.

There are, of course, many kinds of irony, and the kind of implicit criticism I have mentioned could well be seen as one type. But what Upward eschews is the irony which implies, and creates, detachment, the irony by which the author distances himself from his subject, and so allows and encourages the reader to do the same. This type of irony is more than a specific device in English bourgeois literature; it is an almost all-pervading tone, which serves the purpose of providing sophisticated entertainment by making it clear that nothing is taken, or meant to be taken, too seriously. It is Upward’s total seriousness

about politics that so many run-of-the-mill reviewers cannot take. That is what they are objecting to when they complain about the lack of “obliqueness” or retrospective judgments. Upward’s refusal to distance himself from his Communist past is what they are really objecting to, rather than the literary style through which this refusal is expressed. I am inclined to think that the rejection of a distancing irony is an indispensable precondition of writing a substantial novel of politics in and about England.

To write such a novel is, in any case, a formidably difficult undertaking. For in the central English tradition it is private life that has become the accepted centre of the novel. The “public” world, the world of politics, is most likely to feature, if it features at all, as intrusion, episode, or simply “background”. Even so large an event as the Second World War is more likely to be presented as something that happened to people, something in which they were swept up willy-nilly, rather than as a struggle which might personally involve people, to which they might feel committed. It is revealing that two of Upward’s contemporaries, both of whom evidently felt, for different reasons, that they could not, or did not want to, write the conventional English novel of private and family life and the “delicate” nuances of class and status differences, became in effect voluntary exiles from Britain – Christopher Isherwood and Graham Greene. Greene’s liking for “exotic”, i.e. non-British, settings has often been remarked on. What has been less noticed is that nearly all of Greene’s more recent novels, like those he wrote in the ’thirties, have had an important political dimension, and only the latest, *The Human Factor*, has had an English setting. English politics do not have the degree of open conflict, or even, it might be said, the degree of urgency, which Greene’s kind of story-novel requires.

But to some extent even Greene conforms to the conventions of the traditional English novel in that his characters typically get caught up in politics against their will. The positively and actively committed are not usually central to his narrative. Upward has chosen a more difficult task. He has written about people who choose to involve themselves in politics, and, this being England, in politics of a plain and humdrum sort. He has written about political commitment, its costs and consequences, rather than about acute political conflict (as Greene has done).

Undoubtedly Upward was aware of the difficulty and unfamiliarity

of what he was doing, for at moments he feels it necessary to explain to the reader that there are, or were, people who are actually more involved with the allegedly abstract issues than with the smaller and more immediate problems which are supposed to move us most:

“They themselves, as they continued walking, began a discussion, which was at first on the Soviet Union’s recent joining of the League of Nations and then on the establishment in the previous year of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the U.S.A. . . . Did this mean that the Comintern would have to cease being active altogether in America, or was it merely a form of words included to placate the Americans but not really referring to the Comintern, which the Russians had always stated to be an organisation quite independent of the Soviet Government? For both Elsie and Alan the question was not an abstract one about a remote political event; it was as immediate to them as the street in which they walked and incomparably more important. It was more important than the personal relationship between them or than either of their individual selves. They did not become aware of themselves again until they arrived at the tailor’s shop above which the meeting was to be held . . .” (pp.167-8)

This kind of concern, and dedication, is so far removed from the normal parochialism of English life and literature that it is not surprising that some reviewers have found difficulty in responding to Upward’s work. Philip Toynbee believes that what happened in the British Communist Party in the 1940’s is of so little importance that “the soul-shattering thoughts and feelings of the Sebrills become pathetic and even, alas, comic”.²⁸ John Sommerfield also believes that the subject-matter “can only be of interest to a specialised type of reader”.²⁹ But why should the anguished consciences of Communists in the 1940’s be of less intrinsic interest than the anguished consciences of Catholics in the 1940’s – the theme of some of Graham Greene’s best-known novels? Does it ever occur to the bourgeois readers and reviewers of, let us say, the much-praised novels of Iris Murdoch, that the lives and entanglements of her characters might seem a trifle “specialised” to any working-class reader who picked one of them up in the public

library? The comments of Toynbee and Sommerfield – both Leftists in the 'thirties – give us a glimpse in the great gulf of incomprehension that is likely to greet any English novel about political commitment.

Upward's enterprise, therefore, has been a difficult and lonely one, taking into account the obvious risks involved and the shortage of useful precedents, let alone a strong tradition of political fiction. And in rejecting irony and an intrusive hindsight he has evolved a style and an approach which confer on his characters the dignity they deserve, while denying his readers the customary luxury of amused detachment.

Yet the story he has to tell is in many ways a sad one, and in what I have written I have perhaps over-stressed the objectivity and externality which form only one element, and not the most important, in *The Spiral Ascent*. The trilogy is largely a record of sustained internal debate and self-criticism, which culminates more than once in misery, despair and mental collapse. Interestingly, this is, if anything, truest of *The Rotten Elements*, the part which Upward originally subtitled "A Novel of Fact", which chronicles in its final chapter the breakdown which Alan experiences on leaving the Communist Party, and his painful struggles to start writing poetry again. As Upward himself has said, "The trilogy is essentially subjective even where it seems most objective. . . . the 'action', the movement of the narrative, is always dominantly subjective."³⁰ In the final part, *No Home but the Struggle*, some of the stricter narrative constraints on this subjectivity are thrown off: unlike the two earlier novels, the narrative is in the first person, and strict chronology is abandoned in favour of a series of pondered recollections of the past.

There is a clear political significance in this change of person and mood. It is only after leaving the Party that Alan can allow himself to speak in his own voice, and express his subjective feelings quite openly. Indeed, like Upward himself, Alan is for many years quite unable to write at all, since he can find no way of serving the Party through his writing. This does not point to any inherent incompatibility between Marxism and achieved imaginative writing – the conclusion which so many anti-Left commentators have been quick to draw – since Upward himself remains a Marxist and a political activist. But it does suggest that it may be difficult for many writers to put their imagination at the service of a specific party or programmatic requirement. In his final reflections Alan concludes that the stop to his writing poetry "came

because I put the Party not the political struggle first” (p.786), but this is a difficult distinction to draw convincingly, since allegiance to a party is one quite normal form for involvement in political struggle to take.

What does seem clear is that the extent and character of the political discipline which Upward-Sebrill accepted, or imposed upon himself, as a member of the Communist Party was thoroughly inimical not only to any kind of imaginative writing, but also, finally, to his own stability and happiness. Upward has spoken, movingly, of the “desolation” he experienced on leaving the Communist Party.³¹ Part of that desolation must have been the inner emptiness left behind after all those years of self-denial and self-discipline. Suddenly the reason for abnegation was removed, but meanwhile the imagination had withered for want of scope and nourishment. “Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart.” A terrible price is paid for the kind of self-denial exemplified by Alan and Elsie in the passage I quoted above. That degree of repression must always take its toll.

So if Upward’s work affirms the rightness and necessity of political commitment, it also warns us of the penalties of too great a repression of the self, of subjectivity – not only in terms of creative sterility, but also in terms of personal strain and misery. *The Spiral Ascent* offers no easy comforts to the politically committed. Upward’s chosen path has been a difficult one. His trilogy is a moving testimony to this truth, among others.

References

1. Some examples are given by Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation* (Bodley Head, 1976), p.85.
2. Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (Hamish Hamilton, 1951), p.102; and see also John Lehmann, *The whispering Gallery* (Longmans, 1955) p.195.
3. Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and his Kind* (Eyre Methuen, 1977) p.42.
4. Christopher Isherwood, *All the Conspirators* (Sphere Books, 1967: "He listened, puffing at his huge pipe, ..." p.100).
5. *ibid*, p.100.
6. Julian Symons, *The Thirties, A Dream Revolved* (Faber, 1975) p.64.
7. See Spender, *op cit*, pp.211-12.
8. *Christopher and his Kind*, p.43.
9. *Ibid*, p.80.
10. See *Christopher and his Kind*, p.81, and Spender, *op cit*, pp.133-4.
11. Edward Upward: Interview with Alan Ross, *London Magazine*, June 1969, Vol.9 No.3.
12. Lehmann, *op cit*, p.244. Spender comments similarly, *op cit*, p.302, and so does W. H. Sellars in Upward, *The Railway Accident and other stories* (Heinemann, 1969) Introduction, p.xxix.
13. Christopher Isherwood, *Lions and Shadows* (Methuen, 1953) p.116.
14. Edward Upward, *The Spiral Ascent* (Heinemann, 1977) pp.690-1. All page references in the text are to this edition.
15. "An Evening at the Bay" in Christopher Isherwood, *Exhumations* (Penguin, 1969) pp.226-234.
16. *The Spiral Ascent*, pp.9-10 especially, and compare *Lions and Shadows*, pp.233-4.
17. *The English Auden* (Faber, 1977) ed. Edward Mendelson, pp.155-8.

18. *The Railway Accident*, p.57.
19. *Christopher and his Kind*, p.80.
20. *The Spiral Ascent*, p.284.
21. These phrases are taken from reviews in *The Guardian* by Norman Shrapnel (July 31st, 1969) and by Francis Hope in *The New Statesman* (August 1st, 1959).
22. In *The Sunday Times*, c. August 1962.
23. Hynes, op cit, p.317. His review of the completed trilogy (*Times Literary Supplement*, August 5th, 1977) was a bit more charitable.
24. In the *London Magazine*, November 1977.
25. Philip Toynbee, *The Observer*, July 27th, 1969.
26. Hynes, *Times Literary Supplement*, August 5th, 1977.
27. Andrew Leslie in *The Guardian*, August 1962.
28. Toynbee, loc. cit.
29. Sommerfield, loc. cit.
30. In a letter to me, July 11th 1978. I am very grateful to Edward Upward for his comments on the earlier version of this paper.
31. See his interview with Robert Jones in *The Leveller*, January 1978, and also his contribution to this collection.