

## Without a Backward Glance: Short Stories

In the introduction to his anthology of wartime writing, *Writing in a War: Stories, Poems and Essays of 1939-1945*, Ronald Blythe writes:

At the time the really good short story seemed to be a rare event. Critics—including George Orwell and Stephen Spender—constantly attacked the form, declared that it was tepid and too concerned with tidiness, and looked back longingly to Lawrence and Turgenev. But hindsight shows the war years unusually rich in first-rate short stories, and that it is these, rather than the novels, which retain their spell.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever Spender's misgivings concerning the form, for *Horizon*, like most other literary periodicals, short stories dominated the creative writing published. This was partly the result of necessity, of course. Though length varies, the general brevity of short stories has always made them particularly suited for publication in magazines. During wartime, the appeal of the form grew for authors due to the lack of time to write, particularly among those in the armed forces or various civilian services whose energies were consumed by the war effort. According to Robert Hewison in *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-45*: 'There was not time to write, and the imagination was dislocated by wartime's break with the past, and uncertain connection with the future'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, 'the short story, the anthology, and the magazine [...] prospered'.<sup>3</sup> Because the novel normally takes much longer to compose and prepare for publication, the appearance in wartime of critically-acclaimed novels such as Evelyn Waugh's *Put Out More Flags* or Graham Greene's *Ministry of Fear* that actually

dealt with the war itself, was a rare occurrence. The best war novels, in particular those that found ways of actually comprehending and accessing the larger aspects of the war like Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Heller's *Catch 22*, Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, or Waugh's own *Sword of Honour* trilogy, generally appeared well after the time they documented.

T. S. Eliot, in a 1942 essay in the journal *Common Sense*, explains the importance of hindsight, in this case regarding poetry, for creating any decent literary treatment of war:

You cannot understand war—with the kind of understanding needed for writing poetry—or any other great experience while you are in the midst of it; you can only record small immediate observations. And when, after the war, the experience has become a part of a man's whole past, it is likely to bear fruit in something very different from what during time of war, people call 'war poetry.'<sup>4</sup>

While Eliot's belief that the conflict must end before the experience of war can be assimilated into good writing is debatable, there is insight in his statement that the recording of 'small immediate observations' is the usual response, in writing, to critical periods as they are happening. But Eliot's use of the modifier 'only' diminishes the particular quality of these raw, intimate pieces. They are, in fact, a valid literary response, and as important in understanding war as well as its literature and culture as those novels that use hindsight to paint more complete but also more generalised, and in some cases highly stylised, pictures of the conflict. The previous chapter on poetry argued the case for wartime poets: much good poetry was obviously produced well before hostilities ended. And an aspect of that previous chapter's argument was that quality poetry can indeed be formed from immediate, emotional responses to current events. This idea is very much applicable to prose efforts as well,

particularly in the case of short stories. The short stories appearing in *Horizon* during the war years offer ample evidence that ‘small immediate observations’ and a focus on singular, perhaps ostensibly trivial details or episodes can produce quality fiction dealing with the war.

Short stories are particularly suited to this type of focus, but the failure of the novel garnered most critical attention in wartime. The problems inherent in trying to write works that attempt to provide overarching analyses of the conflict while it is in the process of being experienced led to exasperation in many critics, and indeed many writers themselves, regarding wartime fiction, as well as writing in a war in general. As mentioned before, and despite the closure of many literary magazines, paradoxically the war increased demand for reading material.<sup>5</sup> This increased demand for popular literature, however, combined with severe paper rationing and the concurrent shortening of new books, forced publishers, always mindful of profit, to print new items rather than classics. What did get printed was generally not as sophisticated as most literati might have hoped: in the case of war literature, as a glance at the lists Harrison produces in his essay attests, anything that celebrated the RAF or the evacuation of Dunkirk, or dealt with the Blitz or espionage of any sort, seemingly was readily published and easily sold, no matter how atrocious the writing.<sup>6</sup> The outlets for short stories were quite often the little magazines, and their authors suffered when numerous periodicals ceased operations at the beginning of the war. The popularity of the form amongst writers actually grew, however, because quality short stories meant speedy remuneration and reputation as they could be quickly produced, and the economic benefits of shorter book lengths made them appealing to publishers.<sup>7</sup> In addition, many writers shared a similar fatalism to that voiced by Alun Lewis, in a letter to a friend: ‘What was the good of writing a long novel when I couldn’t see the way into the next day?’<sup>8</sup>

*Horizon* was arguably the most well-considered place to be published during the war, as it provided an outlet for established writers and opportunities for up and coming writers.

This explains the numerous excellent short stories in the magazine, a number of which deal with the war. Their subject matter was focussed enough to allow decent, effective treatment of wartime experience without sacrificing quality or focus. *Horizon* offers a cross-sectional analysis of the literature and cultural life of the war years, and the regular inclusion of short stories shows that fiction was as valued as verse and essays. Analysing the discourse on wartime that these stories offer, in conjunction with, and as an aspect of the magazine's monthly coverage of wartime literature and culture, provides a perspective that is perhaps more concurrent with events than most other wartime literary efforts. It also justifies a reevaluation of the quality and importance of short fiction written during the war. The high quality of the stories that appeared in *Horizon* during these years, the varied voices they convey, and the unique ability they possess to powerfully represent the experience wartime without the softening, cleansing light of hindsight are all worth considering. They speak to the often overlooked value and importance of Second World War literature as a whole.

Judging from Connolly's own commentary, and his never-realised lifetime obsession with producing a 'masterpiece' in the form of a well-received novel, his esteem for fiction and belief in its importance, even dominance, of literature is obvious. David Pryce-Jones, in his combination of biography, reprinted correspondence and diary entries entitled *Cyril Connolly: Journal and Memoir*, describes and quotes from one of Connolly's journal entries concerning reviewing and journalistic writing in general versus 'proper' writing:

Reviewing, Cyril quickly suspected, was opportunity and hindrance; it restricted even as it launched. In his diary he analysed the several kinds of writing open to him. First, pot-boiling, which he dismissed, and secondly journalism, which exercised the mind and got rid of the recurring need to be competent and adaptable. Finally, writing proper, 'the expression of oneself for oneself with one

eye on posterity and the other on old age. This includes all that is written from the desire to create beauty or to discover truth, to preserve the moment or destroy one's troubles, to perpetuate one's ideas and sensations and also to explain them and to give one's best to one's friends.' Few literary projects [...] could make headway in the face of definitions like those.<sup>9</sup>

It logically follows that Connolly felt short stories were an important part of any literary magazine, and that, particularly in wartime, writers who made use of the format could more readily respond to the world around them.

Although the war figures prominently in many stories submitted to *Horizon* from 1940 to 1945, in others it only serves as a setting, with very little direct effect on action or theme. Some stories seemingly have nothing to do with the war at all, with pre-war settings and themes suggesting no obvious connection to wartime concerns whatsoever. Yet even these stories, whether through the editor's decision to include them in *Horizon*'s wartime pages, the writer's decision to submit them, their creation in the first place during a period of war or in the years leading up to its outbreak (or a combination of these) demonstrate reactions to wartime life and writing. In many, the war serves as a setting, but the themes are unbound from time periods. Elizabeth Bowen's 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps' provides an example. In others, the setting and plot have little or nothing to do with the war, but thematically they speak to the concerns of wartime nevertheless. Two representatives of this type of story are a translation of Franz Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony,' written at the very beginning of the previous World War but still demonstrating relevance to current wartime experience, and William Sansom's 'The Long Sheet,' which explores many of the same Kafkaesque themes in a similar setting. This chapter analyses these and other stories,

showing the diversity of the material presented to readers, and challenging the notion of the silent war.

In those stories that do deal with the war directly, the treatment of war, and the themes drawn from it, vary considerably from writer to writer, in line with the multiplicity of British experiences of the conflict. Even in the military, few were involved in active service for most of the war, with the vast majority training and waiting in the camps and bases. The experience of this lifestyle is reflected in Alun Lewis's 'The Last Inspection' and Julian Maclaren-Ross's 'I Had to go Sick.' For the larger civilian portion of society there was the National Service, and a great many, including *Horizon* contributors, had war-related duties, and these inform William Sansom's 'The Wall' and colour Elizabeth Bowen's 'In the Square.' Alberto Moravia's 'In the Country' provides an international perspective, and highlights the often overlooked consequences of war for non-combatants. Obviously, this is a very limited selection of the short stories that appeared in *Horizon* during the war, but these stories are evidence that quality fiction was produced in the Second World War. Some stories, such as those discussed here, illustrate the rare ability of this particular form to convey reactions to the war that are undulled by the passage of time. These stories, whether the war is at the forefront of, serves as the background for, or is ostensibly absent from them individually, demonstrate the varied nature of wartime experience in Britain and the concordant expression of these experiences in *Horizon's* pages. Each story's theme presents a snapshot of British wartime living and provides a cross section of wartime concerns. Collectively, these stories and their brief analyses, albeit of more circumscribed aspects of wartime experience, form a montage that begins to approach a fuller picture of living and writing in wartime. They are raw, without hindsight, but not without insight, and, compared to other literary responses, closer to the immediate experience of war.

Elizabeth Bowen's 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps' is indicative of many of the short story contributions to *Horizon* in that it deals with a period before the current war, in this case the time just before the first war. 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps,' which appeared in the September 1945 issue of the magazine, uses a frame story set in the time period immediately following the invasion of Europe by the Allies. The majority of the action, however, takes place in the main character's memory, at some point when the first war with Germany has yet to occur, but seemed imminent. It begins in the present day, with Gavin, the main character, returning to the seaside town of Southstone, a somewhat gentrified residential area for retirees near the Channel coast, as can be surmised by its being closed to civilians for the majority of the war. Although it is Gavin's memory that forms the main focus of the story, the introductory paragraphs are instructive, metaphorically, of the story's theme:

Ivy gripp'd and suck'd at the flight of steps, down which with such a deceptive wildness it seem'd to be flowing like a cascade. Ivy matted the door at the top and amass'd in bushes above and below the porch. More, it has cover'd, or one might feel consum'd, one entire half of the high double-fronted house, from the basement up to a spiked gable: it had attain'd about half-way up to the girth and more than the density of a tree, and was sagging outward under its own weight. [...] To crown all, the ivy which was now in fruit, cluster'd over with fleshy pale green berries. There was something brutal about its fecundity. It was hard to credit that such a harvest could have been nourish'd only on brick and stone. Had not reason insist'd that the lost windows must, like their fellows, have been made fast, so that the suckers for all their seeking voracity could not enter, one could have convinc'd oneself that the ivy must be feeding on something inside the house.<sup>10</sup>

This is the house, in the present, as described by the third-person narrator. This narrator is limited to Gavin's thoughts, and those for the most part only in the flashback sequence. The reader is made aware that Gavin has come here, to see this house, as soon as the ban is lifted after the liberation of France, and is not quite sure why this would be his choice for a holiday. The house once belonged to a Mrs. Nicholson, who died before the war, and as the flashback begins, the narrator explains this childless widow's connection with Gavin. She was a dear friend of his mother's, substantially better off financially, who, after finding out that Gavin was sickly and affected by the damp area his family resided in, requests that he stay with her for long stretches, near the sea, to convalesce in the drier air. This of course takes place, and it soon becomes apparent that Gavin idealises the house, the town, and particularly Mrs. Nicholson, who encourages, to the point of near unseemliness, his adoration. After a number of years, he finds out, through an overheard conversation, that her gentrified neighbours see their relationship as strange. Mrs. Nicholson responds by asking if they would mind if she had a small dog to coddle instead, implying that her feelings for Gavin are on a similar level. This revelation ends the flashback, and the narrator immediately returns to the present, with a description of Gavin ending this painful memory, then immediately trying to make time with an 'A.T.S. Girl,' stationed in a neighbour's house, stalking her in a predatory manner. The narrator then switches out of the limited mode to provide the servicewoman's appraisal of Gavin:

'I've got nobody to talk to,' Gavin said, suddenly standing still in the dark. A leaf fluttered by. She was woman enough to halt, to listen, because this had not been said to her. If her, 'Oh yes, we girls have heard that before,' was automatic, it was, still more, wavering. He cast away the end of one cigarette and started

lighting another: the flame of the lighter, cupped inside his hands, humped for a moment over his features. Her first thought was: yes, he's quite old—that went along with his desperate jauntiness. Civilian, yes: too young for the last war, too old for this. A gentleman—they were the clever ones. But he had, she perceived, forgotten about her thoughts—what she saw, in that moment before he snapped down the lighter, stayed on the darkness, puzzling her somewhere outside the compass of her own youth. She had seen the face of somebody dead who was still there—'old' because of the presence, under an icy screen, of a whole stopped mechanism for feeling. Those features had been framed, long ago, for hope. The dints above the nostrils, the lines extending the eyes, the lips' grimacing grip on the cigarette—all completed the picture of someone wolfish. A preyer. But who had said, preyers are preyed upon?<sup>11</sup>

The idea of predation is a thematic constant throughout the story, first characterized by Mrs. Nicholson and at the end, in the same manner with the same sexual overtones, by Gavin. The connections are numerous, and, along with the language of predation, exemplified by 'prey' and 'brutal,' the idea of sheltered light bringing into relief both characters' features, hence their oldness, happens in both periods of the story. The parallel that the two characters form, when viewed in conjunction with the opening image of the enormous parasitic ivy now covering the house, identify the theme, as do the words forming the A.T.S. Girl's last thought concerning Gavin: 'Preyers are preyed upon'.

Although 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps' is set in wartime, and utilizes aspects of wartime to shape the plot, the theme, and the characterizations that form it, could easily stand alone, without the wartime setting. The war does serve a purpose, however, in the characterisation of the two principle figures in the story, Mrs. Nicholson and Gavin. The Great War, rather than

the Second World War, is the subject of consistent foreshadowing in the story's flashbacks, and Mrs. Nicolson's inability to believe that anything so uncivilized as a war could occur, for the simple reason that it would displease her, serves to more fully flesh out her character.

The story also utilises war to establish Gavin as a broken character out of touch with his time and place, represented in his status as a man 'too young for the last war, too old for this'. It is obvious, nevertheless, that the war is used as a device, and only sparingly, because it creates a connection with contemporary readers. This, too, is characteristic of many stories that appeared in *Horizon*, particularly those dealing with civilian life: if they make use of the immediate wartime period as a setting at all, it is usually in such a way that it does not necessarily affect the theme in a direct manner. This can be seen as reflective of the civilian experience of war. It is something which shapes some parts of life, but is sometimes only a background against which the rhythm of life, normal, or in this case abnormal, takes place.

'In the Penal Colony' was written by Franz Kafka in 1914, even before the First World War, and its setting is not that of war.<sup>12</sup> As it is set in a world of officers and orders, however, there are definite militaristic overtones throughout the narrative. But even more importantly, the themes of sadism, masochism and inhumane justice were applicable to concurrent attitudes towards fascism, and to war in general. The story appears in the March 1942 issue of *Horizon*, and is translated by Eugene Jolas, who was probably the first to bring Kafka to an English-speaking audience, having translated *Das Urteil* in 1928 for the Paris-based magazine *transition*.<sup>13</sup> The story, one of the longest to be published in *Horizon*, is ostensibly about a machine designed to execute condemned prisoners by etching their crime repeatedly over their entire body with fine needles for twelve hours before impaling them on a spike and tossing them into a ditch. In the Penal Colony' is written in the dense, highly descriptive prose typically associated with Kafka, in this case these lengthy descriptions are employed to connect the ideas of meticulous attention to detail, idolisation of efficiency and

the perception of unnecessary violence as beautiful justice. These connections, along with the aforementioned military overtones conveyed by the character of the officer and the hierarchy of the prison camp, are easily applicable to the wartime view of totalitarianism that filled *Horizon's* pages. Connolly was usually hesitant to include such long contributions, so it stands to reason that he believed this story's themes warranted it being included in the journal because of its obvious relevance to enemy ideology and the experience of the Second World War in general. In order to demonstrate this relevance, it is necessary to summarise at length the parts of the story where the machine is described, because these descriptions, and the related characterisations, demonstrate how Kafka's themes of masochism and sadism are applicable to a wartime context occurring almost three decades after the story was written.

The actual subject of the story is the officer who tends the machine, and who fanatically reveres its horrible gracefulness to such an extent that, when the method of execution is to be ended, he decides to become its last victim. The officer's reverence for the machine is made obvious both in his eagerness to explain its workings to a European explorer who serves as witness to the last use of the machine, and in the explanation itself:

'It consists, as you see, of three parts. In the course of time, each of these parts has come to be designated by certain folk names, as it were. The lower one is called the "bed," the upper one the "draughtsman," and the middle one hanging up there is called the "harrow." "The harrow?" asked the explorer. He had not been listening with undivided attention; the sun was much too tightly ensnared in the shadowless valley[...]The officer seemed to him all the more admirable, therefore, as he explained his cause so zealously, in his tight dress uniform.<sup>14</sup>

It is established that the officer is conversing with the explorer in French, so that as he describes the machine, the condemned man has no idea what the officer is saying, and therefore no conception of his fate. In fact, as the narrator states, ‘it was all the more striking that the condemned man should nevertheless have made an effort to follow the explanations of the officer’.<sup>15</sup> After regaining the explorer’s attention, the officer patiently resumes his explanation, and his matter of fact description of how the condemned is secured introduces the element of casual brutality and horror:

‘Yes, harrow,’ said the officer. ‘It’s a suitable name. The needles are arranged as in a harrow and the whole thing is worked like a harrow, although always on the same spot, and much more artistically [...] the condemned man is laid here on the bed [...] belly down and naked, of course; these straps for the hands, these for the feet, these for the throat, so as to fasten him tight. Here, at the head of the bed [...] there is this little ball of felt, which can be easily adjusted so that it goes right into the man’s mouth. Its purpose is to prevent his screaming and biting his tongue. Of course, the man must take hold of the ball of felt, since, otherwise, his neck would be broken by the throat-straps.’<sup>16</sup>

The officer shows no trace of revulsion while describing how the prisoner is secured. Instead, the tone of his description indicates that the possibility of a broken neck is of no significance other than its role as an aspect of the machine’s magnificently efficient design. Screams and bitten tongues have no impact either, and are represented by the officer as mere annoyances that are, again, dealt with masterfully by the machine’s incomparable design. Kafka, obviously, would have had no experience of the Nazis, but the care he takes to illustrate that the officer is capable of both pride in his meticulously worn uniform and

zealous adoration of the deadly apparatus he maintains shows that he was acquainted with the type of sensibilities *Horizon's* readers would have identified with fascism. The explorer is aware of the inhumanity of the machine, and indeed of the entire camp. Nevertheless, he is surprisingly relaxed, at least in the beginning, and willing to listen, somewhat disinterestedly, to the officer's painstaking description. This characterisation indicates an authorial awareness, even condemnation, of the tendency of the supposedly humane witness to suffer the machinations of sadistic and petty officials, as long as only others are affected. Again, the ease with which these themes could be mapped onto current wartime experience undoubtedly appealed to Connolly, and would have been obvious to *Horizon's* readers.

In describing the machine further, the officer manages to finally garner the explorer's interest and attention more fully. When the officer notices this, he becomes immensely more satisfied, believing the narrator has somehow been convinced of the machine's worth, and allows 'the explorer time for undisturbed contemplation' of his treasured machine before continuing the explanation:

'Both the bed and the draughtsman have their own electric batteries; the bed needs one for itself, and the draughtsman one for the harrow. As soon as the man has been strapped down, the bed is put in motion. It quivers simultaneously from side to side, as well as up and down, in tiny, very rapid vibrations. You will have seen similar machines in hospitals; only, in the case of our bed, all the motions are precisely calculated; for they have to be painstakingly accorded to the motions of the harrow. But the execution proper of the sentence is left to this harrow.'<sup>17</sup>

The officer's comparison of the bed with one in a hospital is not accidental. In the officer's mind, the machine is a treatment as much as it is an instrument of death, in that it cures the

condemned of ignorance of his crime. This idea that the realisation of justice, through the horrific operation of the machine, provides some type of salvation is analogous to totalitarian regimes considering purges and other atrocities reasonable in the effort to create a more perfect society. However, it is not simply a case of the ends justifying the means. As the officer's tone of adoration when describing the machine's operation exemplifies, much of the beauty of the inscription of the sentence is the mortification involved, particularly its efficiency. Again, for *Horizon*'s readers, this characterisation of the officer would have immediately called to mind Nazism and its connection with a fascination for both efficiency and violence. The link between medicine and torture conveyed by the similarity of the machine's bed to one in a hospital also serves to emphasise the paradoxical connection between unnecessarily violent suffering and justice.

When the explorer inquires about the condemned man's crime, he is told 'The law which the condemned man broke is written on his body with the harrow,' and 'this offender [...] will have inscribed on his body: "Honour your Superior"'.<sup>18</sup> The explorer, having already noted the prisoner's surprising curiosity about the machine and lack of fear in general, asks if he knows 'his own sentence,' and is told that 'it would be useless to announce it to him [...] he'll learn it anyway, on his own body'.<sup>19</sup> It is also revealed that the condemned man is unaware that he is to die on the machine, and that he did not have any opportunity to defend himself, or know 'how his defence was undertaken'.<sup>20</sup> The officer, in order explain this legal process, describes the principles stipulated by the former commander and architect of the machine, whose genius he still serves:

'The situation is as follows,' said the officer. 'I was appointed judge in the penal colony, despite my youth. For I was assistant to the former commander in all punitive matters and I am the one who knows the machine best. The principle on

which I base my decision is this: There is never any doubt about the guilt! Other courts cannot follow this principle, for they consist of many heads and also have still higher courts over them. Such is not the case here, or at least it was not the case with our former commander.’<sup>21</sup>

The officers blithe attitude towards trial and guilt implies that he sees them merely as formalities. As for the current prisoner, his crime was that he failed to wake, as he was supposed to once an hour every night, and salute his captain’s door. The officer states that, had he taken the trouble to question the prisoner, he would have only lied to escape punishment, which would have caused confusion and, again it is implied, thus impeded the trajectory of the condemned towards the all-important machine. The idea that trials are mere formalities and that guilt can be established without argument or question, while not necessarily sadistic, would clearly be seen, in the early 1940s, as analogous to wartime practices of suspending rights for the sake of expediency. This was usually associated with the Axis powers, but the policy was also put into effect, to a lesser extent, by the Allied nations, in order to avoid the possibility of war efforts being subverted. The experience of the Second World War in Britain was characterised by a curtailment of many rights and privileges. *Horizon*’s readers would have identified with the ignorance and helplessness the condemned man represents, and they would have seen in the officer the embodiment of the inhumanity that characterised fascist statecraft. The magazine’s readers would also easily have understood that an indictment of inaction in the face of inhumanity is expressed in the descriptions of the explorer’s nonchalance, but whether they would see themselves as guilty of such inaction is debatable. The relevance of this story to the experience of the Second World War has already been established as one of the reasons that Connolly would have published such a long story. He would also have wanted to publish Kafka because, during

the war years, there was little cultural contact with central Europe, and the next best thing was pre-war literature from the continent. Lastly, Connolly would not be able to keep from connecting the themes of Kafka's stories and the rise of Nazism in the same cultural milieu. Such a connection, at that time, would have seemed an entirely plausible speculation on the militarism that Connolly, and others, believed inherent in Germanic culture.

William Sansom's 'The Long Sheet,' which appeared in the October 1941 issue of *Horizon*, explores a very similar thematic landscape to that of Kafka's story, as well as other details, including a nameless and timeless imaginary setting. Indeed, that Sansom was heavily influenced by Kafka has been argued convincingly by Peter F Neumeyer in his essay 'Franz Kafka and William Sansom,' where he quotes Sansom's reply, in an interview, to the question he poses regarding Kafka's influence on Sansom's stories in the 1940s:

One must make in my case one distinct statement—I was influenced by his form rather than his content. I loved his unfussy, clear, sinuous prose. I loved his continual humility and doubt, I loved his clear way of positioning say a room, and its exact properties—where the window was where the door, without too much damned decoration. His rooms are like bare, beautifully constructed theatrical abstractions: wonderfully clear and *there* [author's emphasis]. Fourthly, his people who were symbols of people, mysterious, not puppets but tremendous shadows, bigger than real people and again unfussed by chatty observations irrelevant to the theme.<sup>22</sup>

'The Long Sheet' demonstrates a definite debt to Kafka's influence, particularly in its use of setting and atmosphere. As with Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony,' it is necessary to summarise some parts of the story at length in order to demonstrate a wartime connection and the story's

place in *Horizon*. The story takes place in an amorphous detention centre called ‘Device Z,’ and the plot is that the prisoners there have been given a Sisyphean task. ‘Have you ever wrung dry a wet cloth?’ the narrator asks:

Wrung it bone white dry—with only the grip of your fingers and the muscles of your arms? If you have done this, you will understand better the situation of the captives at Device Z when the wardens set them the task of the long sheet. You will remember how, having stretched the cloth between your hands, you begin by twisting one end—holding the other firmly so that the water is corkscrewed from its hiding place. At first the water spurts out easily, but later you will find yourself screwing with both hands in different directions, whitening your knuckles, straining every fibre of your diaphragm—and all to extract the smallest drop of moisture!<sup>23</sup>

The captives have been dropped through skylight holes into ‘a long steel box of a room with no windows and no doors [...] the room was some six feet wide and six feet high, but it ran one hundred feet in length’.<sup>24</sup> ‘Cubicle walls’ separate the captives into groups in this ‘rectangular tunnel,’ and the 22 captives are ‘grouped in unequal number within four cubicles’.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the length of this ‘system’ of cubicles runs ‘a long wound sheet’ that is ‘made from coarse white linen’ and ‘bundled into a loose cylinder of cloth some six inches in diameter’.<sup>26</sup> The sheet is ‘heavy with water’ when the captives enter their respective cubicles, and they are instructed to ‘wring the sheet dry’, ‘purged of every moisture’.<sup>27</sup> This task is intended to take a long time, ‘even months,’ ‘but when the task was finally completed, then the men and women would be granted their freedom’.<sup>28</sup> The lingering descriptions of the process of wringing a towel, with an emphasis on the cruelly impossible task set before

the prisoners, are similar devices to those employed in Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony,' and they serve the same purpose by setting the stage for societal commentary.

Throughout the story, the sheer arduousness of the captives' activities is emphasised. At first the captives are ecstatic, as they have been under the impression that they would be executed. But after three months, 'they began to realize the true extent of their task'.<sup>29</sup> The job is not straightforward, because the wardens cause steam to be injected into the rooms at such a rate that 'it hindered rather than prevented the fulfilment of the wringing [...] there was always less steam entering than moisture wrung from the sheet at a normal rate of working [...] the steam injections merely meant that for every ten drops of water wrung seven new drops would settle upon the sheet, so that eventually the captives would still be able to wring the sheet dry'.<sup>30</sup> The atmosphere is therefore stifling, it is 'sometimes difficult to breathe' and the 'smell of hot, wet cloth sickens the heart'.<sup>31</sup> The small hope afforded to the captives keeps them at the task, for they are made aware that it is ultimately achievable. They are forced to stoop to work, because the height of the sheet makes sitting impossible, and leaning over allows their sweat to fall into the sheet. Thus they are in a constant agony of sore backs and knotted muscles. Sadism similar to that in 'In the Penal Colony' is at work. The oppressive atmosphere is also one of the key features of Sansom's story, and it, too, is a Kafkaesque tactic intended to highlight the torturous circumstances of the plot. The dark setting and plot that the 'The Long Sheet' utilises are dissimilar from those of most other short stories appearing in *Horizon*. Connolly must have believed there were corollaries in the actual experience of wartime Britain, particularly London, with the oppressiveness that defines the story.

The oppressive tone of 'The Long Sheet' serves an important purpose in that it allows the story to explore the idea of freedom in a world antithetical to the concept. After the initial description of the task, the story divides into sections based upon the different cubicles and

each group's individual way of handling the sheet. Each section serves as an allegory for real-life behaviours, some of which are indictments of both the method in use and the type of people who usually employ such methods. The first section deals with room three, where 'two married couples and a young Serbian grocer' decide to 'set about the problem in a normal business-like way,' setting hours for each person and working in shifts.<sup>32</sup> They establish a 'steady, comfortable routine,' 'as if they commuted regularly from their suburbia (the steel sleeping corner) to the office (the long sheet)'.<sup>33</sup> This routine is their undoing, because, inevitably, they would 'congratulate' themselves on arriving 'punctually' to work, and put 'insufficient effort' into the work itself, or decide individually that they had earned 'a little relaxation'.<sup>34</sup> Thus, being 'convinced of their righteousness,' they allow the sheet to grow wetter instead of dryer.<sup>35</sup> One couple produces a child, who works at the same task as the parents its entire life, never knowing freedom. Room Three serves as an indictment of certain aspects of the bourgeois lifestyle, in particular the sanctification of normality and schedule, with the detrimental nature of the characters' resulting self-satisfaction making true freedom an impossibility. The story also conveys the idea that over-regimentation of any sort weakens because it limits, a criticism that can be levelled at the socialist ideals, and especially the communal model, which was prevalent in wartime discourse, including the discussions taking place in *Horizon's* pages. There are also parallels in wartime culture in general, particularly in the sense of meaninglessness that accompanies the regimented approach room three represents. British life during the war was also highly regimented and controlled, for civilians as well as servicemen, due to rationing, the blackout, and mandatory war work that could seem needless.

Room Two holds 'five individualists,' who attack the sheet 'in five different ways'.<sup>36</sup> One of them, due to a childhood trauma, is deathly afraid of sheets, and makes excuses, pleads, even offered to sexually service the other four men in order to avoid touching the

sheet. Another of the individualists attempts to block the steam pipe, feigns madness, even tries to bribe a warden for enamel paint to give the sheet the appearance of being dry. All of these efforts fail, and the last two end with the sheet being resoaked, for which he is almost killed by his cubicle mates.<sup>37</sup> One ‘simple, quiet fellow’ in Room Two stumbles upon the perfect way to wring the sheet, by sitting astride it and using legs and arms together, but none of the others takes notice, and his efforts make no difference in the long run. Another is a ‘fumbler,’ who means to be helpful but is too easily distracted to do any good, and the last is ‘perverted,’ in that he does a good job, but likes to stop and watch the steam sink back in.<sup>38</sup> The criticism of individualism that this room implies is also directed at the capitalist system, where everyone is out for their own gain at the expense of others, as opposed to the socialist model. Many contributions in *Horizon* use the label of capitalism to describe the failings of the interwar government, in particular that their leaders, before the war, showed deficient interest in the quality of life of the average citizen. Wartime, of course, forced all classes to work together, by necessity, and the story’s task is another activity that demands cooperation. However, the cooperation needed is not the self-satisfied kind described in Room Three.

Room Four houses ‘more captives than the others,’ but their numbers do not help them as they ‘seldom did much work’.<sup>39</sup> They quickly grow disheartened, and believe the challenge of the task is not worth the eventual reward. Sansom, by characterising such discouragement as not only harmful to the self, but to others, firmly locates the story in wartime. This criticism is obviously meant for those who are unwilling to serve, or, worse, are willing to collaborate with the enemy in order to avoid the struggle in the first place. The ‘real tragedy’ of Room Four is that their ‘misfortune’ does not only affect its occupants, but is ‘contagious’ and affects the other rooms around them due to the fact that their constant excess of water seeped in to Room One.<sup>40</sup> Room One, it turns out, is the only room where the prisoners have got it right. They have passed through all the other phases that define the

other three cubicles, and through trial and error learned the best methods. They are ‘good people,’ according to the narrator, with the implication that the other cubicles’ inhabitants are not good.<sup>41</sup> When confronted with depression, the prisoners in Room One decide:

The long sheet a senseless drudgery? Yes—but why not? In whatever other sphere of labour could we ever have produced ultimately anything? It is not the production that counts, but the life lived in the spirit during production [...] Let the hands weave, but at the same time let the spirit search. Give the long sheet its rightful place—and concentrate on a better understanding of the freedom that is our real object.<sup>42</sup>

Obviously this approach is the one the story celebrates, and by proposing that concentrating on the desired outcome of freedom instead of focussing solely on the intolerability of the task, ‘The Long Sheet’ clearly provides a commentary on the wartime condition.

The Room One crew does eventually dry their sheet, seven long years after they were dropped into the steel box, and call to their captors to witness their success: ‘There were nods of approbation’ from the warders, and the prisoners ask for freedom.<sup>43</sup> The wardens, resoaking the sheet, answer, ‘You already have it [...] freedom lies in an attitude of the spirit [...] there is no other freedom,’ before closing the skylights once more.<sup>44</sup> The prisoners, despite their success, do not go free. Yet, as the wardens’ response to their pleas implies, they have found freedom, and it is completely separate from their task. The Sisyphean nature of their toil is made irrelevant. The message Sansom intends the story to provide is based in this definition of freedom, which is also a commentary on wartime life, and it is that freedom cannot be found externally. Sansom’s storytelling is didactic, and though he makes use of many of the tools Kafka employs in ‘In the Penal Colony,’ he is less concerned with

exploring the sadistic aspects of the situation he describes. His primary interest is in projecting his intended message, which is meant to guide responses to oppressive situations. Connolly would not include the story simply based on its message. It is more likely that he chose the story because of its originality of tone and setting, and, perhaps, because it is evocative of Kafka's writing style.

Alun Lewis's poetry and fiction proved him to be a great find for the magazine, and Lewis's status as a serviceman gave his contributions, all of which touch upon some part of military life, an air of military authenticity. This by itself might have proved attractive to the editor, even if Lewis's writing had not been of such consistently high quality. 'The Last Inspection,' which appeared in the February 1941 issue of *Horizon*, was Lewis's first short story in *Horizon*, and, like his memorable poem 'All Day it has Rained...' in the issue before, deals with the 'chickenshit' aspect of the military. This entails the seemingly pointless, and during wartime possibly dangerously absurd motions that those in the service were routinely obliged to go through to satisfy someone's sense of tradition or stroke various egos in authority.<sup>45</sup> The topic can be found in numerous other writers' stories, but Lewis's stories and poems demonstrate a significant ability to humanise his characters, absurd or otherwise, and in so doing to keep his stories from becoming mere parody. In 'The Last Inspection,' a retiring Brigadier, who 'had retired once before, but when war began he came forward in the same spirit of service as the rest of us to help the nation in her war effort,' is carried on his last tour of inspection via an ancient locomotive, because

It's only natural when you're retiring, you want to see for yourself whether any work has been done during your tenure of office, how things have been getting along as it were; because when you're at the helm you haven't any time to go

dashing into the stokehold to supervise the trimmers, have you? You even have to rely on the word of your mate that the anchor has actually been raised.<sup>46</sup>

The Brigadier's tour serves only as a vehicle for the series of brief character sketches that form the bulk of the story. The driver, Fred 'Freddy' Tube, 'cool as a cucumber at seventy an hour,' and the firer, Morgan 'Mogg' Evans, who 'had a boil on his neck' and 'was brownd off,' dominate the few lines of dialogue in the narrative. For them, the Brigadier and his entourage of fellow officers and wives are interesting only as a source of leftover liquor and food.<sup>47</sup> Their stories, too, form only singular parts of a collection of loosely-linked scenes and stop-frame description, which make up the work as a whole. What little plot exists consists only of brief glimpses at the preparing of the train, its run and eventual return, all of which are covered in a few sentences: the train's journey serves only as a backdrop for the collection of images and characters, and it is this collage as a whole that provides meaning and offers commentary on the world it represents. The perspective of the narration is third-person limited omniscient, as is demonstrated by the descriptions and characterizations recounted in a voice that it is itself a part of this world, even to the point of using similar sentence structure and colloquialisms. A degree of omniscience is obviously present in that the characters' thoughts and opinions are revealed and these insights are more important than the few bits of dialogue in the story's process of characterization.

Freddy and Mogg are realised through dialogue as well as the narrator's description of them. That of their higher-class passengers is created mainly through descriptions alone, as well as of the train cars they ride in: 'two posh carriages that had been waiting for fifteen years in the carriage sheds for this supreme occasion, the diner and the saloon, comfortable as upstairs in the pictures, smelling of carbolic and Jeyes and the simmering of lunch'.<sup>48</sup> That

this train only runs around a single camp gives evidence to the absurdity of such opulent transport:

There was a lot of things to inspect. The camp area was several miles square, and the military line wound about like an undecided snake from barracks to barracks, from construction yards to stores depots, from ordnance dump to M.T. park. And at every station a guard of honour stood on the cinders that made the platform and slapped their rifles when the sergeant yelled 'Pree Zent—AMMS,' and the whole party piled out and the Brigadier saluted and inspected the guards' buttons and the whole party piled back again and Freddy Tube said: 'Up, Nelly!' and off they went.<sup>49</sup>

The narrator's decidedly colloquial, deadpan voice, in describing with almost journalistic brevity the hullabaloo surrounding the Brigadier's tour, hints at the lack of importance of the whole episode, something known to Mogg, Freddy, the narrator and the reader but not, apparently, to the rest of the camp. The story lampoons the traditional social hierarchy, presenting Freddy and Mogg as the pivotal characters. The atmosphere of inconsequentiality encompasses the Brigadier, and even his recent career, and the project that has consumed it, falls prey:

During the last twenty years they had been trying to make the two ends of the railway meet by constructing a loop at each end which was to meet in the middle at a point among the gorse and scrub which was marked X on the big chart in the Brigadier's office. But one thing and another had prevented the completion of the task during peace time. There was no real urgency in peace time. Now things

were different. National emergency, supreme effort. When the Brigadier came out of retirement to answer the call he said: ‘The line *must* be completed. Immediately.’ It would show he realized the gravity of the situation. But the line hadn’t been completed, although he had spent many week-ends in London—before the Blitz—in trying to get the War Office to allocate him sufficient construction stores. Meantime, the work gangs went out to the job every day and did what they could. In winter it was rough on them because they couldn’t keep warm without working, but in summer it was O.K. Anyway, the Brigadier was looking forward to seeing how much they had done. It was *his* line, his monument.<sup>50</sup>

This constitutes the longest unbroken description of the story, and its breathless pace, with run-ons and fragments intermixed, along with its coincidental jabs at the Brigadier’s self-absorption, even cowardice, conveys the whole project’s actual insignificance despite the Brigadier’s attitude.

Freddy and Mogg treat this run the same as any other, with the narrator explaining that their primary concerns are keeping warm and obtaining some of the whiskey being served. They appear, at a casual glance, to be no wiser than the rest of the trains’ passengers, but an example of their brief dialogue reveals this not to be the case:

Then the Brigadier said he had one last toast to propose. Silence in the diner.

‘To Victory!’ he said.

‘To Victory!’ they all replied.

Mogg strolled back to the footplate where Freddy was dozing by the fire.

‘The war’s nearly over,’ said Mogg, grinning sulkily. ‘We’ve dug for Victory and saved for Victory. And now they’re drinking for it.’

‘D’you think there’ll be any left for us?’ Fred said.<sup>51</sup>

Freddy’s doubt that any whiskey will be left over, because of the phrasing in the dialogue, is made into a questioning of wartime culture in general, in the military or otherwise. Those toasting ‘Victory’ are of a much higher station than Freddy or Mogg, and the idea that, while the working class toils for victory, only the upper class would reap the rewards, was a common sentiment. The idea that the last war was instigated by those who finally gained, and fought by those who did not, was pervasive, and it was natural that Lewis, like many other writers, would have wondered if the current conflict would end in the same manner. Satire in this vein runs throughout almost the entire piece. Without it, the story would indeed be nothing but a humorous caricature of the Brigadier, his ilk, and military life in general. The last lines of the story reinforce this sense of unequal suffering, and dispel the sense of the absurd abruptly:

‘There’s a telegram in the office for you, Fred,’ somebody said.

‘Oh Christ,’ said Fred, turning grey at the thought of his wife and kids in Shoreditch. ‘Oh Christ! Oh Christ!’

Mogg took his arm, gently.<sup>52</sup>

The glimpse of military life offered is intended as an indictment, not only of the absurdity of military protocol, but of the British class system. Freddy’s unintentionally voiced doubt about receiving a fair share, followed by the immediate fear that consumes him when the telegraph is mentioned, are intended to show that not only does the social order need repair,

but that there is a war on, with human costs, in which everybody is affected. Those who stand to gain seem oblivious to this simple truth. As a result, the satire exhibited in the rest of the narrative engenders disbelief, even anger, rather than comedy. The ‘chickenshit,’ personified by the Brigadier and signalled by the division’s reactions to his inspection, is juxtaposed with the reality of war. There, real lives, often civilian lives, are at stake, but the military has yet to demonstrate an active, effective response to this reality. This observation of dangerously absurd devotion to the peripheral, ritualistic pomp and pageantry of military life, with scant evidence of actual, effective military efforts to protect the country and its citizenry from invasion and bombardment, would be shared by many newly recruited servicemen, particularly those who volunteered in order to do something meaningful, as Lewis did. Hewison suggests that ‘Alun Lewis sought combat because it would give him “authority in the long fight for peace”’.<sup>53</sup> Thus, Lewis’s story gives voice to a larger, widely disseminated view. ‘The Last Inspection’ offers a reflection that is strikingly timely, coming as it does during the Blitz, and just after the Phony War, when defence, rather than offence, was the prime consideration, and when much of the Army was constrained to Britain, training rather than actually fighting. Bowen presents a rather nostalgic portrait of Britain, while Kafka and Sansom, in different ways, offer decontextualised nightmare worlds. Lewis, by contrast, reveals the combination of boredom, hypocrisy, comic chaos and actual danger that formed the lives of most British combatants. The war here is no distant enterprise, but draws from and reveals long engrained processes and power relationships in Britain itself. So, while the story has its comical elements, it also casts a sharp critical eye on the reality of contemporary Britain. And in pointing out shortcomings and hypocrisies, it gestures towards the need for new social awareness, possibly even social transformation.

Julian Maclaren-Ross, like Lewis, served in the military, at least for the first few years of the war, and also explores the ‘chickenshit’ element of wartime service. His story ‘I Had

to Go Sick,' appeared in the August 1942 issue of *Horizon*. Maclaren-Ross deals in particular with the elements of frustrating absurdity in relation to overwrought, inefficient military bureaucracy. As the title suggests, the first-person narrator, Corporal Picquet, is forced to 'go sick,' or be relieved of duties pending examination by the Medical Officer, due to his inability to march in step because of a years-old wound.<sup>54</sup> Picquet does not know how, and the only answers he can find are from two 'old sweats.' Their responses are emblematic of the treatment Picquet receives throughout his ordeal, and foreshadow the difficulties he will face: "How do I go sick?" I asked the other fellows, back in the barrack-room. They didn't know, none of them had ever been sick. "Ask the Sarnt," they said'.<sup>55</sup> Picquet eventually finds an 'old sweat' peeling potatoes, and asks him how to 'go sick,' to which the heavily tattooed enlisted man responds:

'Ah, swinging the lead, eh? M.O.'ll mark you down in red ink, likely.'

'What happens if he does that?'

'C.B. for a cert. Scrubbing, or mebbe a spot of spud bashing. You won't get less than seven days, anyhow.'

'What, seven days? C.B. for going sick?'

'Sure, if you're swinging the lead. Stands to reason. There ain't nothing wrong with you now, is there? A1, aintcher?'

'Yes.'

'There you are then. You'll get seven all right,' said the sweat. 'What d'you expect? All you lads are alike, bleeding lead swingers the lot on you.'<sup>56</sup>

He finds another 'old sweat,' this one 'even older and more tattooed than the first one' and toothless to boot, who offers this advice:

‘Go sick?’ said this second, toothless sweat. ‘You don’t want to do that, cocker. Christ, you don’t want to do that.’

‘Why not?’ I said.

‘Well, look at me. Went sick I did with a pain in the guts, and what’s the M.O. do? Silly bleeder sent me down the Dental Centre and had them take all me teeth out. I ask you, do it make bleeding sense? Course it don’t. You got the guts ache and they pull out all your teeth. Bleeding silly. And they ain’t given me no new teeth either, and here I been waiting six munce. No,’ said the sweat, ‘you don’t want to go sick. Take my tip, lad: keep away from that there M.O. as long as you can.’<sup>57</sup>

Despite these warnings, Picquet is adamant, because going sick was an order, and eventually he begins the process. At first, despite the warnings and Picquet’s qualms, the process is more or less straightforward. The shock therapy that is initially applied doesn’t work, however, and he is allowed to return to camp, still relieved of all duties, while awaiting a legendarily elusive medical board:

So I didn’t even go to the hospital any more. I used to lie on my bed all day long reading a book. But I got tired of that because I only had one book and I wasn’t allowed out owing to being on sick. There weren’t any other books in the camp. Meanwhile the fellows were marching and drilling and firing on the range, and the man in the next bed to me suddenly developed a stripe. This shook me, so I thought I’d go and see the sergeant-major.<sup>58</sup>

Picquet thus enters the increasingly Kafkaesque labyrinth he is forced to navigate in order to obtain a medical board that will either prescribe treatment or reclassification. He, too, sours quickly to the whole idea of having to 'go sick.' Picquet's mounting frustration with the ever-increasing absurdity and incompetence he encounters conveys the author's own ideas concerning military bureaucracy, as well as the practices of the military as a whole.

The inept bureaucratic mess that Maclaren-Ross illustrates in the story differs the humanity that Alun Lewis's similar indictment of military life exhibits. It seems that Maclaren-Ross himself was aware of this difference. A whole section of his *Memoirs of the Forties* recounts his relationship with Lewis when both were stationed together, a friendship that was unlikely because Lewis was an officer while Maclaren-Ross was a mere private:

I do not think that in civilian life we could have been friends. We were too different. Where he was genuinely humble and modest, I am arrogant and didactic. Where he felt sympathy and love, I feel anger and contempt. I have only a film gangster's kindness towards small things—animals, children—Lewis had a deep tenderness towards life itself [...] but in the army, where the strangest friendships are struck up, it was natural for us to draw together and to talk of intimate ambitions'.<sup>59</sup>

When they first meet, Lewis asks Maclaren-Ross to read some of his short stories in progress. Maclaren-Ross is at a loss afterwards, writing:

I will say only this: that after reading them, the army stories which I myself was trying to write seem by contrast a joke rather in bad taste. This feeling had worn

off by the next morning, but I went to bed profoundly dissatisfied with myself and my work.<sup>60</sup>

Maclaren-Ross does not explicitly say what was so disappointing in the comparison, but his description of his own personal contrast with Lewis seems to indicate that similar differences existed in their respective works. It also stands to reason that Maclaren-Ross saw Lewis's approach to writing about military life as more incisive than he believed his own attempts to be. The differences between 'I Had to Go Sick' and 'The Last Inspection' in terms of the use of satire to excoriate the entire class system, rather than just a facet of military life, seem to confirm this aspect of Maclaren-Ross's self-criticism.

Although the Blitz was a definitive part of the British wartime experience, the aspect of it portrayed in William Sansom's 'The Wall' would have been novel to most *Horizon* readers. The story, which appeared in the July 1941 issue, is shorter than most other stories submitted to *Horizon*, but its simple structure and plot do not detract from its value as a snapshot of the bombing of London, in this case from the perspective of a firefighter. The story begins with the establishment of setting in the first paragraph:

It was our third job that night. Until this thing happened, work had been without incident. There had been shrapnel, a few enquiring bombs, and some huge fires; but these were unremarkable and have since merged without identity into the neutral maze of fire and noise and water and night, without date and without hour, with neither time nor form, that lowers mistily at the back of my mind as a picture of the air-raid season.<sup>61</sup>

The narrator's nonchalance in relating the composite memory of so many bombs and fires is striking when contrasted with the usual horrified amazement in which such events are normally portrayed, and sets the tone for the rest of the story, which is related throughout in the same deadpan voice. Relating the events of the story in this manner serves, ironically, to make the story even more chilling; the effect is further illustrated by the second paragraph, which, still in a matter-of-fact manner, details the spirit-crushing work of fighting fires:

I suppose we were worn down and shivering. Three a.m. is a mean-spirited hour. I suppose we were drenched, with the cold hose water trickling in at our collars and settling down at the tails of our shirts. Without doubt the heavy brass couplings felt moulded from metal-ice. Probably the open roar of the pumps drowned the petulant buzz of the raiders above, and certainly the ubiquitous fire-glow made an orange stage-set of the streets. Black water would have puddled the City alleys and I suppose our hands and our faces were black as the water. Black with hacking about the burnt-up rafters. These things were an every-night nonentity. They happened and they were not forgotten because they were never even remembered.<sup>62</sup>

The increasingly clipped, terse delivery of the description intimates something different from that which the otherwise flat tone would otherwise convey, as does the repetition of the word 'black' near the end of the section: even if this description covers numerous nights, and the narrator believes the fear and suffering inherent in the experience have faded to mere background noise, it still has an profound effect even if it is sublimated.

According to the narrator, what changes everything, making the night memorable, 'in that simple second my brain digested every detail of the scene,' is that the 'blank, indefinite

hours of waiting were sharply interrupted—by an unusual sound’ of ‘a long rattling crack of bursting brick and mortar’.<sup>63</sup> The warehouse wall in front of them, five stories tall, snaps at the base of the third story and begins to fall towards the narrator and his three companions. The narrator is frozen by the scene, ‘the long second held me hypnotized, rubber boots cemented to the pavement’.<sup>64</sup> The wall falls ‘as flat as a pancake [...] it clung to its shape through ninety degrees to the horizontal’.<sup>65</sup> The sound, ‘like automatic gunfire,’ of the last few connecting bricks and mortar breaking away ‘both deafened us and brought us to our senses,’ and the men drop the hose, crouch and brace themselves just before it breaks, with ‘an incredible noise—a thunderclap condensed into the space of an eardrum—and then the bricks and the mortar came tearing and burning into the flesh of my face’.<sup>66</sup> One of the men, Lofty, who was ‘away by the pump,’ is killed by the falling mass, but the other three firemen, including the narrator, are dug out, with ‘very little brick on top of us’.<sup>67</sup> ‘We had been lucky,’ says the narrator, ‘we had been framed by one of those symmetrical, oblong window spaces’.<sup>68</sup>

Sansom’s narrative, appearing in *Horizon* only a few months after the Blitz, demonstrates that recounting immediate, visceral responses to such an incident, with very few flourishes added in hindsight, can provide a powerful, well written story. As dynamic and thrilling as the fall of the section of wall is to Sansom’s tale, equally important are the narrator’s statements that, though this was a unique event, the quiet battle to hold the hose four hours on end, face and hands black with soot, soaked and bone-cold, was a nightly activity, ‘an every-night nonentity,’ with the current setting already their third job of the night (IV:19 24). It is in this revelation, that such inhuman conditions can become accustomed to, even fade almost completely into the background, that Sansom conveys the awesome reality of fighting fires during the Blitz. In so doing he creates a fuller awareness of the experience of war for the vast majority readers who were not as intimate with its unparalleled

destruction. The war depicted here is no ‘chickenshit’ succession of pointless or comically inept acts. There is powerful immediacy to the narrative and to its representation of a novel and terrifying reality.

Elizabeth Bowen’s ‘In the Square,’ which appeared in the September 1941 issue of *Horizon*, is more subdued in its exploration of wartime life than Sansom’s ‘The Wall,’ but in its description of the war-wrought changes to one household, it speaks to a larger sense of the end of past ways of living and understanding, and the powerful sense of being disconnected and lost in one’s own home would apply to the experience of many *Horizon* readers. The narrative is relatively simple in form, with the plot consisting of a visitor, Rupert, returning after a few years away from London, coming to call on Magdela, the lady of the house in a well-to-do district of the city. From the beginning, descriptions of the house, and the square where it sits, dominate the story. In particular, the narrator focuses on what has changed since the war began. Magdela, as the lady of the house, and Rupert, who once frequented parties she hosted there before the war, also, through their observations and dialogue, highlight these changes, as well as conveying the sense of a lost age and uncomfortableness with the present. Their conversation regarding the past two years since their last meeting provides a sense of what has changed, and their inability to fathom their current time:

‘How nice it was of you to ring me up,’ she said. ‘I had had no idea you were back in London. How did you know I was here? No one else is.’

‘I happened to hear—’

‘Oh, did you?’ she said, a little bit disconcerted, then added quickly: ‘Were you surprised?’

‘I was delighted, naturally.’

‘I came back,’ she said. ‘For the first year I was away, part of the time in the country, part of the time in the North with Anthony—he has been there since this all started, you know. Then, last winter, I decided to come back.’

‘You are a Londoner.’

She said mechanically: ‘Yes, I suppose so—yes. It’s so curious to see you again, like this. Who would think that this was the same world?’ She looked sideways out of the window, at the square. ‘Who would have thought this could really happen?’<sup>69</sup>

The bombed out buildings on the square that Magdela looks at through windows, which themselves are opened to admit a last bit of fresh air before they are covered for the blackout, are not the only changes.

Magdela is not alone in the house. Gina, who used to be a secretary for Magdela’s husband, desired ‘to drive a car for the war’ and was the first to reoccupy the premises. Thus, she has only known it in its current, wartime state, and has a somewhat possessive feeling for it, along with thinly veiled contempt and envy for Magdela: it is revealed to the reader that, before coming to London, she was Magdela’s husband’s mistress as well as his employee. She is young and brash, and meant, in comparison to Magdela’s confused nostalgia, to represent a generation easily adapted to war, as Rupert’s first impression, when she opens the door for him, conveys: ‘She [...] studied him with the coldly intimate look he had found new in women since his return’.<sup>70</sup> Heard only in the background during the course of the narrative is a couple, who ‘are only supposed to be caretakers,’ according to Magdela, but even though their policeman son sometimes surreptitiously sleeps ‘somewhere at the top of the house,’ she notes that ‘caretakers are hard to get’.<sup>71</sup> Magdela’s nephew, Bennet, is also staying in the house for a night on his way home from school, and like Gina, his casual manners and regard

for his aunt and her guest, along with his comfort with the surroundings, represents something new and unrecognizable to the older duo.

That Magdela still exudes a sense of disconnectedness and isolation despite the number of guests in her house is a principal device in the narrative for conveying the sense of change. It is as important in a way as the actual descriptions of bombed out houses across the square, especially when juxtaposed with her reminiscences, in her dialogue with Rupert, about the parties she used to hold, and Rupert's observation that, in those days, 'she could not be intimate without many other people in the room,' demonstrates how ill-suited Magdela is to her current status.<sup>72</sup> In a larger sense, Magdela's predicament, and to a smaller degree the behaviour of Gina and Bennet, illustrate the way in which the war has ended so many things, and for many, like Magdela, hollowed out the present to such an extent that coming to grips with it is all but impossible. The state of the house, with its missing furniture, and the square, with its missing houses, provide symbols for this notion. Bowen ends the story with Magdela posing a question to Rupert, 'Do you think we shall all see a great change?', which indicates that Magdela herself, while aware that 'so much has happened,' has yet to accept that it is not her time any longer, and has not realized that the 'great change' has already occurred.<sup>73</sup>

A very different perspective and treatment of the war is given in Alberto Moravia's 'In the Country,' which was published in the April 1945 issue of *Horizon*. His story was intended, Cyril Connolly states in a footnote to his 'Comment' for the issue, to 'mark the beginning of our cultural relations with the new Italy'.<sup>74</sup> At this point, Moravia was relatively young and little known in Britain. Joan Ross and Donald Freed, who claim in their 1972 book *The Existentialism of Alberto Moravia* that the writer 'is one of the great authors of our world' and argue for his 'right to inclusion in the pantheon' of the existentialists alongside Sartre and Camus, state that Moravia spent the war in 'exile' in the 'primitive Italian mountains'.<sup>75</sup> This experience gives 'In the Country' an air of authenticity. Moravia's

story, translated for *Horizon* by Vivian Praz, indeed is about Italy in wartime, and it describes a much different civilian experience of war than does Bowen's 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps,' with its nostalgia. Because it describes the results of occupation, even the terrifying experience documented in Sansom's 'The Wall' is not comparable. In it, Moravia depicts a young, well-off, unmarried couple, travelling in the mountains, are forced to stop for water to fill the radiator. The only structure in the wild, flooded valley they find themselves in is an old, dilapidated shed. As they make their way towards the shed to ask for a bucket of water, the couple are amorously playful, but the narrator's description of the hut they approach kills this mood, and foreshadows what lies within, and what will transpire:

A little door or rather hatch with a lintel formed of a stone larger than the rest brought to mind a hutch for animals rather than a human habitation. A dead dry tree, with a trunk stripped of its bark and the branches reduced to split stumps, leaned on one side towards the hut. Two or three pots, blackened and cracked, a cup or two and a terracotta jug were hung up by their handles on the stumps. An axe was fixed by the blade on a fork in the branches. But what gave a singular character to this thorny, backless tree was the white skull of an animal stuck by its orbit on the topmost branch. The long, white teeth grinned against the background of the gloomy sky. Other bones, ribs, vertebrae, thigh-bones gleamed, scattered everywhere in the space in front of the hut.<sup>76</sup>

This description of the hut changes the tone of the story abruptly, destroying the feeling of gaiety conveyed in the first few paragraphs. The couple enter the hut, and meet a mother, 'her face made one think of those rag dolls stuffed with sawdust which through long use and ill-treatment grow black and lose their shape without breaking,' and her young sons, faces

‘rough and swollen, with little eyes and thick ruffled hair as though it were sticky with glue’.<sup>77</sup> The mother relates the story of the family’s downfall: ‘The Germans destroyed our house, flooded the farm, took away the cattle, stole all our stuff; this was the stable for the goats’.<sup>78</sup> The young man, having taken notice of the family being well-fed despite their obvious abject poverty, asks how they manage to find food, and the mother admits that her sons steal livestock, among other things. After castigating the woman about theft, to which the mother replies, ‘It’s bad to steal [...] but it’s worse to die of hunger,’ the young man is sent out to the well, where the father of the family waits, to obtain water.<sup>79</sup> While he is gone, the mother asks for the young woman’s handbag, coat, stockings and shoes, again explaining while she disrobes that the family must steal to survive. The mother’s tone is described as calm, even joyful, in spite of the girl’s palpable fear and tearful protests. The young man comes back from the well, carrying the pail of water, under the armed guard of the husband, similarly relieved of his belongings. They are escorted back to their vehicle, frightened, cowed, and thoroughly disillusioned.

Italy, although a member of the Axis, was nevertheless occupied by the Germans near the end of the war. Moravia’s story illustrates the tragic consequences of occupation and war fought on home soil in a way that most British readers, not having experienced anything like the chaos depicted in the story, would not have read about until after the liberation of Europe. Naturally, most treatments of the war by British writers are coloured by their country’s plight, a nation under siege and frequently bombed, which carries a different type of horror, but the inclusion of ‘In the Country’ both allows a non-British voice of a previous enemy to speak to British readers and forces these readers to confront a type of wartime experience they may have otherwise overlooked.

These stories are, as stated at the beginning of the chapter, only a small sample of what *Horizon* offered during the war years. Numerous other stories of all types appeared.

But this selection represents a cross-section of reactions to wartime, from those in the service and civilians, from Britons and foreigners, and, in the case of Kafka, from outside the war altogether. All the stories appearing in *Horizon* during wartime are war stories in that they had been selected by Connolly for a cultural magazine whose existence was defined by the conflict, and placed in such a way as to appeal to subscribers who read the magazine in the same context. The stories in this selection are not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of *Horizon*'s fiction, but to demonstrate some of the different ways that the war was represented in this form in the magazine. Elizabeth Bowen's stories both utilise a sense of longing for the past, somewhat sinisterly in 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps' and with a more nostalgic sense of loss in 'In the Square.' This nostalgic sensibility was not uncommon in short stories of the period, but it by no means defined responses to the war, as William Sansom's 'The Wall' demonstrates. These stories were also appealing to readers who, for the most part, would not otherwise confront such direct experience with the war's violence. Alun Lewis and Julian Maclaren-Ross also present an aspect of the war that many readers would find informative, that of British military life. Their satirical approaches both expose the comical absurdity of army protocol, and Lewis's also carries commentary on the defects of the concurrent social order. William Sansom also explores social order in 'The Long Sheet,' albeit in a decontextualised manner, but his intended message is quite different in its focus on the nature of freedom. Alberto Moravia's 'In the Country' takes both freedom and social order into account, and as the story's situation reverses the class-defined roles of the well-off couple and the family of farmers turned thieves, it confronts a larger reality of a nation turned upside down by war and occupation. Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony' is not a reaction to war, but it is a cautionary tale about violence as fetishism, the danger of sacrificing justice for the sake of efficiency, and obliviousness to inhumane treatment of others. Like Sansom's derivative 'The Long Sheet,' Kafka's story utilises an oppressive atmosphere and dark,

torturous tones to illustrate his points, and even though the story was written long before the Second World War, the evils it identifies are easily witnessed in the barbarity of Nazi war atrocities. Even though readers would have only been partially aware of the horrors that were taking place on the continent, Kafka's sadistic and masochistic 'officer' would have been readily identified with Hitler and his party.

Despite their varied approaches, different settings, and contrasting themes, these stories are all valid responses to war. Indeed, all *Horizon's* short stories, by benefit of appearing in its pages during the war years, were chosen by the editor and read by subscribers in the context of war, even if they were written outside of it. Short stories, like the poems of the preceding chapter, were a form particularly suited to being written, and read, in wartime. They could reproduce the thoughts and feelings war provoked, without the necessity of hindsight, and because of this they are invaluable in their ability to provide an unfiltered sense of the culture of the conflict. Creative responses provide an important window into this culture. Yet again, the diversity of the material offered *Horizon* readers a rich composite picture of elements of the war they were experiencing in individual ways. And the quantity and quality of stories published in the journal, which this chapter has only been able to sample, contribute to the general argument of this thesis, that creative writing of substance and value was being produced and read even in the worst of circumstances. As the next two chapters show, significant non-fiction was also being published in *Horizon's* pages. Connolly's 'Comments' demonstrate the complimentary interrelatedness of the different forms the magazine published, and the remainder of the thesis will emphasise the role political and cultural analyses fulfilled in the developing entity that was *Horizon* in wartime.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Blythe, 'Introduction,' *Writing in a War: Stories, Poems and Essays of 1939-1945*, edited by Ronald Blythe (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1982) 21.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Hewison, *Under Siege: Literary Life in London* (London: Methuen, 1988) xvi.

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- <sup>3</sup> Ibid. xvi.
- <sup>4</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Poetry in Wartime,' *Common Sense*, 11, No. 10 (October 1942) 351.
- <sup>5</sup> Linda M. Shires, *British Poetry of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1985) 15.
- <sup>6</sup> Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1969) 511-12.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid. 511.
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted in Ibid. 513.
- <sup>9</sup> David Pryce-Jones, *Cyril Connolly: Journal and Memoir* (London: Collins, 1983) 109-110.
- <sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'Ivy Gripped the Steps,' *Horizon*, 12, No. 69 (September 1945) 179.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. 208.
- <sup>12</sup> Margot Norris, 'Sadism and Masochism in Two Kafka Stories: "In Der Strafkolonie" and "Ein Hungerkünstler",' *MLN*, 93, No. 3 (April 1978) 433.
- <sup>13</sup> Peter F. Neumeyer, 'Franz Kafka and England,' *The German Quarterly*, 40, No. 4 (November 1967) 632.
- <sup>14</sup> Franz Kafka, 'In the Penal Colony,' translated by Eugene Jolas, *Horizon*, 5, No. 27 (March 1942) 160.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. 160.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. 160-61.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. 161.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid. 162.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid. 162.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid. 162.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid. 162.
- <sup>22</sup> Peter F. Neumeyer, 'Franz Kafka and William Sansom,' *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 7, No. 1 (Winter-Spring 1966) 78.
- <sup>23</sup> William Sansom, 'The Long Sheet,' *Horizon*, 4, No. 22 (October 1941) 271-72.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid. 272.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid. 272.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid. 272.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid. 272.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid. 272.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid. 273.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid. 273.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid. 273.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid. 279.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid. 279.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid. 279.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid. 279.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid. 280.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid. 280-81.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid. 282.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid. 283.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid. 283.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid. 284.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid. 284.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid. 285.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid. 285.
- <sup>45</sup> Alun Lewis, in a letter written in Longmoor on 20 January 1941, says of *Horizon's* acceptance of 'The Last Inspection' that

*Horizon* is publishing it in their February number and I expect there'll be a bad smell after it. Maybe a courtmartial for me, if anybody in the War Office reads *Horizon*. But let them do their damndest. If Connolly's willing to risk publishing a bit of truth, I'm willing to take the consequences. (*Alun Lewis: Letters to My Wife* [Mid Glamorgan: Seren Books, 1989] 99)

As his letter makes evident, satirical treatment of the military could be construed, during wartime, as illegal, and not only for military personnel. The letter also speaks to Lewis's conviction that such 'chickenshit' was, indeed, an all too real aspect of military life.

<sup>46</sup> Alun Lewis, 'The Last Inspection,' *Horizon*, 3, No. 14 (February 1941) 123.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 123.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 124.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 124-25.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 125.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 126.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 127.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Hewison, *Under Siege: Literary Life in London* (London: Methuen, 1988) xvii.

<sup>54</sup> Julian Maclaren-Ross, 'I Had to Go Sick,' *Horizon*, 6, No. 32 (August 1942) 113.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 114.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 114

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 114-15.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 118-19

<sup>59</sup> Julian Maclaren-Ross, *Memoirs of the Forties* (London: Alan Ross Ltd, 1965) 233. A letter from Alun Lewis, written while he was stationed in Felixstowe on 17 May 1942, also provides an account this unlikely friendship when he describes Maclaren-Ross as

A queer chainsmoking intellectual private soldier from the army in the next hotel to ours—J. Maclaren-Ross, who writes tough stories for *Horizon* and *English Story* and is a clerk in their company office and garrulous beyond description—and highly strung! Gott o Gott! He talked my head off last night and took all my stories to read, and is returning them tonight. High pressure! He's in a lovely cushy job, and spends the time writing novels. Sort of Longmoor existence, apparently. He's B2. Has had pneumonia. Sometimes I wish I were unhealthy, too. (*Alun Lewis: Letters to my Wife* [Mid Glamorgan: Seren Books, 1989] 217.)

Maclaren-Ross describes his frightening experience with military medicine, due to this pneumonia, in *Memoirs of the Forties*, and 'I had to Go sick' is undoubtedly derived from his experience.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 232.

<sup>61</sup> William Sansom, 'The Wall,' *Horizon*, 4, No. 19 (July 1941) 24.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'In the Square,' *Horizon*, 4, No. 21 (September 1941) 194.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 193.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 193.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 196.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 199.

<sup>74</sup> Cyril Connolly, 'Comment,' *Horizon*, 11, No. 64 (April 1945) 224.

<sup>75</sup> Joan Ross and Alan Freed, *The Existentialism of Alberto Moravia* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1972) 6.

<sup>76</sup> Alberto Moravia, 'In the Country,' translated by Vivian Praz, *Horizon*, 11, No. 64 (April 1945) 283.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 284.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 284.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 285.