

The Politics of the Personal in Edward Upward's *The Spiral Ascent*

Ronald Paul

To-morrow for the young the poets exploding like bombs,
The walks by the lake, the winter of perfect communion;
To-morrow the bicycle races
Through the suburbs on summer evenings: but to-day the struggle.

– W. H. Auden, *Spain 1937*

In a much quoted passage from his “Sketch for a Marxist Interpretation of Literature,” Edward Upward made the following provocatively prescriptive statement about the kind of committed writing that was needed to meet the political challenges of the 1930s:

Yet literary criticism which aims at being Marxist must begin by recognising that literature does reflect social and economic conditions, and must proclaim that no book written *at the present time* can be ‘good’ unless it is written from a Marxist or near-Marxist viewpoint.¹

Such an unapologetically Marxist claim by Upward must have come as something of a surprise to many writers of his generation – W. H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood – who already knew and revered Upward as the “English Kafka,” celebrated for his playfully experimental Mortmere stories and his early surreal fantasy, *The Railway Accident*. Even in manuscript form, this latter work had, according to Alan Walker, “enjoyed a *samizdat* status among Auden and other 1930s writers, and did much to create a literary aesthetic for that decade.”² Upward’s iconic reputation at this time is also corroborated by Samuel Hynes in his study *The Auden Generation*, where he is described as being “not so much a literary figure as a legend: Auden had learned from him, Isherwood deferred to him, Spender admired his ‘strange sardonic power.’”³ However, despite this unique personal standing, the only one of his closest literary associates who seems to have

¹ Upward 1937, p. 41.

² Walker 2003, p. 10.

³ Hynes 1992, p. 316.

been persuaded by Upward's insistence on a writer's Marxist credentials was Stephen Spender who became, according to Walker, "convinced" by Upward "of the necessity of commitment to the communist cause."⁴

Critics of Upward's later work have been less impressed, however. After the above remarks about Upward's legendary status, Hynes's attitude changes completely in relation to the *Sketch*, referring instead to its "doctrinaire author,"⁵ whose opinions "demonstrated his total commitment to the Party by taking a critical position of extreme rigidity."⁶ It is clearly Upward's adoption of an unequivocal Marxist standpoint that discredits him in Hynes's view. More recent critics have continued in the same condemnatory vein, often demonising Upward as a 1930s commissar of vulgar leftwing political correctness. David Smith for example describes the *Sketch* as "one of the most uncompromising of all the Marxist critical essays of the thirties,"⁷ while David Margolies claims its "classically crude judgements" led to the "low reputation that most left criticism of the thirties suffers four decades later."⁸ Valentine Cunningham refers to the *Sketch* as simply "notorious."⁹

Upward has himself remarked on the controversy surrounding the *Sketch*, pointing out that many of the negative comments were the result of a misrepresentation of his views about politics and writing: "Everyone quoted me as saying that you can only write a good book if you have Marxist ideas . . . I hadn't actually quite said that. I also said you needed some skill. But it sort of hung around me."¹⁰ Indeed, later on in the *Sketch*, Upward does qualify his initial statement by reminding his readers that the radical political standpoint of an author is no guarantee of literary quality:

Having become a socialist, however, he will not necessarily become a good writer. The quality of his writing will depend upon his individual talent, his ability to observe the complex detail of the real world. But unless he has in his everyday life taken the side of the workers, he cannot, no matter how talented he may be, write a good book, tell the truth about reality.¹¹

⁴ Walker 2003, p. 9.

⁵ Hynes 1992, p. 320.

⁶ Hynes 1992, p. 317.

⁷ Smith 1978, p. 96.

⁸ Margolies 1979, p.71.

⁹ Cunningham 1997, p. 13.

¹⁰ Quoted in Wroe 2003.

¹¹ Upward 1937, p. 52.

If one considers the *Sketch* in a broader political context, however, Upward's call for personal commitment comes across as much more compelling. First of all, the italicised reservation "*at the present time*" is an important one, since Upward was writing in a decade characterised by deep economic depression, rampant fascism and impending world war. To be a writer in such apocalyptic times meant almost axiomatically to be politically active one way or another. In Upward's view, the revolutionary choice was the obvious one and had already led to the radicalisation of many 1930s writers, as he explained:

Economic crisis, unemployment, the growth of fascism and the approach of a new world war – these facts are regarded by almost everyone as real and important, and they are beginning to be reflected in the work of the majority of serious writers today. . . .¹²

Thus, set against the actual situation of the 1930s, the Marxist aesthetic that Upward was arguing for does not appear so unreasonable or reductive. The task was to face up to the grim reality of oppression and war that was engulfing the world. The literary ivory tower was no longer an option. Upward himself personified this political trajectory as an author who had gone from experimenting with fantasy fiction to writing directly about the struggle for socialism. The more obscure, Kafkaesque kind of stories he had produced before were, he felt, no longer sufficient to deal with the political imperatives of the modern world. One could not escape from social conflict into fiction, only engage with it:

But a modern fantasy cannot tell the truth, cannot give a picture of life which will survive the test of experience; since fantasy implies in practice a retreat from the real world into the world of imagination, and though such a retreat may have been practicable and desirable in a more leisured and less profoundly disturbed age than our own it is becoming increasingly impracticable today.¹³

The key words that recur throughout the *Sketch* are "experience," "reality," "true to life" and "struggle." Upward sought to break down the barriers between art and

¹² Upward 1937, p. 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

politics through a revolutionary consciousness which, he believed, should inform both the everyday life of the writer as well as the kind of writing that this would, hopefully, inspire. It was a radical project that was typical of the 1930s, but one not without its own existential dilemmas. He gives an indication in the *Sketch* of the sort of difficult personal and political choices that this might entail, a passage that pre-empts the central concerns of his own later writing:

Going over to practical socialism is not so easy for a writer as some Marxist literary critics think it ought to be. He is aware that it will involve him in extra work other than imaginative writing, and that this work will come upon him at a time when, having abandoned his former style of writing, he most needs to give all his energy to creating a new style. He is aware also that this work may in certain circumstances stop him writing altogether, that he may be required to sacrifice life itself in the cause of the workers. It is not much use telling him that, unless he becomes an active socialist, the world situation – the growth of fascism and the approach of war – will sooner or later prevent him from devoting himself to writing: he might retort that, though the world situation may sooner or later hinder and perhaps stop him from getting on with his job as a writer, becoming an active socialist will certainly hinder and perhaps stop him *now*. He must be told frankly that joining the workers' movement does mean giving less time to imaginative writing, but that unless he joins it his writing will become increasingly false, worthless as literature. Going over to socialism may prevent him, but failing to go over *must* prevent him from writing a good book.¹⁴

Of course, it is this continued dedication to the workers' cause that distinguishes Upward from many of his literary contemporaries, including Isherwood, Auden and Spender, whose radical opinions faded as they grew older. Upward remains remarkable, however, not only in the consistent Marxist convictions he maintained throughout his life, but also in his way he continued to place his pen at the service of the working class. There is much made by critics of the post-war lapse into silence in Upward's career, as though the lack of published novels and stories reflected some kind of artistic dead-end in his Marxist aesthetics. Yet, from the amount of material that has emerged in recent years, it is clear that Upward, who died in 2009 at the age

¹⁴ Upward 1937, p. 53.

of 105, never really stopped writing, even though publishers tended to shy away from his work. Despite this neglect, the most powerful testament to his continued determination to write the revolution came in the form of a trilogy of novels, *The Spiral Ascent* (*In the Thirties* (1962), *The Rotten Elements* (1969) and *No Home but the Struggle*), which he completed in 1977. In the light of what he stated in the *Sketch*, the trilogy represents, I would claim, the finest realisation of Upward's desire to fuse art and life, dialectically, in a work of literature. It is also Upward's sustained dramatisation in the trilogy of the politics of the personal that I want to explore in more detail in this essay. In particular, the way it is played out in the relationship between Alan Sebrill and his wife Elsie, the two main radical protagonists in the novels.

*

In his review of the completed trilogy, Samuel Hynes complained that Upward's writing was "marred by the leaden jargon of Marxist polemics, and by the pulls and pushes of his dialectical intentions." He concluded by saying that this is a "cautionary tale of the expense of poetic spirit in a waste of Party life."¹⁵ Valentine Cunningham is equally dismissive of the politics of the work, whose title he gets wrong: "Upward dulled himself, as it were, into silence at the end of the 30s, and when he returned to fiction as a Communist party renegade with *The Upward Spiral* he had only this dull medium at his command, and his trilogy simply bores you."¹⁶ A similar disdain for Upward's political aesthetic is implied by Peter Widdowson, another critic who can't get the title of the work right: "Upward wrote no more fiction – until the 1960s when he began to produce the flat autobiographical realism of his trilogy *In the Thirties*."¹⁷ Relegating his comments to a footnote, David Smith recycles the assertion that the author's "doctrinaire voice" and "decline of vividness" are "even more embarrassingly evident in Upward's post-war novels, *In the Thirties* (1962) and *The Rotten Elements* (1969)."¹⁸ In his introduction to the Penguin Modern Classics edition of Upward's stories, W. H. Sellers also repeats the mantra that Upward sacrificed his literary talent on the Marxist treadmill: "[H]e paid the high price of maiming his artistic gift on the monolithic demands of his political faith."¹⁹

¹⁵ Hynes 1977, p. 954.

¹⁶ Quoted in Wroe 2003.

¹⁷ Widdowson 1979, p. 146.

¹⁸ Smith, 1978 p. 178.

¹⁹ Sellers 1972, p. 30.

This litany of critical carping is without doubt a further reaction to the fact that Upward never reneges on his commitment to socialism in his trilogy. Moreover, the powerful ideological critique he levels in these three novels against the betrayals of both the British and Soviet Communist Party comes clearly from the left. Thus, Upward argues not only for an unequivocal condemnation of the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, but also for the need for an alternative international movement that carried on the revolutionary traditions of Marxism. This was certainly not an easy position to defend in the Cold War conditions in which he started writing his trilogy. Another aspect that has irritated critics was Upward's abandonment of his earlier surrealist fictional mode and adoption of a much more naturalistic style of writing. Above all in the trilogy, Upward reproduces a range of Marxist terminology, which often repelled critics, but which corresponds to the vocabulary of people who view the world in such radically political terms. This also forms part of the documentary aspect of the novels. Indeed, in his "Author's Note" to the second volume, *The Rotten Elements*, Upward describes the work as "A Novel of Fact," explaining that "one of its aims is to give an historically accurate picture of policies and attitudes in the British Communist Party during the late 1940s."²⁰

In another "Author's Note," this time at the end of the trilogy, Upward includes a short explanation of how he saw the three works as forming one dialectical whole. The key to this antithetical development was, according to Upward, the conflict between the "political life" and the "poetic life" of the main character, Alan Sebrill.²¹ This authorial pointer is also how the trilogy has tended to be read by the critics. In contrast, however, I would suggest that the relationship between politics and poetry remains both vague and unresolved in the story. Alan oscillates between a condition of hope and frustration about reaching some sort of synthesis between these two aspects of his life – writing and political activism. There is, however, no real indication, even at the end of the trilogy, that this artistic dilemma has been successfully overcome, since Alan provides little or no proof that the "Marxist poem"²² he set out to write is ever likely to be successful. Even though he declares after several hundred pages that "I have finished the poem at last, six years after I

²⁰ Upward 1977, p. 284.

²¹ Upward 1977, p. 788.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

began it,”²³ there is no evidence of what this final fusion of Marxism and poetry might look like. Indeed, the only examples of poetic writing that Upward includes are the intensely imagined descriptions of nature that recur throughout the trilogy. Without doubt, these are finely observed prose poems, full of detailed observations of the English countryside, but hardly the great “Marxist” poem about the struggle for socialism that Alan hoped to produce.

However, this poetic project is, I would claim, only a pale reflection of what is the real ideological conflict of the novels, one that is much more fully and dramatically explored, between the personal and the political, between reformism and revolution. This decisive clash and the way both Alan and Elsie deal with it in their personal lives represent the most complex and moving aspect of the whole trilogy. It is also here that an alternative dialectical movement can be traced throughout the work, with the first volume, *In the Thirties*, exploring Alan’s encounter with Marxism and his subsequent commitment to living a political life together with Elsie. In the second volume, *The Rotten Elements*, reaction sets in as Elsie and Alan experience a growing sense of unease with the reformist revisionism of the Communist Party, leading them to break with the Party altogether. In the final volume, *No Home but the Struggle*, Elsie and Alan reach a revolutionary synthesis in their conviction of the continuing relevance of Marxism and of the need to renew their political activity outside the Party. Thus, the trilogy traces a process of revolutionary growth, dramatising the struggles of those who refused to end up in the “God that failed” camp of 1930s Communist renegades who abandoned their previous radical beliefs. In the case of the Sebrills (and Upward himself), the degeneration of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union pushes them not only to reappraise the past critically, but also to engage actively with the new radical politics of the post-war world.

In all three parts of the trilogy there is, moreover, a key component of gender, which, I would argue, is decisive in Alan’s development on both a personal and political level. This growing gender awareness is related directly to the influence of Elsie, the working-class militant whom he marries. Elsie’s function in the story has been barely noticed by critics, who relegate her to the background love interest of the first volume. But, as I will show, Elsie is a significant character in her own right and it is through her active political intervention that the central conflict between reformism

²³ Ibid., p. 741.

and revolution is both clarified and confronted. It is also through Elsie that the clash between the poetic and political in Alan's personal life is transformed into a question of both gender and class consciousness.

Initially, Alan's attitude to women is overtly sexist, seeing them merely as providers of quick relief to his physical needs. Sex is clearly subservient to the higher sphere of his poetry:

he succeeded in convincing himself once again that poetry was what mattered to him most, and that nothing must be allowed to interfere with it. If having a woman was essential to him, well, there were plenty of women about and at worst he could get Basher to introduce him to a quickly willing one.²⁴

His first meeting with Elsie Hutchinson, a Communist Party activist, immediately puts into question the bourgeois prejudices Alan has about dull working-class women and the superior "aphrodisiac beauty" of middle-class girls, as "graceful as ancient Greek athletes."²⁵ Elsie impresses him instead by her sharp political intelligence and the way she impels him towards new modes of thinking. In particular, she is very much aware of the contrast between the way men talk about revolution at Communist Party meetings and then revert to patriarchal patterns of domestic behaviour:

Now it was Elsie's turn to be severe: 'If he's promised his wife he'd go home he ought to go home. After all, he's been out late every night for the last fortnight doing Party work. I think we're far too casual in the Party sometimes about comrades' domestic obligations.'

Spalding chose to accept her rebuke. 'All right, Elsie. But he oughtn't to have promised, particularly at a time like this.'

'I don't agree,' Elsie argued. 'The trouble is it's always "at a time like this" in the Party, because the political situation is always urgent. As a result, some comrades who are first-rate politically behave like complete reactionaries in their own homes and don't show their wives any consideration at all.'²⁶

²⁴ Upward 1977, p. 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Elsie's comment is a reflection of her concern throughout the trilogy with questions of revolutionary consistency, with the need to take responsibility also on a personal level for one's commitment to socialist politics. In this, Elsie's is way ahead of either Alan or any other Party member in the novel. It is perhaps unusual that Elsie voices this kind of gender awareness in the 1930s, since the idea that the political is personal did not really emerge until the 1960s when, as Sheila Rowbotham points out, it was a slogan of the "American New Left" that "passed into the women's movement."²⁷ As far as Elsie's criticism of the Party is concerned, it is even more politically telling since, as Party historian, Willy Thompson, has admitted, the British Communist Party "in conformity with prevailing social norms, had been routinely and unconsciously sexist throughout its history. Party activists, full-timers and leaders were overwhelmingly men, and their ability to perform in such roles depended for the most part upon the availability of a domestic support system provided by women."²⁸ The fact that it is Elsie who raises this sensitive issue in a novel depicting Party life is an early indication of the more prominent political role Upward gives her in the subsequent ideological debate about reformism that occurs in the trilogy.

This gendered debate revolves, therefore, not only around the question of how to implement revolutionary theory in practice, but also how to make a dialectical link between the private and the public sphere in one's everyday life. The novel opens up what goes on in the home, traditionally associated with the private sphere of the family, to political scrutiny. This is what makes Upward's exploration of the existential choices facing Alan and Elsie much more radically challenging. Thus, Alan's initial lack of emotional commitment to Elsie can be seen as a reflection of both his personal alienation and political rootlessness. His thoughts at this stage are still those of a detached poetic observer, watching life from the outside. What he fears most is rejection by the Party as a "middle-class interloper."²⁹ However, since this does not happen, at least not with Elsie, there is towards to the end of the first volume a sense that as Alan is slowly able to get in touch with his real feelings, he begins to come alive and his leftwing consciousness takes on a more tangible, personal rather than poetic dimension. It is through his marriage to Elsie that Alan's quest for identity is given a new direction, since it is Elsie who shows him that the political life he has

²⁷ Rowbotham 2001, p. xiv.

²⁸ Thompson 1992, p. 166.

²⁹ Upward 1977, p. 45.

dreamed of begins with a radicalisation of their domestic relationship. This not only applies to their equal division of labour when it comes to household chores, but also the way they integrate the upbringing of their two children into their political activities later on in their marriage. There is a similarly inclusive understanding in Elsie's attitude to her husband's writing, an activity which he thinks of as something standing in opposition to Party work, but which she insists on as being part of his own particular contribution to the struggle:

‘What exhausts me is attempting after a day's teaching and an evening's Party activity to settle down at half past ten or even at eleven to write a few lines of poetry.’

Instead of telling him, as he half expected and as the tone of his remark almost invited her to tell him, that he ought to drop the poetry, she said, ‘Why don't you mention it at the next cell meeting that you're finding you haven't enough time for writing poetry and that you would like to be relieved of some of your ordinary Party activities?’

The suggestion shocked him a little. ‘I couldn't do that.’³⁰

Thus, Elsie's characteristically down-to-earth manner helps him to put the demands of their everyday life in a more concrete political perspective, since for her socialism is all about bridging the ideological gap between living passively under capitalism and working actively to replace the system with something more rational, creative and humane. There is, therefore, a growing awareness in Alan after his marriage of what it actually means to live the life of a revolutionary both in thought and action. It is Elsie who helps him go beyond the state of poetic introversion that previously almost drove him to suicide and gain instead a grip on the reality of struggle in the here and now:

There was nothing unbalanced or romantic about her . . .

He must try to learn from Elsie. He must put a stop to his endless bourgeois whining, to his miserable fussing about his own happiness. He must remember what he had joined the Party for. ‘Was it merely in order to feel good?’ he asked himself. ‘Did I do it, like some egoistical religious convert joining a church, just for the good of my own soul?’ Indignation against himself for his backsliding since he had first come into the Party grew

³⁰ Ibid., p. 166.

so sharp in him that he could not lie any longer in bed. He jumped out and began, almost unaware of what he was doing, to strip the bedclothes off the bed, and then to make the bed, and as he did so he inwardly answered his own questions. 'I joined the Party,' he thought, 'in order to help bring about certain changes in the external world. These changes won't be achieved easily, and perhaps not till after I am dead, but the people will turn in the end, and even though the work I am doing with the Party seems ineffectual now it will take effect then. Whether the work makes me *happy* or not is of no importance at all. The thing is to do it.'³¹

What I am trying to argue here is not merely that Upwards novel dramatises the point that revolutionary change begins at home, but that there is a dialectical interdependence between personal morality and political involvement. This link is made even more decisive in the sequel in which Upward explores in more detail the growing ideological contradictions within the British Communist Party in the 1930s and the devastating impact this had on the lives of many of its supporters.

*

The Rotten Elements refers, as Upward explains in his Author's Note, to Communist Party "members who deviated seriously from the correct party line."³² It is in this second volume of the trilogy that the political dialectic is taken a qualitative step forward through the emergent struggle of Elsie and Alan to come to terms with the betrayal of the Communist Party of its Marxist roots by its adoption of a reformist parliamentary programme. Moreover, in questioning the Party line, it is Elsie who plays the most dynamic role, functioning once again as the driving force in the trilogy's dramatisation of the way Party politics affected the personal lives of Communist activists. Despite his background both as an active intellectual and a public school teacher, Alan is compelled to follow on in Elsie's political wake, as she voices their shared concerns about the Party's revisionist opportunism:

Her use of 'they' instead of 'we' for the Party was only momentarily a shock to him. He was becoming increasingly convinced by her.

'The truth is,' she went on. 'that the whole policy of the Party since the war has been wrong.'

³¹ Upward 1977, p. 251.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 284.

This idea, he now knew, was the climax she had been leading up to ever since she had come out to him from the conservatory, and it was this that had made her walk seem like a dance. He felt the momentousness of the idea for them. She added:

‘The policy has been wrong because the theory on which it is based is unLeninist.’³³

It is significant, therefore, that it is Elsie, and not Alan, who gives the main speech at their local branch, attacking the policy document of the Party, *Britain’s Way Forward*, as an abandonment of the Marxist analysis of the state. Critics of the novel have usually identified Alan’s stance in this context with Upward’s own rejection of the reformism of the Communist Party. However, they seem to have missed the fact that it is Elsie who provides the most politically elaborate and pedagogically persuasive critique of the new Party line:

Now she went on to summarize in more detail, though as briefly as the need to make herself entirely clear to comrades from other Branches would allow, Lenin’s argument in the first two chapters of *State and Revolution*. As she spoke he knew that, like the competent schoolteacher she had been before she resigned from teaching to have children of her own, she was constantly aware of her hearers as individuals who were at different levels of educational attainment, and was trying to adapt her presentation of Lenin’s theory accordingly.³⁴

This is another gendered point in the novel that should be underscored, with Elsie, not Alan, reiterating the need to take individual responsibility for the collective aims of the cause. Critics have remained, however, oblivious to the female focus in this ideological debate. Hynes, for instance, mentions only Upward’s “hero, Alan Sebrill” who “breaks with the Party because it has become revisionist.”³⁵ Alan Walker refers to the “intangible air of mystery” in the story that reflects “a sense of sleepwalking determination on the part of the hero, Alan Sebrill.”³⁶ Nicholas Wroe shrugs the whole political conflict off as Upward’s own “semi-autobiographical story about a

³³ Ibid., pp. 298-9.

³⁴ Upward 1977, p. 351.

³⁵ Hynes 1977, p. 953.

³⁶ Walker 2003, p. 13.

poet's struggle with Marxism and art." This is typical of critics who are, from the outset, basically hostile to the socialist dimensions of the trilogy. Hynes maintains for example, that "*The Spiral Ascent* is not really a political book. That is, it is not primarily about political ideas, or about historical political struggles."³⁷ When they do mention the politics, many critics view it purely in autobiographical terms as causing the poetic paralysis of both Alan and Upward. They tend, therefore, to ignore the profound ideological implications of Upward's portrayal of the split within the Communist Party and the conspiratorial response of its Stalinist bureaucracy to the revolt within its ranks. The term "Rotten elements" was used to demonise members who, like Alan and Elsie, rejected the reformist line of the Party leadership, linking them to Trotskyists and even fascists. Although Elsie and Alan are not themselves directly purged from the Party ranks, their experience of personal and political isolation is hauntingly rendered in the novel. However, this is not primarily a "psychological thriller" as Alan Walker has suggested,³⁸ since the question of conflict within the Party is, in Upward's dramatisation of these tensions, not about individual guilt or retribution. This is why Elsie's role in the novel is so important, since it is through her that their moral choices are constantly refocused onto how best to promote the struggle for socialism. Private decisions are shown to have direct political consequences.

While Alan feels betrayed by the Party both on a personal and poetic level, "This is the Party I have sacrificed my career to,"³⁹ pushing him towards another breakdown, Elsie reveals a much deeper understanding of the significance of their actions in terms of remaining true to political principles. Alan is, for example, initially horrified by her tearing her Party card in two, until the implications of this highly symbolic act are made clear to him:

Perhaps she was inhibited by the beginnings of an awareness of the terror she had caused Alan. He felt he was losing her, as if she was falling into a limitless void which he too was on the brink of. He said desperately:

'But how can you bear to live outside the Party?'

'One thing I shall do now is to go back to teaching.'

'What good will that be if you've abandoned the political fight?'

³⁷ Hynes 1977, p. 953.

³⁸ Walker 2003, p. 13..

³⁹ Upward 1977 p. 370.

‘I shan’t abandon it. I shall carry on as an individual. I shall try to have some political influence in the staff room. And I could become active in the Union.’

She realized how inadequate this sounded, and she added:

‘I would try to start a new and genuinely Marxist-Leninist Party – but for the fact that the Soviet leadership still seems to support the policy of the British Party. We can’t go against the Soviet leadership. That would be futile.’

‘I can’t believe that Stalin approves of the British Party’s line, but I think conditions aren’t ripe for a new Marxist-Leninist Party here.’

‘No, perhaps they aren’t,’ she had to agree.⁴⁰

Thus, it is Elsie who envisages their life without the Party in revolutionary terms, while Alan remains the voice of scepticism, clinging to the spiritual home of their membership. Throughout the trilogy there is a recurring element of nostalgia in Alan’s thinking, both poetically, personally and politically, which characterises his search for a context in which he feels that he belongs. This is also connected to his crossing over from the middle to the working class. Through his contrasting portrayal of Alan and Elsie, *Upward* is able to bring to the surface some of the unresolved personal anxieties within this process of political and class migration.

It is, however, in the concluding volume of the trilogy that all these strands of the personal and political, of reformism and revolution finally come together. Even though there is a subjective shift in the last novel to the more autobiographical voice of the narrator and a return to Alan’s childhood and youth, there is nevertheless a much stronger sense of looking back at one’s life in terms of what social liberation really means. Between the past and the present, the implicit conclusion of Alan’s own, often troubled trajectory, is that politics remains an essential prerequisite to their personal fulfillment. Not surprisingly, it is Elsie who also provides the impetus, now that they are retired, to a renewal of their commitment by joining the local C.N.D. branch. Her action is also politically prescient, since the Committee for Nuclear Disarmament was to become the most significant of all of the radical protest organisations in 1950s Britain. Created outside of the control of the Communist Party, its activists were initially condemned and dismissed by the Stalinist leadership as

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 459.

“divisive maximalists.”⁴¹ Willy Thompson also refers to this sectarian isolationism of the Communist Party at the time: “The party had been initially opposed to CND. In the first place it had seen the new movement as a distraction . . . The second reason for the party’s suspicion was that the Campaign was seen as a potential rival to its own front peace organisation.”⁴² Significantly, Alan’s own more supportive characterisation of this new anti-war movement is not his own, but harkens back to what Elsie stated about the need for an international revolutionary alternative:

We were equals in a campaign which was the only good thing politically that had come out of England since the second world war – a campaign, I went on to think as I sat listening to them, that had already spread to other countries and could be the first step towards the development of a consciously anti-imperialist movement among the young all over the capitalist world.⁴³

Moreover, not only is there a renewed emphasis on political activism in the third volume of the trilogy, there is also a much clearer condemnation of Stalinism, which goes beyond the criticism of the reformism of the British Communist Party. Indeed, Elsie and Alan begin to see the connection between the Party revisionism at home and the Stalinist betrayal in the Soviet Union. The dialectical synthesis of the final volume brings with it a deeper understanding of the fundamental antagonism between Marxism and Stalinism:

and finally I had come, culpably late, to recognise that propagandists against Stalin, whatever reactionary political sympathies some of them had been motivated by, had not been spreading lies about him when they had accused him of being responsible for the imprisonment of very large numbers of people who had broken no laws and were not counter-revolutionaries at all (though the propagandists failed to admit the probability that at least some indigenous enemies of socialism and also some foreign agents did commit acts of sabotage in the Soviet Union) and for the use of torture as a method of extracting confessions of guilt, and for the execution of many genuine Leninists.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Upward 1977, p. 540.

⁴² Thompson 1992, p. 116.

⁴³ Upward 1977, p. 539.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 540-1.

As their post-war life together progresses, through the C.N.D., the Cuban missile crisis and the Vietnam war, it is clear that Alan's and Elsie's politics have been determined by their decisive break with the Communist Party. Although they are now revolutionaries without a Party, their continued identification with the world struggle for socialism remains the leitmotif of the trilogy. Thus, for example, the emergent Sino-Soviet conflict in the 1960s comes not only as a dramatic political revelation, it represents also a profound personal vindication of their own previous outlawed position, signifying a longed-for return of the revolutionary repressed both at home and abroad:

Elsie and I could hardly believe our eyes when we read in the newspapers those statements issued one after another by the Chinese who were using exactly the same arguments against the Russians which we had used fifteen years before against the revisionist and non-revolutionary line of the British communist leaders and which resulted at last in our being forced out of the Party. Since our defeat then I had almost come to think of ourselves as political cranks, as puny eccentrics who had claimed to be better Marxists than the whole of the world communist movement and who even if our arguments were right would be swept away by history like the minutest of dust specks, ludicrously insignificant. But suddenly we found that a communist-led country with seven hundred million inhabitants was on the same side as we were. It was this discovery which started the growth in me of the idea, fully conscious at last this afternoon, that Elsie and I might one day be able to rejoin – not the Party, because it does not look like ever being able to cleanse itself of its revisionism – but the Marxist-Leninist movement which I believed I was joining when I became a Party member thirty years ago, or that if such a movement has hardly begun to exist again yet in this country we ought to help to revive it.⁴⁵

This moment represents the real culmination of the spiral ascent of the trilogy, the point of personal affirmation of their life-long struggle. Thus, the novel ends in a period when the revolution is once again making fundamental advances. Despite the subsequent violent excesses of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese worker state was undergoing at this time a profound political battle against bureaucracy and

⁴⁵ Upward 1977, pp. 659-60.

revisionism, which had a reverberating impact throughout the progressive world. Within the British Communist Party itself, as Willie Thompson notes, radical opposition with the ranks “was supported partly by members who responded on the basis of their admiration for the Chinese regime and by others on their belief that the CP had diluted its revolutionary conviction and that in consequence its organisation and activism were in a state of deterioration. They were prepared to agree that this had occurred under the malign influence of a revisionist Soviet Union.”⁴⁶ It is also this experience and insight that inspires Alan and Elsie into thinking that another socialist world really is possible. Although, as has been mentioned, the last volume of the trilogy is ostensibly dominated by the past – Alan’s memories of school, university and teaching – it is a past that points to the future, to the sort of amalgamation of thought and action that Alan and Elsie personify together. That is why there is little or no comfort for critics like Hynes, who would most certainly have preferred Alan (and Upward) to start doubting their whole commitment to socialism. When this does not happen, all they see in the trilogy is doctrinaire Marxism and flat social realism. It was this rejection by the critics that led to Upward becoming in his own words “an unmentionable man,”⁴⁷ whose work for a long time disappeared from public view. This situation has in recent years been partially remedied and several new collections of Upward’s stories have appeared, creating what Alan Walker has described as “a remarkable late flowering” of his writing.⁴⁸ The trilogy remains to be reprinted, however. Despite this, Frank Kermode reminds us in the following salutary terms of Upward’s unflagging dedication to the promotion of a radical political realignment of the arts:

he remains convinced that the artist cannot escape the world of political strife, that if he declines the commitment to that as well as to his art he will fail. His claim is that he has not, like so many of his old acquaintance, accepted that failure. More obliquely, he reminds us that we have still not fully understood the Thirties, that critical decade in politics and the arts, which tried to face the problems, to them terrible and urgent, which we

⁴⁶ Thompson 1992, p. 131.

⁴⁷ Walker 2003, p. 9.

⁴⁸ Walker 2003, p. 14.

comfortably push out of sight and out of mind. It may be that our neglect of Upward is a measure of a more general and perhaps more costly negligence.⁴⁹

It is part of the compelling power of Upward's writing that it confronts in an uncompromising way the realities of the clash between the personal and the political in the context of life under capitalism. As I have tried to argue in this essay, Upward brings this moral dilemma alive by showing how two people, Elsie and Alan, are brought together in their belief that it is necessary to live a political life also in their own private relations at home. Moreover, even as individuals, they continue to struggle to make a difference in the world of leftwing organisation and debate, where political ideas can make or break people's personal commitment. This is the overriding theme of Upward's great trilogy, as the title of the third volume indicates – there is *No Home But The Struggle*. There are few novels in English that explore in such depth the individual consequences of this dedication to the cause of socialist revolution. *The Spiral Ascent* remains moreover one of the most ambitious attempts to turn this radical struggle into literary art.

⁴⁹ Kermode 1994, p. 10.

Works Cited

- Upward, Edward. (1977). *The Spiral Ascent. A trilogy of novels*. London: Heinemann.
- . (1937). "Sketch for a Marxist Interpretation of Literature." In Day Lewis, C. ed. *The Mind In Chains. Socialism and the Cultural Revolution*. London: Frederick Muller Ltd. pp. 39-55.
- Cunningham, Valentine. (1997). "The Age of Anxiety and Influence; or, Tradition and the Thirties Talents." In Williams, Keith & Matthews, Steven. Eds. *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*. London: Longman. pp. 5-22.
- Hynes, Samuel. (1977). "Between poetry and the Party." In *The Times Literary Supplement*. 5 August. p. 953.
- Kermode, Frank. (1994). "Introduction" to Upward, Edward. *An Unmentionable Man*. London: Enitharmon Press.
- Margolies, David. (1979). "Left Review and Left Literary Theory." In Clark, Jon, Heinemann, Margot, Margolies, David & Snee, Carole. Eds. *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*. London: Lawrence & Wishart. pp. 67-82.
- Rowbotham, Sheila. (2001). *Promise of a Dream. Remembering the Sixties*. London: Penguin Books.
- Sellers, W. H. (1972). "Introduction" to Upward, Edward. *The Railway Accident and Other Stories*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Smith, David. (1978). *Socialist Propaganda in the Twentieth-Century British Novel*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Thompson, Willy. (1992). *The Good Old Cause. British Communism 1920-1991*. London: Pluto Press.
- Walker, Alan. (2003). "Introduction" to Upward, Edward. *A Renegade in Springtime*. London: Enitharmon Press.
- Widdowson, Peter. (1979). "Between the Acts? English Fiction in the Thirties." In Clark, Jon, Heinemann, Margot, Margolies, David & Snee, Carole. Eds. *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*. London: Lawrence & Wishart. pp. 133-164.
- Wroe, Nicholas. (2003). "A lifetime renegade." *The Guardian*. 23 August.