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Christopher Caudwell's Greek and Latin Classics



There's a valley in Spain called Jarama
it's a place that we all know so well
it was there that we fought against the fascists
we saw a peaceful valley turn to hell.

From this valley they say we are going
but don't hasten to bid us adieu
even though we lost the battle at Jarama
we'll set this valley free 'fore we're through.

So ran Woody Guthrie's adaptation of a popular anti-fascist song commemorating the battle of Jarama in the Spanish Civil War, 12 February 1937. In the last line, with the words 'we'll set this valley free', Guthrie turns the individual bloody encounter into the universal struggle for freedom and equality, the cause which the soldiers of the International Brigades certainly believed they were defending.

On ‘Suicide Hill’, east of Madrid, the British Battalion of the International Brigade lost nearly two-thirds of their six-hundred strong force.¹ They included a communist writer, steeped in Greek and Roman classics, Christopher Caudwell (1907-1937). He was twenty-nine years old and the author of numerous works including two book-length studies of literature, which would be published soon after his death, *Illusion and Reality* (1937) and *Studies in a Dying Culture* (1938). To the comrades alongside whom he fought he was known by his real name, Christopher Sprigg, and for the rest of this essay, to avoid confusion, I simply call him ‘Christopher’. His brief life, fervent commitment to the cause of international socialism, prolific output, and untimely death do not just make an arresting story in themselves; they can also be read as emblematic of the whole lost cause of British revolutionary socialism in the 1930s. This briefly promised an exciting new approach to cultural analysis, as Philip Bounds has shown in his fine study *British Communism and the Politics of Literature 1928-1939* (2012). It also opened up new vistas on the literature of ancient Greece and Rome, most of which were prematurely closed off again.

Although it is seldom pointed out, the spirit that drove British communism in the 1930s and inspired people like Christopher in their literary work and military action was far from ineffectual. It was in the left-wing resistance to fascism and the spirit fostered in the universities during the period from the General Strike (1926) to World War Two—and not the war alone—that prepared the nation and the generation of Labour politicians for the implementation in the 1940s of some of the most important social reforms Britain has ever seen. Aneurin ‘Nye’ Bevan, for example, the son of a coal miner who established—against enormous vested interest—the National Health Service, which

would provide free medical care at-point-of-need *for all*, a seismic breakthrough in the struggle for social reform, was suspended from the Labour Party in 1939 for straying from the party line by rallying with members of the CPGB and other socialist parties in the attempted formation of a united, cross-party ‘Popular Front’ against fascism. The ideology that stimulated and nourished the work of figures from the Left such as Christopher throughout the 1930s had real-world political implications manifesting themselves in the foundation of the ‘Welfare State’—a mighty landmark for British social reform—and further reforms brought in by the Wilson cabinets of the 1960s, which included former CPGB members.²

Amongst Christopher’s poems is a well-crafted and faithful translation of a Greek epigram by Crinagoras of Mytilene (first century BC). It is a memorial poem for a young man from Lesbos who died far from his homeland in Roman Iberia. As Sullivan has suggested, it might well serve as Christopher’s own obituary (*Palatine Anthology* 7.376):³

Unhappy men, who roam, on hope deferred
Relying, thinking not of painful death!
Here was Seleucos, great in mind and word,
Who his young prime enjoyed for but a breath.
In world-edge Spain, so far from Lesbian lands
He lies, a stranger on uncharted strands.

Seleucos clearly haunted Christopher, but Christopher has himself turned into a ghostly presence haunting the imagination of the British Left and its literary circles ever since *his* premature death in Spain. His own voice has yet to be fully heard, since so many of his papers lie unpublished in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin. Despite the lip service routinely paid to the radicals who risked their lives for the freedom of Spain, it has long been customary to criticize Christopher's published work. A retrospective condescension has been a common response to his unswerving commitment to the Soviet Union,⁴ as if this was an unusual stance on the British Left in the mid-1930s. He was a remarkable polymath, an expert on the history of aviation who tried to think about the world of knowledge—physics as well as literature—synthetically; using an ancient philosopher's image, he explained science and art as yearning to be reunited, 'like the two halves produced by cutting the original human hermaphrodite in half, according to the story of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*.'⁵ Yet he has met with damning critiques of his grasp of the physical sciences. His cultural and literary theories have been savagely criticized as naïve, misguided or reductionist by theoretical titans on the Marxist scene, including E. P. Thompson and especially Terry Eagleton in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), thus perpetuating the tiresome tradition of oedipal aggression towards forefathers displayed by new generations within the intellectual Left.⁶ Little has been written about Christopher that does not evaluate—and often condemn—his contribution to materialist theories of culture, especially literary culture.

Bounds has recently argued, persuasively, that Christopher took many of his theoretical bearings from important elements in Soviet theory, 'but that he refracted the Soviet orthodoxy through the distorting mechanisms of his distinctively autodidactic

mind’.⁷ Like Bounds, I hope to shift the emphasis onto illumination rather than judgment. First, I aim to show the extent to which Christopher’s approach to aesthetic questions was indebted to classical literature, especially classical literary theory. This debt can help to explain what have been seen as some of his more idiosyncratic as well as important insights into the relationship between Life and Art, and between reality and poetic rhythm, on which his thinking was ground-breaking. Secondly, I want to emphasize that Christopher saw the production of art, and analysis of art, as necessary parts of the struggle for social and political renewal. He wrote poetry himself, and saw no real distinction between theory and practice. Both art and its analysis were, for him, active verbs rather than abstract nouns. Art offers humans a way to think about their predicament collectively, a way of seeing their fate without which they could not cope with it, let alone change it: tragic art can be great art, for example, ‘for here reality at its bitterest—death, despair, eternal failure—is yet given an organisation, a shape, an affective arrangement which expresses a deeper and more social view of fate’.⁸ Tragedy *organises, shapes, arranges affectively*, and *expresses*, thus producing a *social view* of fate. If the social world were to be changed for the better, mankind needed—Christopher believed—to achieve a collective and clear-eyed ‘social view’ of mankind’s situation. It was the function of art and its discussants to make such a view achievable.

In his finest poem, ‘Classic Encounter’, he fuses material from an ancient tragedy with a critical stance on more recent history, attempting to create through art ‘a deeper and more social view’ of the cost of militarism, ancient and modern:

Arrived upon the downs of asphodel

I walked towards the military quarter
To find the sunburnt ghosts of allied soldiers
Killed on the Chersonese.

I met a band of palefaced weary men
Got up in odd equipment. “Hi,” I said
“Are you Gallipoli?”

And one, the leader, with a voice of gold,
Answered: “No. Ours, Sir, was an older bungle.
We are Athenian hoplites who sat down
Before young Syracuse.

“Need I recount our too-much-memoired end?
The hesitancy of our General Staff,
The battle in the Harbour, where Hope fled
But we could not?

“Not our disgrace in that,” the leader added,
“But we are those proficient in the arts
Freed in return for the repeated verses
Of our Euripides.

“Those honeyed words did not soothe Cerberus”

(The leader grinned), “For sulky Charon hire

Deficient, and by Rhadamanthos ruled

No mitigation.

“And yet with men, born victims of their ears

The chorus of the weeping *Troades*

Prevailed to gain the freedom of our limbs

And waft us back to Athens.

“Through every corridor of this old barracks

We wander without friends, not fallen or

Survivors in a military sense.

Hence our disgrace.”

He turned, and as the rank mists took them in

They chanted at the God to Whom men pray,

Whether He be Compulsion, or All-fathering,

Or Fate and blind.⁹

The ‘I’ in this poem is a visitor to the Underworld, like Odysseus in book eleven of the *Odyssey*. The *nekuia* was of course a favourite trope of all the Modernists, especially in the wake of World War One,¹⁰ but few of them made such explicit references to real

events in recent history. The ‘I’ voice meets the Athenians who had died a horrible death in Syracuse in 413 BCE (described in tragic detail in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, book VII) as a result of the military debacle that concluded Athens’ disastrous invasion of Sicily. The speaker mistakes them for those fallen in the Gallipoli campaign of 1915-1916, when combined British and Anzac fatalities alone are estimated at 76,000. The poem thus draws a parallel between the victims of warmongering generals in the Mediterranean at a distance of more than two millennia. But it also incorporates an ancient tradition, reported in Plutarch’s *Life of Nicias* 29, that some of the Athenians had persuaded their captors to spare their lives by performing songs from the tragedies of Euripides:

Most of the Athenians perished in the quarries by diseases and ill diet... Several were saved for the sake of Euripides, whose poetry, it appears, was in request among the Sicilians more than among any of the settlers out of Greece. And when any travelers arrived that could tell them some passage, or give them any specimen of his verses, they were delighted to be able to communicate them to one another. Many of the captives who got safe back to Athens are said, after they reached home, to have gone and made their acknowledgments to Euripides, relating how that some of them had been released from their slavery by teaching what they could remember of his poems, and others, when straggling after the fight, been relieved with meat and drink for repeating some of his lyrics.

But Christopher adapts this ancient anecdote by suggesting that the song they had sung was actually from *Trojan Women*. With the exceptions of *Medea* and *Oedipus*, this was the most familiar Greek tragedy in Britain in the 1920s. Just after the war, in 1919, Sybil Thorndike played Hecuba at the Old Vic to raise funds for the newly founded League of Nations, and also at the Alhambra Theatre in Leicester Square: she said later, ‘All the misery and awfulness of the 1914 war was symbolised in that play and we all felt here was the beginning of a new era of peace and brotherhood.’¹¹ We do not know whether Christopher saw that production or not. But the work that he makes the ancient play do shows him forging a distinctive new mythical method that used the Greeks in a progressive political way. The method allows him both to expose the needless deaths of irresponsibly led ordinary soldiers, and also to pose metaphysical questions about the reasons men invent to understand mortality. The last lines are a response to one of the most famous challenges to the idea of benevolent deities, expressed in *Trojan Women* by Hecuba herself (e.g. 884-6).

Before we explore Christopher’s writings further, we will benefit from laying out the context within which he was operating, especially the political organisation to which he had given his allegiance, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). This had been founded in 1920. Inspired by the Russian revolution, and supported by a financial donation from Lenin, the four major political groups which combined to form the new CPGB were the British Socialist Party (BSP), the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), the Prohibition and Reform Party (PRP) and the Workers' Socialist Federation (WSF).¹²

Although the CPGB never became a mass party like its equivalents in France or Italy, it exerted an influence out of proportion to its size, partly because there were

always links between its members and those of the mainstream Labour Party. Substantial numbers of prominent workers' representatives, students and intellectuals, moreover, did actually take out membership. By the time of the General Strike in 1926, the party had over ten thousand members. Its first Member of Parliament, William Gallacher, was elected for the mining district of West Fife in Scotland in the 1931 General Election, at which the party won nearly seventy-five thousand votes nationally. During the next few years Christopher joined the party, along with thousands of other young idealists. It offered the young people of that generation 'a bridge between the radical liberal tradition of the "freeborn Englishman" and the twentieth-century struggle against fascism and decrepit capitalism.'¹³ Christopher was one of several communist writers during the first two decades of the party's existence; they were influential amongst their 'fellow-traveller' friends—the substantial number of communist sympathisers who never actually became members, such as W. H. Auden, E. M. Forster and the classical scholar and poet Louis MacNeice.

By 1936, as the first rumours of Joseph Stalin's purges emerged, the CPGB leaders had begun to be divided over the question of continuing support for the Soviet Union. But the emergency in Spain diverted the world's attention and aroused the grass-roots members of the party to action. British communists were crucial in the creation of the International Brigades which went to fight for the Republicans in the Civil War. After Christopher's death, while the Fascists gained power in both Germany and Italy, the membership of the CPGB steadily increased. At the end of the war, two communists were elected to parliament in the General Election. This was the historic moment at which the CPGB enjoyed its greatest popularity; but, within a decade, lurid anti-Soviet propaganda,

alongside truthful accounts of Stalin's dreadful crimes, sent the party into terminal decline.

Looking back on the 1930s, the Marxist historian Christopher Hill himself drew attention to the number of CPGB intellectuals for whom, he argued, it had not been History but English Literature that had been the original primary interest—he was thinking of A. L. Morton, Edgell Rickword, Alick West, Douglas Garman, and Jack Lindsay.¹⁴ I do not deny the importance of English literature in the intellectual development and publications of these people, and for other communists of their generation such as the poet (and translator of Virgil) Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender and the English Literature specialist Margot Heinemann. But several, for example Alick West and Jack Lindsay, only came to English literature via traditional and rigorous educations in the Greek and Latin classics. Moreover, part of their Marxist understanding of culture was that separating different linguistic traditions and historical periods—reading ancient poetry in isolation from contemporary poetry, for example—was to impoverish the transformative social potential of art. Edgell Rickword, who in 1919 went to Pembroke College, Oxford, to read Modern Languages, had attended Colchester Royal Grammar School, famous for its training in classical languages and literature. Douglas Garman attended Caius College, Cambridge, graduating in Medieval and Modern Languages in 1923, but much of his specialist translation work in later life was actually on ancient Greek history.

There were, moreover, classical scholars working inside academia who were committed and active party members, notably Benjamin Farrington and George Derwent Thomson. In their cases, too, we often find a sensitivity to the continuity of literary

history, taking the form of much more developed interest in the ‘reception’ of ancient literature in the modern world than in most of the classical scholars of the time. It is therefore possible to make a case, as I have with Henry Stead in another volume,¹⁵ that British Marxist intellectual tradition as founded in the 1930s by committed revolutionaries was built less on literature in English than on literature in Latin and Greek. This has important implications for the way that literature in that period is configured, since the classicism of this time is routinely associated with the Modernist poetry of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and the other practitioners of the ‘radical Right’ in literature.¹⁶ Their fame and public prominence has effectively occluded the role of classics in early British communism.

Amongst the substantial group of CPGB intellectuals there were many who did not operate within the ‘Ivory Tower’ but in the public world of letters. Classical authors were still an important component of the advanced school curriculum, and so many of the middle-class intellectuals attracted to communism had read substantial amounts of ancient literature. One of the most brilliant of the young communists killed in Spain, John Cornford, was the son of the distinguished and prolific Cambridge classicist Francis MacDonald Cornford, himself a politically engaged supporter of the working-class movement.¹⁷ John had undoubtedly studied classical authors during his privileged education at Stowe School. But the most promising communist intellectual killed in Spain was Christopher, whose posthumous book *Illusion and Reality* (1937), despite all the obloquy it has been customary to pour in it since Terry Eagleton’s critique, has undoubtedly exerted a considerable influence in British and also Continental left-wing circles.¹⁸ It was mostly written in the summer of 1935.

Before the painstaking studies of Sullivan and Whetter, the standard view of Christopher has long been that he was at worst a ‘maverick’ author,¹⁹ and at best an autodidact who taught himself all he knew about the history and philosophy of the world in the London Library in the 1930s. Yet education scarcely begins at university. He was a member of the highly educated Roman Catholic middle class. His family had literary interests and had worked in journalism for several generations. He was unusually close to his father, Stanhope W. Sprigg, because his mother died when he was only eight years old. Stanhope was superlatively well read. He had attended the King’s Grammar School in Worcester before beginning a career (as had at least two generations of Spriggs before him) in journalism, editing, literary consultancy, and translation. Stanhope was a member of the Authors’ Club in Whitehall Court and the Savage Club on Adelphi Terrace. He regularly renewed his reader’s card for the British Museum reading room.²⁰

Stanhope’s first publication was *Games and Amusements* in the ‘Sunlight Year Books’ series published at Port Sunlight by the Lever Brothers (1895). He was best known as the editor of a popular illustrated children’s series *Louis Wain’s Annual* (1901-21) and of the *The Windsor Magazine*. But he was decidedly on the left-wing end of the political spectrum, as his strongly worded letter urging the formation of a National Union of Working Journalists in *The Journalist* reveals: he talks of the ‘colossal stupidity’ of working journalists who expect that their employers would ever raise their salaries without a fight, and urges that the proposed Union would accept only ‘bona fide pressmen’, whether ‘rich or poor, high or low’, and exclude all newspaper proprietors.²¹ For many years Stanhope Sprigg also offered his services, probably for no fee, as literary advisor to the Society of Women Journalists.²² His commitment to progressive politics is

underlined by his publication of Lucy B. Stearns's *Two Schemes to Prevent Pauperism* (London, 1911); keen interest in military matters and international politics, at least during World War One, is proved by his translation of *The New Bernhardi: "World Power or Downfall"* (London: C. A. Pearson, 1915), his study of the Australian Labor politician and Prime Minister William Hughes in *W. M. Hughes, the Strong Man of Australia: With a message from Mr. Hughes* (London: Pearson, 1916) and his World War One pamphlet *The British Blockade: What it Means; How it Works* (London: G. B. Dibblee, 1917).

But Stanhope's regular paying job was as Literary Editor of the *Daily Express* newspaper, owned by C. Arthur Pearson Ltd. He lost this position in 1922 after the death of Pearson, who was fond of him and had always protected his interests. Stanhope was forced to accept the post of Literary Editor on the *Yorkshire Observer* and moved north. Christopher, although required for financial reasons to leave school prematurely, was keen to help his father, and found a job in Bradford as a trainee reporter on the same paper. The books his father chose to discuss, and which one of Christopher's biographers suspects he helped his father review, included works by Maxim Gorky, several on new technologies including the wireless, and *Dictionary of Socialism*.²³ Brought up by a union-organising father, and plunged into poverty suddenly in his teens, he was soon politically disaffected, although he remained unaffiliated to any party or ideology, and attached to the idea of the British Empire.

By 1925 he had moved back to London, to join his older brother Theo as a freelance journalist and contributor to the new magazine *Airways*: aviation had long been a family interest. Christopher also worked as Assistant Editor on the journal of the Association for British Malaya. He began writing in several different genres under a

variety of pen names: his works aviation were written as St. John Lewis, Christopher Sprigg, Arthur Cave, and (intriguingly) Icarus: the telegram address he shared with his brother was 'Ikaros, Estrand, London'.²⁴ He published several books on flying, but by the early 1930s was bored and frustrated, remarking to a close friend that he felt alienated by the 'the conventionally minded bourgeois with a certain ability for superficial journalism' amongst whom he spent his days.²⁵ He lost his religious faith altogether; he read philosophy, psychology and anthropology voraciously. He wrestled with Plato through his identification with the questing, philosophical hero of Charles Morgan's novel *The Fountain* (1932).²⁶ He was a rebellious and intellectual man who had not found his cause in life. He increasingly turned to creative writing, especially poetry and detective novels, some of which were quite successful and are still read.²⁷ Depressed by the worldwide economic slump and the rise of anti-Semitism in London, he did not fight to save the aeronautical publishing business he had shared with his brother. And, in 1934, he began to read the Marxist classics.

His first sustained encounter with Marxism may have been through *Viewpoint*, a Croydon-based literary review which ran for a few months in 1934, before being absorbed in October of that year into the *Left Review*, the new organ of the British section of the Writers' International.²⁸ But the work which most transformed his politics and worldview was John Strachey's classic communist polemic, *The Coming Struggle for Power* (1932). For Christopher, any lingering affection for British imperialism or the British armed forces was impossible to retain by the end of this volume, which concludes with a rousing exhortation:

There is no force on earth which can long prevent the workers of the world from building a new and stable civilization for themselves upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production. Nor is there anything in the geographical, industrial, cultural, or economic position of Great Britain which forbids the British workers from taking a decisive part in the establishment of world communism. The realization of this new stage in the history of mankind is not in doubt. But the immediate future of all humanity rests to no small degree in the hands of the workers of Great Britain.²⁹

Christopher was persuaded. He had discovered his intellectual position and his political cause. He soon joined the Communist Party in a conversion, which his brother later said was almost overnight, ‘after being struck on the head while observing a Mosley rally in Trafalgar Square.’³⁰ He also joined the London Library in St. James’s Square and never looked back. He wrote ferociously throughout the two and a half years remaining to him, planning to publish under a new pen name, Christopher Caudwell (his mother’s maiden name), probably to mark a break with his earlier political views and to his serious commitment to Marxism. Writing continuously, he moved in November 1935 to Poplar in Tower Hamlets, East London, the traditional home of the radical dockworkers who made up most of the local branch of the Communist Party’s membership. At least ten of the branch members were ‘coloured’, which heightened the importance of fighting Oswald Mosely’s fascists.³¹

Calling himself simply ‘Chris Sprigg’, he was a very active party member, selling the *Daily Worker* on street corners. He soon became Treasurer and then Branch Secretary. Christopher worked in isolation from the other CPGB intellectuals of the time, who were mostly university graduates. The sole opportunity for more contact came in early 1936, when he attended some lectures on ‘Marxism and Literature’ held at Marx House, Clerkenwell Green. The course was run by Alick West and Douglas Garman, graduates of Cambridge University and Trinity College Dublin respectively. West dimly recalls, in his own autobiography, a young man with clear and intelligent eyes, who in a discussion after one of the sessions said that he thought they were not thinking enough about the nature of language in considering the social character of literature.³² Another student on the course recalls that Christopher had to give up attending on account of his duties selling the *Daily Worker* at the entrance to the Underground.³³ Nobody else attending the course seems to have had the slightest idea that Comrade Sprigg was engaged in such extensive researches of his own, and there was no further contact between them.

But Christopher was in fact planning a large number of compositions, as his list in a surviving notebook reveals. Enticing titles of novels include *Plato in Syracuse* and *Tiberius* as well as *Filthy Rags* and *Boom and Slump*; proposed poems include ‘Prometheus’ as well as ‘The Revolutionaries’. Plays and books of social and literary criticism are also promised.³⁴ But he kept his writing life hidden from his Poplar comrades. One later remembered him as not ‘quite one of us’, although they ‘would hang on his every word’.³⁵ In his unperformed script *The Way the Wind Blows*, derived from a story he had written earlier called ‘We all try’, a Jewish working-class communist tells a

middle-class comrade that he is not wanted: ‘The workers distrust your sort, deboshed intellectuals trying to save their souls! If you really want to do propaganda, go back to your Mayfair drawing-room...’³⁶ But Christopher did not go back to his bourgeois life in journalism; the Poplar branch of the CPGB staunchly supported the Spanish Republicans. Christopher left for Spain on 11 December 1936 (probably in response to John Cornford’s recruitment campaign). He died two months later. A telling epitaph upon him was pronounced by Jason Gurney, a sculptor from Norfolk who survived Jarama:

Spriggy... was an exceedingly modest, pleasant man whom I knew simply as a private of infantry like anybody else. I only learned subsequently that he had written five books on aviation technology, three books on philosophy and economics, together with *Illusion and Reality* which still remains one of the important books on Marxist aesthetics. In addition, he had produced seven detective stories and yet, when he was killed on the first day at Jarama, he was still under thirty.³⁷

How much more might ‘Spriggy’ not have achieved if he had, like Gurney, been wounded rather than killed on that February day in 1937?

There is no doubt that Christopher’s reading in philosophy, psychology and anthropology mostly dated from about 1932, but he was already highly educated in both literature and technology. He was certainly an accomplished classicist. His elementary education was at St Dominic’s Roman Catholic Preparatory School in Bognor Regis, where he will have been introduced to Latin. He left St. Dominic’s in the summer of 1919

to enrol as a boarder at a London school, then called Ealing Priory School. It had opened in 1902 and occupied Orchard Dene in Montpelier Road in Ealing. He will have been taught a great deal of Latin, and at least some Greek.

The Benedictine curriculum goes all the way back to St. Theodore, a Greek convert to Christianity who came to Britain with Benedict in 669 CE and became Archbishop. He brought with him Greek as well as Latin classics, and a conviction that the great pagan authors had much to offer Christianity; he therefore set up schools for these learned languages in various parts of the country.³⁸ There is no contradiction between the philosophy that underlay Christopher's schooling and his profound sense of an ancient pagan world of art and culture lying forever just beneath the surface of the modern world, which comes over in his early short poem, 'In the Aegean':

We passed that day on the Aegean deep,
Those lovely children of the Cyclades,
And thought of all the gracious forms that sleep,
Prisoned in rock, beside those tuneful seas,
Never to be released! for in that dust
The enchanted chisels of Phidias rust.³⁹

A traditional approach to classics, in a Victorian poetic idiom inherited from Arnold, Browning and Tennyson, with the conventional praise of Phidias' sculpture, reveals Christopher's typical middle-class education and veneration of classical art. He also asks the reader to work slightly, to decode from the reference to the Cyclades a specific

pointer to the island of Paros, source of famous marble. The choice of the idea of classical *form* – the famous sculptor Phidias’ ‘graceful forms that sleep’ – perhaps reveals Christopher’s mind, even at this early, pre-Marxist period, sensing the importance of inherited forms concealed forever within ideology and culture.

With his Benedictine teachers, Christopher will have studied composition into Greek and Latin verse as well as Greek and Latin Prose. His early poems in English also include versions of favourite schoolboy Latin classics, such as Catullus’ poem no. 5, ‘Vivamus mea Lesbia, atque amemus’.⁴⁰ Earlier we saw his rhymed, taut translation of Crinagoras’ Hellenistic Greek epigram on Seleukos; two further translations of epigrams from the *Greek Anthology* show him wrestling—uncomfortably—with the challenge of reproducing the dactylic rhythm and form of the Greek elegiac couplet in English:

O would I were a red rose that blooming where your feet go

I might be plucked by your fingers and laid in your breast of snow

and

O would I were as the wind that, walking where the seas flow

You might lay your bosom and receive me as I blow.⁴¹

This technical interest in metrical form prefigures the work of the man who became the unquestioned pioneer in terms of developing a systematic socio-political approach to the

metre of English verse, rooted in prehistoric rhythms of labour and ritual, in his study of the rhythms of bourgeois poetry in *Illusion and Reality*.⁴²

In the 1920s, before he encountered Marxism, Christopher's poems share several features of the use of classical myth and literature by the famous Modernists of the time. A telling example is his early poem 'Agamemnon and the poets':

(Always just past the next hill

To be reached early in the next year).

I press with longing on until

That hour when I no more shall hear

The nightingales, but be their lips

And shriek and swing among the trees,

And be the body's flesh that slips

Round the red bath with loosened knees.⁴³

This is clearly a response to T. S. Eliot's 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales' of 1918, in which Sweeney negotiates the barbarism of modern civilisation in a café. Eliot begins with an epigraph consisting of Agamemnon's death cry as he is struck by Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, and ends with these two stanzas

The host with someone indistinct

Converses at the door apart,

The nightingales are singing near

The Convent of the Sacred Heart,

And sang within the bloody wood

When Agamemnon cried aloud,

And let their liquid droppings fall

To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud.

Yet Christopher has bypassed Eliot in order to go back to Aeschylus (the bath in which Agamemnon died does not feature in Eliot's poem). He has used the mythical method made fashionable by Eliot, but adapted it to say something more personal and more optimistic about the experience of attempting to write poetry. He is partly figuring himself as Cassandra, whose voice and stance are compared by Aeschylus in her prophetic singing to a nightingale (1140-9), as Christopher clearly knew. But he is a Cassandra-in-waiting, hoping one day to shriek and swing *himself* in the trees. He presses on, waiting for the time when he doesn't just hear the nightingales, but actually becomes their lips, at the same time as he becomes the flesh of the dying Agamemnon. The Benedictine-trained Christopher is, in effect, erasing the Platonic-Catholic distinction between mind and body, matter and art, but through a type of poetry otherwise very much of its 1920s era.

The *Oresteia*, the trilogy of plays kicked off by *Agamemnon*, haunted Christopher. When he later wrote about changes in the social function of language over time, he referred to the ancient Greek language as the 'feeling-tone of reality' expressed

by ‘the “god” of the early Greek tribunal’,⁴⁴ by which he meant Apollo and Athena in *Eumenides*. It was to the trilogy of plays kicked off by the *Agamemnon*, the *Oresteia*, that Christopher turned later—in the early 1930s—when writing his longest and most ambitious poem *Orestes* (originally *Orestes in Harley Street*). Any relationship between his work and the *Agamemnon* translation by Louis MacNeice, published in late 1936 (after a November production in London by the Group Theatre⁴⁵) is probably coincidental; although MacNeice did know many Marxists and communists through W. H. Auden, Christopher, as we have seen, scarcely knew any other party intellectuals nor their contacts. There had, however, been a few productions of the *Oresteia* or parts of it during his teens and early twenties. It is impossible he did not know that in February 1922, a few months before he left the Ealing school, the Chiswick Education Committee had organized a performance of *Agamemnon* and the final scene of *Libation-Bearers* as a matinee at the nearby Chiswick Empire, acted by Cambridge University students. They had at the same time shown a film of the 1921 stage production in Cambridge.⁴⁶

The teenage years spent with his father in dismal Bradford lodgings were significant in Christopher’s intellectual development. His job required him to report on criminal incidents, drunkenness, accidents and labour unrest in the factories of the area, which exposed him to a very different stratum of society from the genteel townspeople of his early years on the south coast, in literary London and at boarding school. He now devoted himself to improving the knowledge of classics he had already acquired at school and used it to explore both his literary and sexual urges. In a sonnet he wrote on his seventeenth birthday, which fuses his desire for both aesthetic and sexual potency, there

are awkward references to ‘Helen’s breasts’, to the crowning of Julius Caesar, and to the ancient oracle at Memphis.⁴⁷

His years in Bradford and before joining the CPGB are illuminated by two prose novels, both written at around the time he discovered Marxism in 1934-5. *We All Try*, which has not been published, centres on a disillusioned middle-class man in his twenties named Brian Mallock. He feels parasitical on society and that his life has no meaning. He is drawn to the cause of the working class, and after a divorce and problems with alcohol eventually finds some kind of contentment working in a cobbler’s shop.⁴⁸ *This My Hand* (published in 1936), by far his most profound novel, features a fictionalised female version of Christopher’s younger self in Celia Harrison, the heroine of the first part. Celia is the clever daughter of a widowed Berkshire vicar. Her father teaches her Latin and Greek as well as Geometry, French, History, Geography and Literature.⁴⁹ Having moved with her father at the age of fourteen to a parish in Tinford, an industrial town in Yorkshire, she becomes involved in social issues and leaves school. As a lover of poetry, she attends the University Extension Lectures at the Mechanics’ Institute, and begins to review books for the local paper. She has an intellectually questing nature, and becomes dissatisfied with the answers she feels she has been offered to the world’s problems, in due course joining the local Spiritualists.

All the young people in the novel are struggling with the epistemological and metaphysical crisis that afflicted the young people who had survived World War One, and Christopher’s later antipathy to Spiritualism suggests he may have had direct personal experience of it. Another avatar of Christopher in the novel is to be found in the enigmatic figure of Charles Firth, a rich, nervous youth. He strikes the novel’s antihero,

Ian Venning (with whom he became friends in the trenches) as strange: Firth ‘used always to keep a volume of Greek poetry in his pocket and would at intervals escape into it from externals’.⁵⁰ *This My Hand* also owes a substantial debt to Greek tragedy. It contains a much more heavyweight analysis of the moral issues of crime and punishment than we might expect in the average crime detective novel. One of the characters, Salmon, discusses murder, atonement, scapegoats and sacrifice, and has been described as ‘a salesman with a philosophical bent’, who ‘acts as a kind of “chorus” in this modern tragedy’.⁵¹

Yet, despite such noisy clues, the scale of the classical influence upon Christopher’s intellectual development has never been acknowledged. Aristotle and Plato do not feature at all in Pawling’s study of the development of his dialectical theory of literature.⁵² Even Francis Mulhern, who praised the ‘fascinating study of Greek and Roman culture’ he discovered in *Illusion and Reality*, and stressed Christopher’s discussion of religion in the city-state, neglected his engagement with Aristotelian aesthetics.⁵³ But Christopher’s competence at handling authors who wrote two thousand years before in Latin and Greek shine through both his poetry and his critical studies. His late and only overtly communist poem, ‘Heil Baldwin!’ (1936), a satire on the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935, is framed as a *pastiche* of the *Aeneid*, opening ‘Arms and the man I sing’.⁵⁴ Sullivan argues that the idea for his verse drama *Orestes* was partly inspired not by Freud’s Oedipal complex but through the psychoanalytical Charles Baudouin’s thoughts on how the Platonic theory of ideas retained a vestigial presence in culture centuries after the disappearance of the material circumstances which had produced it.⁵⁵

It is true that classical authors are not prominent in *Studies in a Dying Culture*, nor the essays later collected and published as *Further Studies in a Dying Culture* (1949), because their focus was ‘bourgeois literature’ (H. G. Wells, Bernard Shaw, D. H. Lawrence), and their theoretical approaches profoundly informed—as Bounds has shown—by Russian critics of bourgeois art (Nikolai Bukharin, Maxim Gorky, Georgi Plekhanov, Andrei Zhdanov and Karl Radek).⁵⁶ But Greek and Latin authors *are* central to Christopher’s more conceptual approach in *Illusion and Reality*. It was to Greek myth and religion that he turned when seeking to understand how art arises, and especially to the famous classicist Jane Ellen Harrison’s ritualist theory of myth, which has been called the biggest single influence on Christopher’s entire aesthetics.⁵⁷ In *Illusion and Reality* he discusses ancient and more recent poets alongside one another, as voices in an ongoing transhistorical dialogue: natural phenomena, in poetry, are social signs, ‘the rose of Keats, of Anacreon, of Hafiz, of Ovid, of Jules Laforgue’; poetry expresses a dialectic between instinct and environment, ‘rooted in real concrete social life—English, French, or Athenian’.⁵⁸

Above all, it was to the debate between Plato and Aristotle on the nature and function of art that he intuitively took his quest for a new, all-embracing, social way of thinking about literature. The most overlooked section of *Illusion and Reality* is chapter 2, ‘The Death of Mythology’, which is essentially a study of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. E. P. Thompson rides roughshod over the study of the *Poetics* in his otherwise penetrating study of Christopher’s legacy.⁵⁹ One of the problems here is that people have read Christopher through the admiring exposition of the classical scholar George Thomson, perhaps understandably, since Thomosn was a staunch *defender* of the dead critic at the

time of the earlier attacks led by Maurice Cornforth.⁶⁰ But Thomson's own work on ancient Greek literature is much less philosophically and aesthetically engaged, and far more centred on anthropological and sociological models of the evolution of poetry from primitive magic and ritual. This has resulted in the failure of most critics, except perhaps David Margolies,⁶¹ to recognise that Christopher's fundamental thesis in *Illusion and Reality* is inspired by the argument between Plato and Aristotle on the topic of the relationship between the ideas, the empirically discernible world (reality) and the worlds conjured up in art (mimesis). This battle of the philosophical titans of the fourth century BCE represented a sophisticated stage in the ancient evolution of literary theory. It has left magic and ritual far behind, and discusses mimetic art as a category including sculpture, painting, poetry and theatre, all of which, as it proposes, offer imitations, in paint and stone or words and music, of things apprehended through sense in life. For Plato, these imitations, however pleasurable, are bad for humans psychologically; for Aristotle they are pleasurable, and beautiful, and can offer two distinct psychological and social benefits. It does not matter that they are *representations* of things in the real world rather than being real themselves. And, in a crucial paragraph Christopher writes that 'Aristotle's theory of mimesis, as our analysis will show, so far from being superficial, is fundamental for an understanding of the function and method of art'.⁶²

Margolies is surely correct in commenting here that what Aristotle 'means is that art's function is accomplished, not by a "pure" emotional reorganization, but by emotional reorganization in regard to the *reality* with which art deals.'⁶³ Christopher is here linking two parts of Aristotle's theorisation of poetry. The first is that all art is fundamentally mimetic of reality, as stated in Aristotle's *Poetics* chapter 4:

Poetry seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated. We have evidence of this in the facts of experience.

The second Aristotelian principle which Christopher assimilates to his Marxism is that it is the aim specifically of *tragic* art to produce a socially beneficial function by somehow *addressing* the painful emotions aroused in tragedy (*Poetics* chapter 6): tragedy effects, through the arousal of the emotions of pity and fear, the release or relief from such emotions. Christopher has already demonstrated how attentively he has read the *Poetics* in his insistence that ‘the categories of literature are not eternal, any more than the classification of systematic biology; both must change, as the objects of systematisation evolve and alter in the number and characteristics of their species’.⁶⁴ This teleological model of the rise and evolution of genres is of almost identical to Aristotle’s teleological description of the emergence and development of tragedy and comedy in the *Poetics*. But there are other things that have impressed Christopher about Aristotle, especially his analysis of literature *as a social product*—a body of cultural data to be analysed for what it can tell us in its own right, rather than as an expression of the individual writer’s subjectivity, or even the influence it might have had on an individual subjectivity:

Aristotle, with his extraverted mind turned firmly on the object, was more interested in the created thing, e.g. the play – than in the man who was influenced by it or who produced it. Thus his angle of attack is aesthetically correct; he does not approach literature like a psychologist or a psycho-analyst'.⁶⁵

I need to stress, of course, that there were numerous other influences on Christopher besides Aristotle, and these extended beyond the writings of Marx and Engels themselves to thinkers including, most importantly, I. A. Richards and Bukharin. But Aristotle's *Poetics* shaped the very *form* taken by the questions Christopher asked himself, as well as the answers that he formulated.

David Margolies concludes in *The Function of Literature* that the British criticism of the thirties, despite the important contributions of Ralph Fox and Alick West, 'did not succeed in producing a Marxist aesthetic'. The questions they did not ask, but which Christopher did, included 'what is literature?', 'what is its social function?', and where does it fit into the human world?⁶⁶ In the case of the first two questions, Christopher found the model for them in Aristotle's theories that literature develops across time according to contingent historical circumstances and that it is mimetic. When it comes to the second question, he found not only the question in Aristotle but the answer – that literature's function is educative and that it affects beneficial emotional change. What he added to the Aristotelian model, of course, was the analytical category of class and the principle of the dialectical interpenetration between matter and the immaterial content of human minds.

Christopher's thoughts moved independently of the regular tramlines of the contemporary debate on classics. He certainly did not align himself with the elite Pound/Eliot view of the inherent superiority of Greek and Roman culture as expressed in Eliot's essay advocating the traditional classical curriculum in 'Modern education and the Classics' in 1932.⁶⁷ The egalitarianism of his poem 'Classic Encounter' and its unheroic dead hoplites underlines his different approach. But nor did he ever suggest—as did some of his peers—that using classical literature might be to foster links with cultural property so thoroughly hijacked by the ruling classes as to call its place on the socialist agenda into question. His independent position is thrown into relief by comparison with the revulsion against traditional classics and all it stood for as expressed in most other left-leaning writers of the thirties.⁶⁸ An important note was struck by Day Lewis in his article 'An expensive education' in *Left Review* for February 1937, when he attacked Latin as a bourgeois instrument for the retention of power. Gavin Ewart's poetic voice in 1939 claimed a desperation to grow up and quit the academy, 'To go, to leave the classics and the buildings, / So tall and false and intricate with spires'.⁶⁹

MacNeice, despite being a University lecturer in classics, professed himself happy in 'Out of the Picture' that the archaic poet Pindar was dead and gone, and refused in *Autumn Journal* section XIII (1939) to defend the classical snobberies:⁷⁰

We learned that a gentleman never misplaces his accents...

That the boy on the Modern side is merely a parasite

But the classical student is bred to the purple, his training in syntax

Is also a training in thought

And even in morals; if called to the bar or the barracks
He always will do what he ought,
And knowledge, besides, should be prized for the sake of knowledge:
Oxford crowded the mantelpiece with gods—
Scaliger, Heinsius, Dindorf, Bentley and Wilamowitz—
As we learned our genuflections for Honour Mods.

Such breast-beating about the exclusivity of classics seems to have bypassed Christopher altogether. Perhaps this was because he was forced to leave school early; perhaps it was because he had been earning his own living since his teens; perhaps it was because of his isolation from the fashionable literary ‘scene’.

But perhaps it was most of all to do with his respect for the cultural discussions in Russia that he will have heard about in the Communist Party. For in Russia, despite the similar place that classics had held in the elite and reactionary curriculum under the Tsars, the leading lights of the cultural revolution in 1917, above all Anatoly Lunacharsky, had insisted on the importance of ancient Greece and Rome in the teeth of opposition from more extreme members of the organization established to plan culture in the new Soviets, *Proletkult*.⁷¹ Lenin, influenced by his friendship with Lunacharsky, famously enshrined ‘everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human culture’ in the fourth item of the resolution he drew up for the First All-Russian Congress of Proletkult, which met in Moscow from 5 to 12 October 1920.

Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture. Only further work on this basis and in this direction, inspired by the practical experience of the proletarian dictatorship as the final stage in the struggle against every form of exploitation, can be recognized as the development of a genuine proletarian culture.⁷²

Christopher quoted this when writing to Elizabeth Beard about his project for a book called *Studies in a Dying Culture*. He felt the need to immerse himself in the entire cultural history of the world, including the Roman Republic and the French fin-de-siècle, if he were to understand the historical changes taking place under his contemporaries' noses: in imagining a richer culture in the socialist future, he writes that he has taken profoundly to heart 'Lenin's remark, "Communism becomes an empty phrase, a mere façade, and the Communist a mere bluffer, if he has not worked over in his consciousness the whole inheritance of human knowledge."'”⁷³ Given his love of and immersion in classics, and the exceptional promise of the dialectical and class-conscious Aristotelianism of his theory in *Illusion and Reality*, Christopher's death before he could develop his full potential was a particularly dreadful loss to those of us who deny that the Greek and Latin classics are inherently any more reactionary than any other literature. He fully deserves to be rescued from what E. P. Thompson called in another context 'the enormous condescension of posterity'.⁷⁴ I feel it is Christopher himself speaking when he

concludes his *Orestes* with Athena ascending on the theatrical crane, saying as she departs, ‘Well, I had quite a lot more still to say’.⁷⁵

¹ For an eyewitness account by a man who fought alongside Caudwell, see Gurney 1974.

² For example, Denis Healey; see Simpson in this volume.

³ Sullivan 1987: 48, although he mistakenly believes it is a translation from a poem in Latin.

⁴ The most important exception is Sullivan 1987: 18, who argues persuasively that Caudwell ‘may well find his true place in intellectual history as a twentieth-century *philosophe* who was fascinated by ideology in all its guises.’

⁵ Caudwell 1937: 80.

⁶ See especially Thompson 1977 and 1995; Eagleton 1976: 137; for all of the relevant references see Gallagher 2013: 683-4; the comments on these critics in Sullivan 1987: 3-4, are eloquent.

⁷ Bounds 2012: 7.

⁸ Caudwell 1937, ch. 11.

⁹ Caudwell 1986: 125-6. ‘Classic Encounter’ is his only poem which has appeared in several anthologies, beginning with the *Everyman’s Library* volume *Poems of Our Time* ed. Church and Bozman 1942: 276.

¹⁰ Hall 2008, ch. 15.

¹¹ Thorndike **

¹² See Arnot 1967: 185-6 and Klugmann 1968: 13-74.

¹³ Hamilton 2010: 39.

¹⁴ Hill 1990: 11. See also the heavy emphasis on authors of literature in English in Kettle 1975: 2. There are useful biographies and bibliographies of most of these figures in Paananen 2000 and Bounds 2012.

¹⁵ Hall & Stead, forthcoming, 2015, ‘Between the Party and the Ivory Tower: Classics and Communism in 1930s Britain’, in *Classics and Communism*, D. Movrin, E. Olechowska et al. eds (Ljubljana University Press).

¹⁶ See especially Caesar 1991: 5.

¹⁷ Cornford Senior had been lecturer in Classics at Cambridge from 1904, and was appointed Laurence Professor of Ancient Philosophy in 1931. Amongst his most important works were *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (1907), *The Athenian Philosophical Schools* (1927), *From Religion to Philosophy* (1912) and *Greek Religious Thought* (1923). But see also e.g. his *Poems of George Meredith: A lecture delivered at the Working Men's College, London, on 21 March 1903*.

¹⁸ For Germany see Klaus 1978; for France, Duparc 1979.

¹⁹ Cunningham 1988: 21 divides writers of the 1930s into the Oxford camp (Waugh, Cinnolly, Greene, Betjeman, Anthony Powell) and the Cambridge one (John Lehmann, Malcolm Lowry, Kathleen Raine, Hugh Sykes Davies). Caudwell is bracketed off as one of the 'maverick authors' (along with George Orwell, V. S. Pritchett, and Samuel Beckett) who attended neither university.

²⁰ Whetter (2011) 26.

²¹ Letter of 5 January 1895, quoted in full by Whetter 2011: 14-15.

²² Whetter 2011: 34.

²³ Whetter 2011: 46-7.

²⁴ Whetter 2011: 102.

²⁵ Remark made to Paul Beard, quoted in Whetter 2011: 100.

²⁶ Sullivan 1987: 29.

²⁷ *The Perfect Alibi* was admired by Dorothy L. Sayers, who reviewed it positively in the *Sunday Times*, 7 July 1934.

²⁸ Heinemann 1988: 118-19.

²⁹ Strachey 1932: 896.

³⁰ Quoted in Whetter 2011: 142.

³¹ Whetter 2011:155

³² West 1969: 181-2.

³³ Letter from Louis Harap in *Worker* (1946), quoted from Sullivan 1987: 41.

³⁴ The full lists are reproduced in Whetter 2011: 161-2.

³⁵ Tony Gilbert, quoted in Whetter 2011: 161.

³⁶ Quoted in Sullivan 1987: 20.

³⁷ Gurney 1974: 71.

³⁸ He also appointed Benedict abbot of the Monastery of St. Peter and St. Paul in Canterbury. Historians of education often claim that the colleges in the older English Universities are the lineal descendants of the Benedictine schools of Charlemagne.

³⁹ Caudwell 1986: 33.

⁴⁰ Caudwell 1986: 32.

⁴¹ Caudwell 1986: 36.

⁴² See the astute comments of Fowler 1977. West 1975: 182-3 said that *Illusion and Reality* had fundamentally changed his own and other Communists' views on the nature of the relationship between economic reality and poetry.

⁴³ Caudwell 1986: 88.

⁴⁴ Caudwell 1937: 56.

⁴⁵ See Macintosh, Michelakis, Hall & Taplin 2005: 376.

⁴⁶ See Macintosh, Michelakis, Hall & Taplin 2005: 372.

⁴⁷ Unpublished; quoted in full in Whetter 2011: 49.

⁴⁸ Information from Sullivan 1987: 34-7.

⁴⁹ Caudwell 1936: 9.

⁵⁰ Caudwell 1936: 32.

⁵¹ Sullivan 1987: 56-7.

⁵² Pawling 1989.

⁵³ Mulhern 1974: 51.

⁵⁴ Caudwell 1986: 99.

⁵⁵ Sullivan 1987: 91, in reference to Baudouin 1924: 111.

⁵⁶ Bounds 1912: 161-78.

⁵⁷ Sullivan 1987: 98 and Solomon 1973: 311.

⁵⁸ Caudwell 1937: 29, 130.

⁵⁹ Thompson 1995: 313-14

⁶⁰ Thomson 1951, responding to Cornforth 1950-1. See further Klaus 1989.

⁶¹ Margolies 1969, especially 61-2.

⁶² Caudwell 1986: 58.

⁶³ Margolies 1969: 61.

⁶⁴ Caudwell 1968: 58.

⁶⁵ Caudwell 1946: 58. After a digression on Plato, he returns to this theme: Aristotle, he writes, is uninterested in the poet's mind, and does not concern himself with whether or not the creation and appreciation of poetry is a conscious function.

⁶⁶ Margolies 1969: 122.

⁶⁷ Reproduced in Eliot 1950: 452-60.

⁶⁸ Cunningham 1988: 23.

⁶⁹ Ewart 1939: no. xiii,

⁷⁰ MacNeice 1979: 79 and 126.

⁷¹ See further Tait 1984.

⁷² Here quoted from the translation of the *Resolution* in Lenin 1965: 300-13 (my emphasis).

⁷³ Letter to Elizabeth Beard, 30 November 1935, quoted from Whetter 2011: 149.

⁷⁴ Thompson 1972: 13.

⁷⁵ Caudwell 1986: 177.