

Europe After the Rain: Alan Burns and the Post-War Avant-Garde

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by

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Abstract

Alan Burns was one of the key figures in the group of experimental writers working in Britain in the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies, which included writers such as B.S. Johnson, Christine Brooke-Rose, Ann Quin and Giles Gordon. All of them sought ways to update and radicalize the techniques of modernism to make them relevant for their contemporary situation. Alan Burns took the novel to more radical extremes than his counterparts, eschewing traditional narrative in favour of a dense accumulation of detail.

This is the first full length study of Burns' work, which has largely been neglected by scholars and, for the most part, remains out of print. I provide a thorough account of Burns' life and work and theorise the reasons for his obscurity. I examine the role of trauma in his work. For Burns the experience of the traumatic moment is one in which the violence that underpins everyday society is momentarily unveiled, the sheer and explicit violence of the event produces a rupture that displays the deeper and more insidious violence that exists beneath it and gives it structure. I draw on theories of visual art, music and cinema, both of the 'classical' avant-garde and more recent, as much as of literature and philosophy, to attempt to account for the strategies, techniques and approaches that Alan Burns engaged with in his writing. Avowedly left-wing, in interviews Burns is frequently optimistic about the possibility for political change in the world, and is even confident about the role that literature can play in fostering that change. However, I argue that his novels present a rather different, and much more pessimistic picture: each of them shows the way in which any activism can ultimately be constrained and co-opted.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:.....

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Preface

Alan Burns was one of the key figures in the short-lived group of experimental writers working in Britain in the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies, which included writers such as B.S. Johnson, Christine Brooke-Rose, Ann Quin and Giles Gordon. All of these writers sought ways to update and radicalize the techniques of modernism to make them relevant for their contemporary situation. Burns, influenced by modernism and the classical avant-garde, in particular the Surrealists (he named two of his novels after Max Ernst paintings), and by left-wing political activism, took the novel to more radical extremes than his avant-garde counterparts, eschewing plot, character and conventional narrative in favour of a dense accumulation of detail. Burns wrote eight novels, a play and the script for two short films (one in collaboration with B.S. Johnson), as well as several short pieces, a book of interviews with writers, articles and edited an American report on pornography and censorship for publication in the UK. Burns was one of the earliest teachers of creative writing as an academic discipline in the Britain, appointed as the first writer in residence on the University of East Anglia's Creative Writing Master's programme and later he went on to teach this discipline in both Australia and the USA.

Burn's first novel, the autobiographical *Buster*, was published in 1961, and his last published novel was *Revolutions of the Night*, in 1986 (though he had ideas for two biographies, another novel, and a book about his approach to fiction, none of which were published¹). Burns wrote experimental novels during a period in which much of the literary establishment, and academia (with some exceptions) were actively hostile towards the strategies of modernism or the avant-garde². This thesis aims to examine critically Burns' fiction, as well as his various other written works, interviews and biographical material, in four distinct areas, which are detailed below.

¹ See David Madden, 'Alan Burns: An Introduction' in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* Vol. 17 Issue 2 (Summer 1997). An excerpt from the unfinished B.S. Johnson biography was published in the same issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, and Madden also outlines Burns' plans for a biography of Frank Cook, a lifelong convict who became an artist and sculptor. Burns also planned a novel entitled *Brothers*, which would depict several sets of historical and fictional brothers. Also excerpted in the same issue is a section of Burns' *Imaginary Dictionary*, a work which, as Madden describes it is: "a dictionary of whimsy, wherein words come alive, take on characteristics of their own, unhinged from the uses and expectations of readers." Finally, Burns also wrote, and came close to publishing, a book about his approach to writing called *Art By Accident*. The book was scheduled to be published by Calder in 2000, has an ISBN and is listed on some websites, including Amazon. However, the book was never released, and at the time of completing this thesis, I have been unable to obtain a copy.

² For a detailed discussion of this issue see, for example, Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), and also my analysis in chapters one and three of this thesis.

Given that so little academic or biographical writing exists about Alan Burns, the opening chapter, 'History, Biography and Context,' will acknowledge Burns' obscurity and also deal with that issue in two ways. Firstly, it offers an extensive historical, contextual, biographical and literary account of Burns' life and work, and, secondly, in so doing presents a cumulative argument for the importance of Burns' novels through an original examination of a wide range of source material. Taken together, this will offer the most detailed and complete version of Burns' biography and bibliography to date. What this material demonstrates is that Burns was a writer whose works were taken seriously by his contemporaries, and who was considered a central part of the London literary scene of the late 1960s and early 70s. He was politically active, with links to various activist groups, and he produced fiction which experimented with form and narrative, at least in part, as a means to convey his left-leaning ideological beliefs, and even as part of an attempt to effect political change.

The chapter outlines Burns' middle class upbringing, his private education and his early career as a lawyer, suggesting that the relative economic comfort and security of his background, as well as his early employment in right wing institutions (in particular his work for the *Daily Express* newspaper), complicate the notion of Burns as a straightforwardly left wing activist writer. Drawing upon material from *Buster*, I also initiate a critical proposition which will recur throughout the thesis, that while such institutions do offer space for resistance, ultimately any such act of resistance can be successfully incorporated by that institution. At the earliest point in Burns' writing, activism is presented as being largely ineffectual and self-damaging, and this trend continues throughout his career. I also examine the historical-cultural factors which impinged upon writers during the time Burns was working, particularly writers committed to difficult, or experimental works. Such writers were often involved in negotiation with various institutions of the State, given that writers could seldom rely on royalties to make their living. Burns' is no exception, and I examine firstly his receipt of Arts Council funding and subsequently his employment by various universities, which might be seen as compromising the radicalism of his politics. I suggest that, though Burns does not acknowledge it himself - or at least, only tacitly does so - his class background allows him to move relatively easily through these institutions and to make use of them. Elsewhere, however, I contend that his ongoing involvement with such institutions does allow him to undertake a subtle and nuanced critique of ways in which State power operates.

Additionally, I examine Burns' Jewish heritage and, although, according to Burns himself, he no longer had a Jewish identity after the death of his mother when he was a young man, I consider ways in which issues of Jewishness, and in particular the Holocaust, impact upon his fiction.

I analyse in detail Burns' non fiction writing, which comprises a substantial essay about his fictional techniques and interviews Burns conducted with other writers for a volume he edited, *Beyond the Words*, alongside interviews with Burns himself, so as to position his views on literature and the status of the writer. This material shows Burns to be a writer who is deeply engaged with the rapidly changing cultural, political and technological society in which he was living, and a writer who thought deeply about the implications of those changes for the way in which he thought about, and wrote, fiction. For example, Burns mentions, in an interview with Peter Firchow, the writer being "driven out"³ by television and film. His opinions are set against broader debates about the status of the novel that occurred the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly the notion of the novel as being 'in crisis'⁴, and the belief that the type of experimentation and fragmentation that Burns was engaged in writing offered a way to resolve that crisis (albeit one that most critics rejected, and continue to do so).

These concerns feed into later critical debates about the fiction of the period, which often stages the crisis of the novel as having been decisively resolved, with the triumphant emergence of a particular version of realism (that is, one complicated by postmodernism), with the experimental novel relegated to a footnote in history. A second way of comprehending Burns' obscurity is achieved through a critique of this critical consensus. Where his work is mentioned in academic works, it is mostly as part of a list of writers. I consider how this reductionism operates as an act of marginalisation through partial inclusion, an ironic acknowledgement transformed simultaneously into a dismissal, thereby effacing the significance of experimental British fiction of the post-war period.

The chapter concludes with a brief reading of each of Burns' novels, and his other works in summary.

³ See, in particular, Burns' interview with Peter Firchow in *The Writer's Place: Interview on the Literary Situation in Contemporary Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974) in which Burns discusses the impact of new technology, in particular film and television on the novel, as well as the way in which sociology and the documentary have encroached upon the space previously occupied by the realist novel.

⁴ See, for example, David Lodge, *The Novelist at The Crossroads and Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1986), and Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel*, (London: Penguin, 1972)

The second chapter is concerned with the way in which each of Alan Burns' novels reproduce the trauma he suffered as a young man. During the Second World War, both his mother and his older brother were killed, and the impact of these deaths on him was so profound that it is possible to see his fictional career as an example of an extended Freudian traumatic repetition. Each text features a family experiencing the loss of one of its members, and the traumatic consequences of that loss. This chapter examines the traumatic incident in Burns' fiction and its fallout. The main argument proposed is that the traumatic moment is one in which the violence that underpins everyday society is momentarily unveiled, the sheer and explicit violence of the event produces a rupture that displays the deeper and more insidious violence that exists beneath it and gives it structure. For Burns' the traumatic moment, therefore, is deeply and inherently political, and the experience of trauma becomes a means of producing the political subject.

In considering Burns' novels I draw upon trauma theory, a wide-ranging field which encompasses many disciplines and approaches. I draw specifically on the work of Ruth Leys, whose meta-analysis of trauma theory suggests two opposing conceptions of trauma: the mimetic and the anti-mimetic. In Leys' account, the prevailing consensus on trauma has oscillated between these approaches (sometimes eliding them) since the earliest theories of trauma in the 19th century. Leys' distinction is useful, both in the way that it provides a genealogy of trauma theory, showing the changeable nature of theoretical currents, but, and more critically for this chapter, it provides a critique of the "mechanical-causal"⁵ understanding of the anti-mimetic model which has a great deal of influence in literary studies, particularly in the work of critics like Cathy Caruth. The anti-mimetic model cannot contain the multiplicity and density of perspective, nor the political implications of the traumatic that occur in Burns' work, hence Leys' work provides an appropriate model with which to critique Burns' fiction.

I also examine the work of Sigmund Freud, in particular his consideration of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and his accounts of traumatic repetition. Additionally Lee Edelman's reading of the death drive using Marxist terminology is particularly useful in positioning the death drive in relation to Burns' work. I offer an extended reading of the first account of the traumatic moment in Burns' fiction, the depiction of the death of Dan Graveson's mother in *Buster*. This scene is replete with Freudian detail, and I extend the analysis by looking at the scene with reference both to Julia Kristeva's conceptualisation of the abject and Maurice Blanchot's account of the complex function of the corpse. However, I argue that Burns' account goes beyond both

⁵ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) p.7

Kristeva and Blanchot's readings of the dead body, which for him is thoroughly embedded in the politics of everyday experience.

Slavoj Žižek's notion of objective violence - that is violence which is typically hidden but which structures our everyday experience is useful in reading Burns' second novel, *Celebrations*, allowing me to develop my analysis of the traumatic event and its politics. Subsequently I draw upon Jenny Edkins' notion of 'trauma time' which exists outside of regular time and events, applying the concept to Burns' novel *Babel*, examining the way in which the fragmentation and simultaneity of events in that novel both mirror and extend Edkins' conception of such chronological aspects to aesthetic expression.

I also consider Dominick LaCapra's idea of 'traumatic realism,' deployed to analyse how Burns uses real people and events in several of his novels. This use of real people and events constitutes a particular kind of realism, which is nuanced and complicated by Burns' use of graphic devices and other experimental techniques, particularly his use of collage, as a means to attempt to replicate on the page a sense of the effect of trauma on its victim. Also I assess the way in which trauma engenders hybrid texts. I read the account of the death of John F. Kennedy as exemplary here, and I contrast it with J.G. Ballard's own fictionalised version of the event, which differs significantly from Burns' in tone and emphasis.

Shoshana Felman's writing on trauma and the fragment offers a way of reading *The Angry Brigade*, contextualizing its multiple perspectives and the traumatic effects of activism. The work of Jeffrey Alexander on collective trauma is useful for my critique. Although not mentioned by Ruth Leys - perhaps because it does not comfortably fit either of her models of trauma - Alexander suggests that trauma emerges as a result of an agreement by a community, out of a belief that that community has been harmed, and often in the wake of the breakdown of that community. As such, Alexander's provocative intervention has particular resonance with Burns' work. Reading *The Angry Brigade* and *Europe After the Rain* in the light of Alexander's writings, allows an understanding of the way in which the multiple perspectives and fragmentary narratives produce an account of the traumatic which inevitably includes the political.

The chapter concludes with Badiou's notion of the event, and in particular the idea of the event as "a multiplicity"⁶ which I link to the manner in which Burns writes about trauma and its capacity to alter its victims. I deploy Badiou's theory of the event to interpret the significance of two traumatic moments in Burns' later fiction: the death of Norah's father in *The Day Daddy Died* and the death of the mother in *Revolutions of the Night*.

The third chapter focuses on Alan Burns' relationship with the avant-garde, which together with definitions of experimental writing are highly contested concepts, which have generated a broad and diverse field of criticism. My approach in this chapter aims to reflect the concerns of the avant-garde, which is frequently multidisciplinary and heterodox. As such, I draw on theories of visual art, music and cinema, both of the 'classical' avant-garde and more recent, as much as of literature and philosophy, to attempt to account for the strategies, techniques and approaches that Alan Burns engaged with in his writing.

Charles Sugnet suggests that Alan Burns' work is "uncompromisingly political and uncompromisingly avant-garde at the same time,"⁷ A key aim of this chapter is to assess Sugnet's claim using a variety of theoretical approaches. Firstly, I examine Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which remains a central text in the field. Bürger's thesis is that the avant-garde exists to critique and problematize the institution of art, and to reintegrate art with what he calls "the praxis of life"⁸. However, Bürger contends that the failure of the avant-garde of the 1920s to produce a fully autonomous art means that any later attempt can only replicate that failure. Bürger is explicit in his denunciation of the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s because of the way in which the techniques of the classical avant-garde that they repeat or update have been so thoroughly integrated into the institutions that the avant-garde aims to critique. I assess Alan Burns' work in the light of these claims, and suggest that his work, in the way that it draws on a multiplicity of sources, replicating the strategies of a saturated media culture as a means to critique that culture, is capable of making the same kinds of interventions as the classical avant-garde.

I consider Pierre Bourdieu's theories of the avant-garde, which he writes about in *The Rules of Art*, alongside Bürger's work, to examine Burns' second novel, *Europe After the Rain*, arguing that,

⁶ Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, trans. Ray Brassier and Albert Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004), p.101

⁷ Charles Sugnet, 'Burns's Aleatoric *Celebrations*: Smashing Hegemony at the Sentence Level' in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Summer, 1997, Vol.17(2), p.193

⁸ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.22

though it contains traces of Burns' later work, through an examination of the novel's major tropes and the way in which its author presents his characters and their environment, the text remains rooted in the tradition and the techniques of the classical avant-garde and, to some extent, of modernist literature. As such, it is not as radical as some of his later work. However, I additionally discuss the work of visual art critic Rosalind Krauss, as well as Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, and Manuel DeLanda to examine the use of networks and grids in the novel, which function to convey the action of power on human and non-human actors.

Next I analyse *Babel*, and show how it constitutes a radical break from modernist tropes and techniques, and moreover, a decisive update to the techniques of the classical avant-garde. The novel depicts real, living people and its incorporation of a dense matrix of quotations and fragments from a range of sources and, as such, I argue, using Bakhtin's terminology, it is a truly heteroglossic text which attempts to immerse the reader in an abundance of discourses and information. I consider *Babel* alongside other texts by Burns from the same period which also attempt to create a 'total environment,' *Dreamerika!*, the play *Palach* and the film *Jeanette Cochrane*. Drawing upon Jacques Attali's theories of signal and noise, I expand the analysis of *Babel*, and consider both the political implications of Burns' techniques and the novel's structure.

To illustrate aspects of *Celebrations*, I examine Alain Badiou's work on the avant-garde alongside the work of Hal Foster, facilitating my analysis, particularly Foster's notion of the neo-avant-garde, which is distinct from the classical avant-garde. Burns presentation of the language of business which he reproduces the novel, constitutes precisely the kind of complex relationship between art and life that Foster diagnoses as distinctive of the neo-avant-garde.

Subsequently I scrutinize the use of metaphor in Burns' work, particularly *Dreamerika!* and compare his praxis with a range of writers on metaphor: Alain Robbe-Grillet, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Paul Ricoeur, Max Black and Jacques Derrida, I indicate the particular, and sometimes contradictory ways in which the metaphor is put to use in avant-garde texts, the analysis is underpinned by the work of Sianne Ngai, whose notions of 'cuteness' in relation to the avant-garde has particular resonance in the way that Burns' represents both John F. Kennedy and Jackie Onassis.

The chapter concludes by briefly considering Guy Debord, and the way in which his work in *Society of the Spectacle* points to the problematic role of the avant-garde, especially its contested status of being under constant threat of absorption into the dominant culture it aims to critique.

The fourth chapter discusses Alan Burns, in terms of politics, ideology and activism, in detail and assesses the role of each of these elements in his work. Avowedly left-wing, in interviews Burns is frequently optimistic about the possibility for political change in the world, and is even confident about the role that literature can play in fostering that change. However, I argue that his novels present a rather different, and much more pessimistic picture: each of them shows the way in which any activism can ultimately be constrained and co-opted. This view brings Burns in line with many of the political theorists of his time, and the chapter examines in detail, through close reading, the ways in which Burns' work exemplifies Foucault's theories of power, and resonates with some aspects of Althusser's structural Marxism. Alongside this, I examine Burns' work in the context of texts emerging from activist groups of the late 1960s and early 70s, many of the concerns of which Burns replicates and represents in his texts.

The chapter begins with a reading of the politics of *Buster* and the role of activism in the life of the protagonist, who continually attempts to resist the various actions of power in the institutions he moves through. I argue, that these gestures of resistance are ultimately self-destructive, and only serve to highlight the powerlessness of the individual against the institutions of the State. I look again at the role of trauma in the novel, and in particular, using the works of Simone Bignall and Simon Critchley, the manner in which trauma engenders a self-alienated subject which vacillates between boredom and action.

Next I consider in detail *The Angry Brigade*, Burns' novel of collective political action and organisation, and attempt, through close reading, to diagnose the ways in which Burns presents the issues surrounding radical political activism. By drawing on the work of Jo Freeman I show the way in which the supposed leaderless organisational structure of the group actually serves to conceal an insidious, gendered hierarchy, which relegates the women of the group to domestic and secretarial duties.

By exploring theories of the events of May '68 in Paris, particularly those of Michela Canepari-Labib and Peter Starr, analysed alongside accounts of the contemporary political response and situation in Britain, I show the way in which the novel might be regarded precisely as a response to the failure of radical activism, and particularly to the way in which the gestures of activist groups cannot escape being reintegrated into State power. I compare Burns' account of activism with that of B.S. Johnson's *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, and, by looking at critical responses to that novel, propose that both writers present a profoundly ambivalent attitude towards the political efficacy of violence against the State.

One of the key concerns of the chapter is to examine the political implications of Burns' change from writing experimental fiction to a more mainstream and conventional approach. I examine this change by looking at the similarities between Burns and composer Cornelius Cardew, who similarly jettisoned his avant-garde sensibilities in favour of plainer song writing. I go on to analyse the change in Burns' style in *The Angry Brigade* and *The Day Daddy Died*. I look at Burns' use of free indirect discourse as a narrative strategy, and argue that this usage has a precise political function, of simultaneously bringing the reader into close proximity to a fictional character, but also maintaining a critical distance from them, which fits with the specific political aims that Burns had for his fiction. The work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, and that of Herbert Marcuse is used to show the way in which the political subject is constituted in *The Day Daddy Died*, and in particular the way in which Burns presents institutions which exemplify a specifically post-Fordist, and even Thatcherite, political landscape which uses precarity and instability as a means of control. I go on to examine in detail the institutions and 'camps' that Burns depicts in his novels, reading them in relation to Foucault's notions of discipline and surveillance.

I subsequently examine the idea of revolution in Burns' work, and in the work of contemporary British experimental novelists of the period, namely Christine Brooke-Rose and B.S. Johnson. I argue that the inability to fully conceptualise or depict a revolutionary event with positive consequences, demonstrating the profound pessimism that these writers have towards the efficacy of political activism. I look in detail at Burns' *Revolutions of the Night*, which portrays revolutionary activity as always somehow distant from the protagonists of the novel, and I conclude by close reading the unattributed quotation from Steve Reich's piece 'It's Gonna Rain' which both seems to portend a great change that is imminent, but also, simultaneously, in the way that it collapses time through repetition and fragmentation, defers that change. I argue that this is exemplary of Burns' attitude towards radical political action, that revolution must constantly be fought for, but can only ever be constantly deferred.

In the conclusion I will bring together the various strands that I have explored in the main body of the thesis. I argue that, while it is necessary, for the purposes of analysis, to separate into chapters those strands, in fact, as has been evident in those chapters each of them are interrelated. The traumatic, with its action of *Nachträglichkeit* (or traumatic repetition), as Freud calls it, which withholds and reveals, informs Burns' fragmentary writing style. But also, that style shows itself to be the best way for Burns to replicate the effects of trauma, and to show the way in which the traumatic moment is revealed to be a dense accumulation of detail. I argue that the political and the

traumatic are inextricable from each other in Burns' work, and that by seeking a style which could represent the multiplicity of voices and perspectives of his contemporary environment, Burns also attempted to create a fiction which had political resonance and could even foster political change.

I conclude by returning to the question of Burns' obscurity and lack of critical attention. I suggest that perhaps it is the complexity and interconnectedness of the issues that I have outlined throughout the thesis that have led to his being left out of critical and literary accounts of the period. I argue, however, that through sustained analysis his texts, Burns is revealed to be a writer who exemplifies many of the concerns of his time, but also one who sought to go further than his contemporaries in reshaping what the novel could be.

Chapter One: History, Biography and Context

Post-war avant-garde writing in Britain has been no more successful [than other avant-gardes] in linking art with politics; the *nouveaux romans* of Christine Brooke-Rose, the Dada inspired collages of Alan Burns, and the metafiction of B.S. Johnson offer increasingly rarefied versions of the earlier shock tactics, thereby revealing that they are the fag-end of a decaying tradition. [...] any simple distinction between experimental and traditional writing has long ceased to be pertinent.¹

Andrzej Gasiorek, as quoted above, characterises a particularly negative view of experimental British writing in the post-war period. He focuses on the ideological subject matter and commitments of such writers and their work, using their failure to radically alter their society as evidence of their wider failure. He suggests that those who continued to believe in the potential of the avant-garde have now been proven to be history's losers, pushed aside by other writers and other conceptions of writing. Gasiorek's views are not uncommon², and the above quotation also epitomises the ways in which the post-war avant-garde in British writing, and in particular the work of Alan Burns, are treated by many critics. Where Burns is mentioned by critics writing about the post-war period in English literature, it is mostly in the list format that Gasiorek employs³, alongside other writers who exemplify the experimental tendencies of that period. The list is sometimes longer, and on occasion includes French, Irish or American writers alongside British ones, and its function is always to summarise and circumscribe a particular tradition, way of thinking, or approach to literature. Significantly, too, Alan Burns does not always feature on such lists⁴. His inclusion or exclusion often seems arbitrary, as though his name were just a cipher, as if he uncomplicatedly stands in for experimental writing and there remains little more to say beyond that about his work, simply a moment of literary history, a punctuation in its description. The list is used as a way to close down analysis, not to open it up, and Gasiorek above exemplifies that

¹ Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p.19

² See, for example, D.J. Taylor, 'The State of Fiction', *The London Library* (Autumn 2008), p. 20.

³ For example, Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction*, (London: Methuen, 1993), p.22 and Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, (London: Picador, 2004), p.3

⁴ For example, there is no mention of Burns in survey texts such as: Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950 - 1995*, (London: Routledge, 2001); Patricia Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties, English Literature and its Background 1960 - 1990*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Randall Stevenson, *The British Novel Since the Thirties: An Introduction*, (London: BT Batsford, 1986) or in Anthony Burgess, *The Novel Now*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1971)

approach. He lists the writers he does merely as a way to introduce their failure and quickly move on to matters that interest him more.

If Alan Burns' appearance in works of literary criticism has mostly seen him included in lists of this kind, what does this say about the position of his work? Whereas contemporaries such as Eva Figs and Christine Brooke-Rose have had lengthy studies of their work published, and there has been a recent revival of interest in the work of B.S. Johnson, Burns remains a fringe figure in academia, as well as marginal to the interests and knowledge of the general reading public. Apart from a 2009 reprint of *Babel*⁵, none of his books have been reprinted. They are only seldom stocked by university libraries (even the British Library does not have a complete collection of his novels⁶) and rarely appear in public library catalogues. Burns is not studied on university courses that deal with literature in the post-war period and very few academic articles on his work have been published⁷. Despite this, there remains a sense that Burns was taken seriously as a novelist at one time, and was seen as being somebody who was producing important work. In 1970, Angus Wilson called Burns, "One of the two or three most interesting new novelists working in England,"⁸ and John Calder, in his autobiography, writes that Burns, "had the energy and the organising ability to lead a movement and it is a pity it never took off."⁹ Calder also writes that Burns gave evidence at the obscenity trial for Hubert Selby Jr's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*¹⁰ and spoke at conferences as a Calder author both nationally and internationally¹¹. Burns received several substantial Arts Council grants in the late sixties and early seventies, enabling him to work as a full time author for a short period. In his interview with Peter Firchow, Burns says, "I've just now myself been bought for two thousand quid by the Arts Council, which I've accepted with immense gratitude but quite aware of the unseen strings attached."¹² Burns also received several other awards and fellowships throughout his writing

⁵ Alan Burns, *Babel*, (London: Marion Boyars, 2009)

⁶ *Dreamerika!* is not in their collection.

⁷ See: Jeanette Baxter, 'Accident and Apocalypse in the Writing of Alan Burns' in *Surrealism, Science Fiction and Comic Books*, ed. Gavin Parkinson, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015); Brian Crews, 'Writing Radical Protest: The Angry Brigade and Two English Novels', in *Journal of European Studies*, Sep 2010, Vol.40(3), p.21 and the articles in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Summer, 1997, Vol.17(2)

⁸ Angus Wilson, 'Untitled Article' *The Guardian*, (30 April, 1970), quoted in Jinnie Schiele, *Off-centre Stages: Fringe Theatre at the Open Space and the Round House 1968-1983*, (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2005), p.48

⁹ John Calder, *Pursuit: The Uncensored Memories of John Calder*, (London: Calder Publications, 2001), p.273

¹⁰ Calder, *Pursuit*, p.321

¹¹ Calder, *Pursuit*, p.312 and p.346

¹² Peter Firchow, *The Writer's Place: Interviews on the Literary Situation in Contemporary Britain* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1974), p.56 - the award would be worth approximately £26'000 today.

career.¹³ As well as this, Burns worked in theatre, writing the play *Palach* which was directed by Charles Marowitz, and in film, writing, with B.S. Johnson, *Unfair*¹⁴, a film which was made to support the ACTT Union in their protest against the 1971 Industrial Relations Bill. Burns also worked with Peter Whitehead, writing *Jeanette Cochrane*, a short experimental film in a montage style, which featured early music from Pink Floyd and an appearance by the musician and actress Nico¹⁵. Burns was at the forefront of teaching creative writing in British universities, and much of the later part of his career was spent as an academic. He was the first writer in residence at the University of East Anglia's MA in Creative Writing, and taught Ian McEwan while there¹⁶; he went on to teach in Australia and the USA, as well as elsewhere in Britain. In 1997, an issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* was in part dedicated to Burns' work, and contained critical material alongside more journalistic pieces written by academics, novelists and publishers. All of this suggests a writer who was very much part of the literary establishment of his time, who had links to other writers and artists, who was reviewed by national newspapers and whose opinion was sought and respected. Why then, in a recent article, does Jeannette Baxter write that, "It may be no accident that the writing of Alan Burns has fallen off the literary map."¹⁷ And why does Burns feature so infrequently in accounts of the literature of the period he was writing in, and why, where he is mentioned, is it so often, as with the case of Gasiorek discussed above, in a list alongside other contemporaries, with no analysis offered, simply as a footnote to the period? In part to initiate a reversal of this trend, this chapter will examine Alan Burns' work, his biography and the cultural context in which he was working.

Alan Burns was born on 29th December 1929 to a middle class family. He grew up in London, and attended the Merchant Taylor School, a private school which counts EH Carr, Mehdi Hassan, Boris Karloff, Edmund Spenser and Michael McIntyre among its alumni. Burns recounts his experiences at the school in fictionalised form in *Buster*, his first and most autobiographical novel, describing his first minutes there in terms which emphasise the authoritarian character of the institution:

¹³ Arts Council grant, 1967, 1969, and bursary, 1969, 1973; C. Day Lewis fellowship, 1973; Bush Foundation Arts fellowship, 1984. See *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. James Vinson, (London: St James' Press, 1976), p.211 and (<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4193/Burns-Alan.html>)

¹⁴ Available on the DVD *You're Human Like the Rest of Them: The Films of B.S. Johnson*, (London: British Film Institute, 2013)

¹⁵ Available on the DVD *Peter Whitehead and the Sixties*, (London: British Film Institute, 2007)

¹⁶ Ian McEwan, 'Class Work' (http://malcolmbradbury.com/uea_ian_mcewan_class.html), accessed 13/4/14. McEwan also mentions Burns in his 2012 novel *Sweet Tooth*. See also: Kathryn Holeywell, 'The Origins of a Creative Writing Programme at the University of East Anglia, 1963–1966' in *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, Volume 6, Issue 1, (2009), pp.15-24

¹⁷ Jeannette Baxter, 'Accident and Apocalypse in Alan Burns' *Europe After the Rain* in *Surrealism, Science and Comics*, ed. Gavin Parkinson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), p.198

Strange roads. Greygravel path. Grey Walls. Eyesocket staring windows. Standing while mother mumbled with Headmaster. Unbroken tradition. Evacuated. Discipline. Horseriding and music extra. Tall boy walked slowly past the open door, twisting his head to stare. Matron. Cash's name tapes. Down a corridor, clicking a radiator. Mother grabbed his arm. Corridors leading off. Hundreds of doors. He would never find his way around.¹⁸

The protagonist, Dan Graveson, is immediately struck by the sense of being observed, by the building itself, whose windows seem to resemble eyes that stare back at him, as well as by the other pupils. There is also a strong impression of the intermingling of the family and the school. Dan's first moments at the school are spent with his mother and the headmaster, who mumble together, their individual speech indistinguishable from the others. What is clear is that Burns wants to show the school as an institution whose purpose is the production of the subject. Through discipline, routine and hierarchy, the school seeks to extend the work done by the family in producing a particular kind of relation to power. By depicting Dan's relation to power in this way, Burns displays an attitude towards the school which resembles Althusser's writings:

[...] the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'. All the agents of production, exploitation and repression, not to speak of the 'professionals of ideology' (Marx), must in one way or another be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously' – the tasks of the exploited (the proletarians), of the exploiters (the capitalists), of the exploiters' auxiliaries (the managers), or of the high priests of the ruling ideology (its 'functionaries'), etc.¹⁹

School, for Althusser, and for Burns, works to create subjects that replicate the ruling ideology. As Althusser writes, they learn "[...] rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination."²⁰ The sense that Dan feels of being observed, and of his insignificance (both in terms of his age and size against the relative maturity of the other pupils and the grandeur and size of the buildings, and his sense of the tradition of the school stretching back in time), is his first apprehension of this attempt to construct him as a

¹⁸ Alan Burns, *Buster* in *New Writers 1* (London: John Calder, 1961), p.67

¹⁹ Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p.133

²⁰ Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', p.132

subject. And, given the type of school that he is depicting, a particular kind of subject. In his article on Burns in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, David Madden writes that: “By his own account his education was "average middle class. . . . I was quite bright but also eccentric, called by some 'Batty Burns.' I went to a middle-range public school, Merchant Taylors' School," where he first studied science and then at "15 switched to Classics, not Greek, but Latin, plus History and English.”²¹

Buster, Burns' debut novel was published by John Calder in 1961. Largely autobiographical, it recounts a middle class childhood spent during the Second World War and an adolescence and young adulthood in its aftermath. The protagonist, Dan Graveson, shares many of the qualities of the Angry Young Men of the fifties and early sixties - a loss of purpose, a disenfranchisement, even an emasculation. And there is a particular sense in the novel of the imbrication of personal trauma experienced during the course of the war and Dan's inability to find his way in life or to form relationships. Dan, afforded various opportunities as a result of his class and upbringing, finds himself unable to take advantage of any of them, and ends the novel virtually destitute, forced to return to the care of his family. With this novel, Burns began a pattern of representation of trauma in his work, a pattern that would re-emerge in each of his novels: the death of a family member and the resulting consequences of that death. In *Buster*, Burns recounts the death of his mother and his older brother during the Second World War, but also shows that these traumatic events can be moments of politicisation, moments during which the implicit violence that underpins relations in society is briefly and decisively revealed. Dan's left-wing consciousness emerges during those moments, and it is this traumatic relation that informs his reluctance to engage with society.

While at school, aged sixteen, Burns published an essay on Dr Johnson in the school magazine²², which he reprints in *Buster*, though in the novel it appears as an exam answer, a shift of context which perhaps shows the novel's protagonist to be more audacious in his critique of authority than the young Burns had been. Asked to write an essay about Samuel Johnson for his school-leaving certificate, Dan writes:

Johnson in the Modern Eye

²¹ David Madden, 'Alan Burns: An Introduction', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Summer, 1997, Vol.17(2), p.110

²² See Madden, 'Alan Burns: An Introduction' in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 17(2)

Johnson was god. And typical of his age. Era of Goodsense worship, sameness and the ultimate ideal, piggery and prudery rife, nonsense wisdom, pomposity prestige.

So, the Nightmareman Must – mountain of conventional revulsion, foul-mannered filth loving big boar beast – of course he Must be part of every mantelpiece. A great lumping tasteless victorian grandfather clock, stumpgomping on top of and right through the pretty coffee cups and sniki simplicities. How he bounds! And Boswell is his weak-tea shadow. And the drawingroom clusters and the Dryden Chandelier and the Johnson and the titters are blushed and the boom begins... he would not like little cracker nuts but with big lumping joll stump off with blugging beef hunks. And guzzle. And cover his ear with gravy. And guffaw. And stuck his feet and glush his mouth the modern dainty mind reflects and recedes back

But now when the cooling stonily creeps me and I can see him just plain big, not glumping, clumsy yes but his thud was live and he jollily glowed in thrilling proudness of Town and culture and coffee house fine conversation and rightness (who will read it?) of the good occasion and the truth

And he warms his behind by the redfire large and lust and he glows. His great brown pipe I can see in his great brown fist and his boots. Gleaming back and sturdy. The socks must be wool (hand woven quite good) and the lack of a bath quite foul. Thank God I'm here and I'm not away from the stench feat and the big fug for I'm modern and fine young man.²³

The result of this act of rebellion, and flouting of expected norms, is that Dan fails his exam and, at the beginning of the third chapter of the novel he has enlisted in the army. This deliberate failure calls to mind a similar act of resistance by John Barker and other proto Angry Brigade members:

[...] there was ripping up the Finals papers at Cambridge, a liberating experience I have never regretted. Again the times were softer, there would always be jobs, it had little or no impact in future years. It was a gesture but one that could harm no one and which did go to the heart of

²³ Alan Burns, *Buster* (London: John Calder, 1961), p.79 (I have attempted to retain the spacing and syntax of the original)

our libertarian communist beliefs, that elitism is the twin of exploitation, the one that mocks the rhetoric of opportunities for everyone.²⁴

As Barker points out, this form of protest is ultimately gestural, and its negative consequences are turned back on the individual, but it serves to highlight contempt for the institution, the elitism of Dan's public school or Barker's Cambridge. However, there is a difference between Barker's approach, which is a simple refusal to accept the opportunities that being a Cambridge graduate affords, because those opportunities aren't available to all, a gesture whose politics are relatively straightforward to read, with Dan something else is going on, both in the form that his protest takes and the content contained in that form. Dan chooses to take the exam, he produces content which a teacher or examiner would have to take into consideration. In doing so he not only displays the same refusal as Barker, but his critique extends to the exam system itself and to the notion of academic writing, perhaps even to the possibility of communication itself.

Dan writes a piece of mock-poetic doggerel that imagines Johnson as a fairytale monster, large, imposing, with an aggressive physicality to his presence, boorish - a figure that the modern mind recoils from, but cannot escape, since he 'must be part of every mantelpiece.' It is a piece of writing that lampoons the idea of the scholarly essay, and the presentation of Johnson is characteristically absurd. Dan engages with and disrupts a notion of literary tradition and a particular literary form: the exam answer. Dan writes convoluted, ungrammatical sentences, containing run together verbs, neologisms, and rapid changes of tone and emphasis. The effect on the reader is disorienting, and the text seems to resist attempts to infer meaning from it. Beyond a broad sense that Johnson, who could be surmised as standing in for literature in general, and its traditions, is a domineering, violent, ignorant, all-consuming figure whose influence is pervasive we get very little that can be read and extrapolated further upon (except, perhaps, a slight cooling toward Johnson in the latter half, a positioning of him in relation to domesticity, though this may just be another facet of his authority). Only the final sentence offers any clarity - Dan appeals to his age and his modernity as a way out of Johnson's influence, and it seems that this text is itself a way out, though a pyrrhic, even nihilistic one. Burns says of his desire to fragment that:

[d]isconnection fascinated me partly from an immature wish to shock, go to an extreme, make a break, an iconoclastic need to disrupt or cock a snook at the body of traditional literature.

²⁴ John Barker, 'Anarchy in the UK, Tom Vague - Review' (<http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/4b8h98>) accessed 9/6/14

[...] I was also showing contempt for what I was doing, almost trying to write badly, from disgust with myself and with Literature [...]. Disconnection also expressed my own social estrangement, my distance from others, with the dual sense of superiority and yearning for closeness.²⁵

Dan's exam answer exemplifies all of these desires, but it also shows the particular form which the enactment of these desires takes. Here it takes place in an institutional context, with the writing being used to deliberately critique that institution and its practices.

With his second novel, *Europe After the Rain*, titled after the Max Ernst painting²⁶, Burns begins to use collage techniques and cut-ups. As a result, the writing becomes starker, more distanced, as the novel recounts the movements of an anonymous narrator moving through an unnamed but ruined country during a war which several, also anonymous, characters say has ended but whose violence persists so that the distinction between wartime and peacetime is blurred. Burns offers an account of war whose focus is diffuse, and does not privilege the human, instead being deeply concerned with the idea of the network, with the relation not only between humans, but between all objects, living and non-living. The war is interminable, and the novel does not concern itself with the politics of the conflict. The reader is not told about movements of armies, casualties, troop numbers, instead the focus is on the everyday, obtaining food and shelter, moving from place to place, boredom and low-level violence. Burns seems to suggest that the way that the wartime situation intensifies these everyday activities allows it to better show the relations that constitute them. For the Burns of *Europe After the Rain*, a decrepit institution, operated by the coerced, frightened or wounded, exemplifies the way bureaucracy functions more effectively than a fully functioning institution in a peacetime state.

²⁵ Alan Burns, 'Essay' in *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, ed. Giles Gordon, (London: Hutchinson, 1975), p.64

²⁶ Ernst's painting is enigmatic, and seems to contain an elision between the personal and the political in a way that is perhaps reminiscent of Burns' writing in the novel. As critic Samantha Kavky writes: "*Europe After the Rain II* depicts the transformation of old to new work within one canvas, mapping Ernst's historical and mythological journey from Europe to America. [...] *Europe After the Rain II* depicts a fantastic, sparsely populated and temporally indeterminate landscape. Is it primeval or post-apocalyptic? Myth or science-fiction? The preposition "after" provides little help, since aside from affirming the image's place within a larger narrative, it still allows for three possible temporal readings: It rained, is raining, or will rain in Europe; this is what it looked/looks/will look like afterwards." Sarah Kavky, 'Max Ernst in Arizona: Myth, mimesis, and the hysterical landscape' in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No.57/58 (Spring/Autumn 2010), pp.212-213

Celebrations transposes the techniques of *Europe After the Rain* into the workplace where the violence persists, but is more concealed, occluded by family hierarchies and arcane legal structures. Burns' focus seems narrower, the narrative concentrating on a factory-owning family, particularly the patriarch, Williams and his son, Michael. After Williams' other son, Phillip, is killed in what might be an industrial accident but might also be at the hands of his brother, Williams and Michael compete for the attention of Phillip's widow, Jacqueline. By limiting his scope in this way, Burns is able to show the way in which the workplace replicates and extends the ideological work of the family. The workplace in Burns' fiction is often the place where oppression can be most keenly and straightforwardly felt, from the dissatisfaction and humiliation that Dan feels at his inability to find suitable employment in *Buster* to the poverty and insecurity that Norah faces in *The Day Daddy Died*. It's possible to trace, throughout these novels, a number of currents that were affecting workers and the workplace in the period in which Burns was writing. Broadly expressed, this is the period in which there was a move from Fordism to Post-Fordism, a move which signalled the decline of industry, and a move towards neoliberalism. Burns is producing his most important fiction at the moment when the crisis that engenders this shift emerges, and even in *Celebrations*, published in 1967, a novel whose focus on the family-owned factory seems predicated upon a Fordist perspective, but nonetheless contains hints of the first stirrings of that crisis.

Williams' and Michael's attempts at modernisation in the novel can be seen as part of this process, as can their desire to quantify their outputs, to be constantly recording, collecting data to feed a process of constant improvement. This is expressed most clearly early on in the novel, in a rare moment in the novel where Burns offers us a direct insight into the workers' thinking (though this is still expressed collectively):

While he [Williams] strove to create the perfect rhythm of work to be done in any weather, the skilled men considered that their work was produced more by their imagination than by practical effort; if there was any muscular exertion it was not apparent, there was a tendency for sweat to be regarded as an anachronism now, production was becoming no more than a branch of the mathematical sciences. Already the beginnings of unfriendliness appeared everywhere, morale became a substance with a practical use, it was tracked and weighed and reduced to a mark on a graph.²⁷

²⁷ Burns, *Celebrations*, (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967) p.7

The reader can already observe in this section that the defining characteristics of Fordism are giving way to a new methodology; imagination replacing muscle, sweat becoming an anachronism. Burns suggests that something is changing. It's also possible to read Williams' crisis as being precisely related to this change, a change he feels perversely compelled to enact, and yet one which does damage to his identity by irrevocably changing the institution he has built up and dominated. There are, therefore, parallels between the dismantling of the Fordist system which Williams helped to perpetuate, and the disintegration of his family. Phillip's accident - however much Michael was directly responsible for it - seems to be directly related to the desire to measure and quantify, and to extend the control of the workplace out into the lives of the workers. Over the course of the novel, the status of the workers does not change much, they do not win any significant victories, nor do they suffer huge defeats. Instead, Burns' contention seems to be that through the repetition of these moments of exploitation, presented in a non-specific, matter of fact way, the reader will become aware of the structural nature of the exploitation of workers, and that it is an ongoing process of everyday life. Rather than blaming particular individuals, institutions or circumstances, the novel seems to suggest that it's only through a broader approach, one that examines the structures that lie behind, and give rise to, those specific incidents, that an understanding of the action of Capital can be reached. Burns seems to argue that the methods which hint at the move to Post-Fordism have both benefits and downsides, and despite the changes that are described, the factory in *Celebrations* does not undergo a radical alteration.

Burns attended school during the Second World War, and his experience of wartime informs much of what comes later in his published writing. During the war both his mother and brother died, and I will argue below that this experience of trauma is one that affected Burns profoundly, to the extent that he revisits that traumatic loss in each of his works, but also that the experience of trauma can also serve as a moment of politicisation, where the violence that underpins relations in society is momentarily visible. This loss also disrupts the stability of the family, and Burns' work is concerned heavily with the way in which families deal with death, as well as the way in which they are structures that often serve to replicate dominant ideology. For Burns, the family is the essential site for the creation of the subject, and all other apparatuses, to use Althusser's term, merely extend the way in which the family shapes and controls the subject. The family is a microcosm of the workplace, and of the state. Burns shows this most clearly in *Celebrations*, which depicts a family-run business, presided over by the patriarch, Williams. In the novel, the factory that the family own extends the reach of the family and the control the father has over his sons. His younger son, Phillip, is killed while working in the factory in what is sometimes described as an accident, but more frequently appears to have been deliberately, or at least recklessly caused by the elder son,

Michael. There is an imbrication of the family and of work and the workplace and Burns shows how they operate in similarly repressive ways. Early in the novel the relationship between Williams and his sons is described:

Williams required totally loyalty from his sons. They were his pets, he called them his animals. They answered to his call with grunts or with effortless gliding according to his will. He never stopped talking about them. They stayed with him. ‘This is my family,’ puffing a pipe and keeping his secret, a suffocating man who knew where to find oxygen.²⁸

Within this family structure, as the quotation above demonstrates, the father is the principle figure of authority, and in some sense all of Burns’ protagonists are reacting to that authority throughout the course of his work. The figure of the father stands in for, or comes to represent, the action of power. Fathers in Burns’ work are ciphers. Rather than being rounded characters, they are instead mutable, unstable, chaotic figures whose unpredictability combined with the power they wield shows them to be representatives of what Burns calls “the subtle dominance of the amorphous State.”²⁹ This is made explicit in *Celebrations*, where Williams asks himself, “How do I know I have not died in the night, been reborn and given a history and previous life and set of memories to complete the new life given? Do I die each night, and born again by morning?”³⁰ There is a childish solipsism to the question, but it also speaks to a sense of character as something impermanent and unpredictable. There is no centre to Williams’ identity, and even he senses it about himself. That Burns aligns this lack of stability to figures who stand in for the action of power says something about his conception of the relation of the individual to the state. There is something chaotic about the fathers in Burns’ novels; both their ire and their affection seem arbitrarily dispensed, as in this scene from *Europe After the Rain*:

When a serious dispute arose between the father and the party he let it be known that if his son was raised in rank, the matter would be settled in an acceptable manner. So it was done, although raising a young man to high rank was contrary to all custom. The father was old and unattractive and his lack of success in war worsened his chronic bad temper.³¹

²⁸ Alan Burns, *Celebrations*, p.8

²⁹ Alan Burns, ‘Essay’ p.67

³⁰ Burns, *Celebrations*, p.89

³¹ Alan Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, (London: John Calder, 1965), pp.76-77

In ascribing these qualities of unpredictability and capriciousness to the actions of fathers in his work, Burns suggests that the action of power is not something that can be simply understood or represented. The scene of politics, for Burns, is always densely packed, and cannot be read in any uncomplicated way.

Following *Celebrations*, Burns published *Babel*, stylistically his most radical work, and the high point of his experimental phase, with no narrative, a huge cast of characters including politicians and celebrities of the time, and short sections of highly condensed, often grammatically difficult prose. Again, Burns' targets in the novel are the state, violence and power. The novel deals repeatedly with the Vietnam war, the effects of colonialism, religion, the amorality of the political class, the workplace, the violence inherent within the family, with the movement of money and state-sanctioned violence. But more than its explicit content, Burns' novel deals, on a structural level, with the increasing fragmentation of the society it depicts. Published in the late sixties, Burns, better than most writers of the time, understands and anticipates the dizzying social changes that were occurring, and the novel gives space to discuss the emergence of new technology and media, as well as the increasing role of mass media, the emergence and influence of new art forms which go alongside the emergence of new political and artistic voices, and with the emergence and coming to prominence of the counterculture, all of which he shows as complicating the staid, monadic left-wing consensus of the time. In addition, the novel deals at length with the diminishment of Britain as an economic and military superpower, and the effect of this on British identity, particularly the crisis of confidence experienced by those with wealth and power. Implicit, too, in the novel is the emergence of 'theory' - the novel appears a couple of years before Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, and *Babel* seems to analyse the world in a similar way, through networks, creating ad-hoc connections, and seeking to embed a replication of these networks into the structure of its writing. Deleuze and Guattari speak, for example, of: "partial objects which [...] produce other flows, interrupted by other objects. Every "object" presupposes the continuity of a flow; every flow, the fragmentation of the object. Doubtless each organ-machine interprets the entire world from the perspective of its own flux [...]"³² Consider this in the context of *Babel*:

CRYSTALLISED BLACK DELIRIUM, metal-white terror, singular stone mania, mineral illness, inexplicable earth, hills of stone, changed leper, green sun, dense bright green swollen

³² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p.6

bodies, pulverised heart, heart thump, illness, science at each step, give oxygen, horizon on the margin of a strange thing, the use of the knife.³³

Burns' oscillation between different objects and different levels of discourse recalls what Deleuze and Guattari write about partial objects in *Anti-Oedipus*: "Partial objects are what make up the parts of the desiring-machines; partial objects define the working machine or the working parts, but in a state of dispersion such that one part is continually referring to a part from an entirely different machine, like the red clover and the bumble bee, the wasp and the orchid, the bicycle horn and the dead rat's ass."³⁴ Burns' novel constructs such elaborate machines which emphasise the enmeshment of the individual in a wider politics, and the way in which inorganic objects, institutions and discourses impinge upon the individual.

Babel received mixed reviews, even from those, like Robert Nye, whom Burns saw as supporters of his work, and sold relatively poorly. But Burns continued his commitment to its style in *Dreamerika!* which traces a fictional history of the Kennedy family in America, seeing them as exemplars of the insidious movement of money and power, and of the relationship between politics and money. In the novel the Kennedys become mythical figures, but incredibly wealth and influence cannot shield them from an essentially tragic character, and as the various members die, it's possible to see Burns replicating his own family pattern. At this point too, Calder seems to lose faith in Burns, having previously thought him capable of being the most prominent of the British post-war experimental novelists. *Dreamerika!* was the last book of Burns' to be published by Calder, who writes in his autobiography that "[Burns] was the nearest we ever came to finding a Kafka-like writer. I liked *Celebrations*, but thereafter was aware that Alan's main interest at that point was in being well-known and earning big royalties, and that his books were becoming gimmicky purely to attract attention, whereas earlier it was an artist at work."³⁵

Following the publication of *Dreamerika!*, Burns' style changes significantly. His next book, *The Angry Brigade*, presents a fictionalised account of several members of the short-lived British activist group. Burns presents their accounts in the form of transcripts from interviews, and in fact Burns did interview several people (including some left-wing activists) in preparing the novel. Though Burns is still working with found material, gone are the difficult to parse sentences, the bursts of incongruous images and non-sequiturs. Instead, the focus is on how a community

33 Burns, *Babel*, p.145

34 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.323

35 Calder, *Pursuit*, p.273

performs its politics, and the way in which their personal interactions and day-to-day living conflict with their ideologies. The question of the efficacy and morality of using violence against the state in activist projects, as the real Angry Brigade did, and were imprisoned for, hangs heavy over the novel, and its protagonists endlessly discuss how they can avoid simply replicating the strategies of the state in their attempt to inspire political change.

Burns' drastic change in approach comes at a time when a great deal was changing in his personal life. In the early seventies his first marriage broke down, Burns moved from being a full time novelist to taking on teaching roles, where he became increasingly permanent as a member of staff. In 1974 this led to Burns moving to Australia to work as a senior tutor in creative writing at the Western Australia Institute of Technology (now Curtin University). In his own accounts of the period, Burns suggests that the reasons for his change are political and theoretical, claiming to be inspired by Heinrich Böll's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, which extolled the virtues of writing plainly to achieve a political effect. Burns, in his interviews, seems uncomfortable with the associations that experimental writing has with elitism and, following Boll, sees the need for a plainly expressed writing which can speak to, and inform, a wide audience. Burns' trajectory here also mirrors that of the composer Cornelius Cardew, who roughly contemporaneously reaches the same conclusion and ceases playing improvised music for plainly performed songs with straightforward political lyrics.

But alongside these personal and theoretical changes, the group of experimental writers that had formed in London in the mid sixties had lost much of its impetus following the suicides of Ann Quin and B.S. Johnson, both in 1973, less than three months apart, the first in August, the latter in early November. Burns had been close friends with Johnson. They wrote the short film *Unfair* together, and Burns considered writing a biography of Johnson, two short chapters of which appear in the 1997 Fall issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* alongside another short piece by Burns and several critical essays. Later, Burns was also interviewed by Jonathan Coe for his book on Johnson, and Burns speaks movingly about their friendship and experiences together. Burns account of Johnson's suicide is meticulously researched, with interview material, with accounts from Johnson's friends both prior to and after the death, including a telling anecdote about Johnson playing electronic bar football with his friend Barry Cole:

[Johnson] played with ferocity that night, pulling the little plastic levers, up to kick forward, down to bring the ball back. One lever had lost its plastic cover, so a little piece of steel jutted out. At about 9:30 Barry noticed his friend's left hand was bleeding. He

suggested they call it a day, but Johnson, who was losing, played on. He wrapped his hand in a dirty handkerchief which was soon dyed bright red, and continued the game until closing time.³⁶

The violence of this image, Johnson's indifference to his wounded hand and his determination to continue the game seems to stand in for the suicide itself, which Burns does not directly write about or attempt to understand, instead opting for a description of the objects that Johnson interacted with – a painting he accidentally smashed, a bottle of brandy he drank from, the various notes he left – and the reactions of his friends upon hearing of Johnson's death. The chapter cannot resolve itself, and ends in fragments, with Burns quoting consecutively from those friends' accounts and, finally, from Johnson's work, in which Burns perceives as prefiguring the death. What this presentation – fragmentary, elliptical, indirect, repetitious – suggests is the unrepresentability of the trauma Burns experienced with the death of his friend, the way in which the subject must be approached as though at an angle, askance. Similar themes of trauma and representation will be dealt with in the following chapter.

Burns also had a close friendship with Ann Quin. Quin dedicated her final novel, the iridescent *Tripticks*, to Burns, and the novel's frenetic pace and wide scope seems to owe something to Burns' approach to fiction particularly that of *Babel* and *Dreamerika!*. In an unpublished interview with Nonia Williams Korteling, Burns talks about his relationship with Quin in terms which suggest they shared a particular kind of intimacy. In particular I want to highlight one of Burns' remarks, an anecdote which he relays with some reluctance, but still feels compelled to tell. Burns says that he and his wife Carol went to Brighton, to visit Quin, where their relationship reached a new, and strange, pitch of intimacy:

I remember an evening which I want to tell you about but I'm not even sure that I should [...] In a big double room, Ann and I we had a meeting, the only meeting that may have had some sexual overtones, or undertones or implications, moving round double bed and Ann was maybe even stroking the bed, something of a kind happening. Only to mention in a very cool way or not at all. The very next day Ann walked out to sea and drowned. I'm definitely not suggesting some kind of connection - definitely, definitely not. Ann's suicide was profound.

³⁶ Alan Burns, 'Two Chapters from a book provisionally titled *Human Like the Rest of Us: a Life of B. S. Johnson*' in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Summer, 1997, Vol.17(2), p.175

We were back in London and the news came on the phone and I thought God damn it. This writers' group came to an end - ten of us - two of its members both bloody well fucking committed suicide and that seemed to say stop it.³⁷

This information, which, as far as I am aware is not mentioned in any of the accounts of either of these writers' lives, places Burns directly at the scene of Quin's suicide. This is not, necessarily, to suggest that he is directly implicated in this act, but rather to show the way in which the end of this brief movement of experimental writing in Britain was deeply personal for him, as well as significant in literary and theoretical terms. The suicides of Johnson and Quin come at a time when the optimism of the late sixties was waning: the post-war consensus was beginning to break down, giving way to increasing fragmentation, different viewpoints and interest groups vying for attention and power. And while Burns' experimental work prefigured that fragmentation, Burns himself seems to lose faith in his techniques around this time. He writes less, perhaps the disgust with literature that he mentions began to manifest itself more profoundly, but at the same time his career becomes more professionalised as he moves to America and begins to teach creative writing at the University of Minnesota, only returning to the UK permanently in 1992. What seems clear though is that these experiences come at a time when Burns fundamentally changed his way of writing and his way of living. The novels that come after Quin and Johnson's deaths are, to some extent, a repudiation of that sense of possibility and expansiveness that his earlier work contains, the sense that the novel can enter into the world and effect political change.

The conception of politics that emerges in his work resists easy summary, but throughout his work a similar family pattern emerges. Burns describes the families that make up his novels in this way:

Powerful father, absent mother, slaughtered son, surviving son, one woman: 'the woman about the house' as my mother was in our family of five.³⁸

Even this description belies easy interpretation. The figure of the mother is both absent and present, and doubly absent both in the sense of having died, but also in the way Burns' description negates her, relegating her position to 'woman about the house', a description which reveals a certain misogynistic component to Burns' discomfort with the domestic. And indeed mothers are largely absent in his fiction, held away from the main action of the narrative, often dying or disappearing

³⁷ Nonia Williams Korteling, 'Unpublished Interview with Alan Burns' (Conducted 2009)

³⁸ Burns, 'Essay', p.66

early on. *The Day Daddy Died* is a clear exception to this in having a female protagonist whose relationship with her children is a major concern, but even in that novel, Norah's own mother fades from the narrative very quickly. She is described early on in the novel in terms that recall Burns' above quotation:

With her mother deaf, her father was the dominant one in the Norah's family. No one knew why her mother went deaf at seventeen; maybe it was scarlet fever, maybe working at the cotton mill, but she was deaf when she married so Norah had only ever known her deaf. Norah fretted at this all her life: she grasped things quite quickly and tried to tell her mother but her mother could not hear. She had to repeat things several times before her mother could understand. Her father was the person who knew everything, who had the time to answer her questions, whatever she asked.³⁹

Burns uses Norah's mother's physical disability to emphasise her distance. She is difficult to communicate with and slow to understand, in contrast to the father whose openness and dominance contrasts starkly with the mother. Norah's inability to communicate with her mother is representative of the absence of mothers throughout Burns' work, despite his continual focus on the family.

In 1981, Burns' published *The Day Daddy Died*, his most conventionally written novel, and one which brings to bear many of the changes that Burns experienced in the years since *The Angry Brigade*. Where Burns' earlier work had contained some misogynistic impulses, *The Day Daddy Died* suggests a writer who has become radicalised by an encounter with feminist theory. The novel traces the life of Norah, a working class woman, whose life is made up of a series of encounters with institutions which exploit and oppress her, and with men who are representatives of those institutions. Toward the conclusion of the novel Norah and her large family (she has five children with five different partners) are confined to what Burns describes as "factory, hospital and work-camp [combined] into an all purpose institution to represent the power of the State," a particularly Thatcherite institution in which the workplace, the prison, the hospital and the school combine, and here in particular Burns seems to anticipate the sweatshops and maquiladoras that arrive with emerging globalisation. The novel is written in a very straightforward, vernacular style, and again Burns' used interview material as his source for the novel. There are brief flashes of surrealistic prose, and collages by Ian Breakwell interspersed throughout the text make more explicit the impact

³⁹ Alan Burns, *The Day Daddy Died*, (London: Allison and Busby, 1981), p.10

of state power on the bodies of women. The ‘daddy’ of the title is an alcoholic, who dies in the first few pages of the novel (again, another instantiation of Burns’ traumatic representation), and while Burns’ prose hints at some form of sexual abuse, Breakwell’s collages extend upon that possibility. Again here, Burns shows the family to be the locus of capitalist ideology. The family is a microcosm of the structures of power and oppression that exist in society. *The Day Daddy Died* is Burns’ most straightforwardly political work, at least in terms of its content, but its impact is stymied by the occasional flatness of the prose and the worthiness of the subject matter. It lacks the structural pyrotechnics of his earlier works, and by the time of its publication - this is the period when writers such as Ian McEwan, Martin Amis and Julian Barnes were emerging and other kinds of voices were gaining prominence.

Burns’ published his final novel in 1986. *Revolutions of the Night* was a return to a lighter prose style, and in places its short, gnomic utterances recall his work in *Celebrations*. Again the title is taken from a Max Ernst painting, and the focus is a wealthy, middle class family in which one member, on this occasion the mother, dies early on, and the remainder of the novel is focussed on the fallout from her death. The novel consists of a series of set pieces, most of which concern the incestuous relationship between the two children of the family, Hazel and Max, a relationship which seems to shield them from the institutions of the state that they encounter. Midway through the novel a war, or revolution, appears to begin, Max is imprisoned and then released, and the novel ends, in scenes that are reminiscent of the ending of *Europe After the Rain*, the two siblings escape the country and live together.

Burns taught briefly at Lancaster University in the 1990s, before returning to London, where he moved in with his ex-wife, Carol Burns, as a lodger. This movement, back to his first wife, to his hometown, retraces the movement of the protagonist of Burns’ first novel, *Buster*, and is itself an instantiation of the traumatic encircling and repetition that takes place in his novels. He died in December 2013.

I will now discuss the role of violence and identity in Burns’ work, particularly the issue of Burns’ Jewishness, and how it informs his approach to those issues. In his interview with David Madden, Burns writes:

My answer to your question should perhaps have begun with my saying I’m a Jew, but my Jewishness died with my mother, in 1944. My father remarried, a Catholic. I have always been wary of displaying my Jewishness, though I would not deny it, not only because I am

and have for all my adult life been an atheist, but because I absolutely wish and intend to avoid any kind of labelling or stereotyping as a Jewish writer, which, in spite of my love for Kafka, I totally reject. One of the few traces of Jewishness in my writing may be seen in the intensity with which *Europe after the Rain* evokes aspects of the Holocaust. However, I always try to counter the notion that the Holocaust victims were all Jewish.⁴⁰

Intermingled with Burns' feeling about his mother, who died during World War Two, are his feelings about his Jewishness. As far as I am aware, Burns makes no further mention of this part of his history anywhere else in his published work, and he is not listed among British Jewish writers in indexes or anthologies⁴¹. Burns' Jewishness links him to other experimental writers of the his period who were working in Britain such as Paul Abelman, Eva Figes, Gabriel Josipovici, Arnold Wesker and Harold Pinter. But for Burns, the idea of his Jewishness 'dying' along with his mother differentiates him from those writers, his Jewishness becomes something which, like the mothers in his texts, is simultaneously present and absent, concealed and displayed.

In the introduction to *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland* (an anthology which neither features writing from, nor mentions Alan Burns), Brian Cheyette writes that "Gabriel Josipovici and Eva Figes create more generalised images of displacement and loss in their modernist fiction, which is characterised by a refusal to turn past trauma into simple stories."⁴² Cheyette goes on to suggest that Figes and Jospipovici's modernism, as he calls it, is related to their émigré status, their sense of "writing in a language they were not born into."⁴³ But his idea of resistance to a, and representation of trauma is also a characteristic of Burns' writing, and, perhaps, of contemporary (in the post Second World War sense that Cheyette uses the term) Jewish writing. Cheyette writes, of Figes, that "her Jewishness remains an unfigured source of anxiety,"⁴⁴ and that "For Figes, the discovery of her Jewishness goes together with her loss of innocence."⁴⁵ Cheyette is speaking here of Figes' account of her learning about the Holocaust and the deaths of members of her family, and this idea of that constituting a loss of innocence, that there would be something traumatic in the discovery of a link to a collective trauma is an important component in the

⁴⁰ David Madden, 'An Interview With Alan Burns', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Summer, 1997, Vol.17(2), p.123

⁴¹ For example, see: Brian Cheyette, *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland: An Anthology*, (London: Peter Halban, 1998), and David Brauner, *Post-War Jewish Fiction: Ambivalence, Self Explanation and Transatlantic Connections*, (New York: Palgrave McMillian, 2001)

⁴² Brian Cheyette, *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland: An Anthology*, (London: Peter Halban, 1998), p.xlviii

⁴³ Cheyette, *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland*, p.xlviii

⁴⁴ Cheyette, *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland*, p.1

⁴⁵ Cheyette, *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland*, p.li

identities of the generation of Jews to which both Figes and Burns belong. Burns' Jewishness links him to a larger sense of collective trauma, and this is linked to, and possibly concealed in, a much more personal trauma that he experienced with the death of his mother. Burns returns to the death of a family member in each of his novels, a repeated return which is characteristic of the traumatic relation to an event. Burns' semi-autobiographical account of his mother's death in *Buster* will be dealt with at length in a subsequent chapter, but in the context of Burns' Jewishness, it is a traumatic moment in which he loses not just a family member, but also a part of his identity, "[...] my Jewishness died with my mother."⁴⁶ A part which remained buried, finding its expression only in snatches, in moments of violence in his novels. *Europe After the Rain* makes oblique reference to the Holocaust, most clearly in a few early passages which offer the clearest evocation of Burns' Jewish identity in his fiction.

The building will be designed to give the children the maximum sunlight when indoors. The children will be poorly clad and ill-shod, they will be kept in a massive building with automatically regulated furnaces, the ovens will be on the same high level of modern design.⁴⁷

And:

I made sure the door was locked behind me. Everything had turned to iron, six million pieces of iron, with appendages.⁴⁸

This account - distanced, spare, prosaic - of an unnamed concentration camp (referred to in the text as an orphanage, or sometimes a prison or army barracks), and the reference to the 'six million pieces of iron', creates a clear picture: this is a Holocaust scenario, but one which, like the death of the mother scene in *Buster*, Burns both wants to examine and look away from simultaneously. The description of the pieces of iron calls to mind golem-like figures, wrought from the earth, able to be anthropomorphised, but not quite human, indistinct; qualities which the characters in the novel possess. The lack of specificity in *Europe After the Rain*, no character names, no place names, very little description of people's physical characteristics or the characteristics of the environment, lends the text a quality which Burns himself identifies as 'numb'⁴⁹ and he goes on to describe his writing

⁴⁶ Madden, 'An Interview With Alan Burns', p.143

⁴⁷ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.20

⁴⁸ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.21

⁴⁹ Burns, 'Essay', p.65

of the novel in a 'semi-trance'⁵⁰ state, linking his writing to the unconscious, and lending the novel a dreamlike quality. And while this lack of specificity allows the novel to gesture towards universal themes of suffering and violence, it is also a disavowal of Burns' Jewishness in its refusal to look concretely at the events he depicts in a properly historicised context. By not doing so, Burns suggests that trauma cannot be directly represented, cannot be faced head on, but must be written around. To truly speak about the horror of the Holocaust, Burns suggests in *Europe After the Rain*, one must avoid naming it, and come at it at an angle, obliquely. In addition, in his interview with Peter Firchow, Burns refers to his reluctance to depict any real historical event, stating that "this is territory for sociologists."⁵¹

The death of Burns' mother and the loss of his Jewish identity marks a fundamental split between periods of Burns' life. The Second World War which took place during his childhood and adolescence clearly shaped Burns as a writer, but, as with his Jewishness, he seems reluctant to speak directly of it, unable to distil its enormity into something coherent (retaining only a fragmentary, occasional point of reference, much like a surfacing image from the unconscious). When asked about his experiences of the war by David Madden, Burns' response is characteristically incoherent and abruptly concluded:

DM: For many writers of your generation, World War II was obviously a major event, and the spectre of war figures prominently in your early novels. Can you talk about what it has meant to you and your imagination?

AB: I'm typing this letter on 5 June 1994 while D-Day is being recalled. It seems "a quarter million Germans" were killed in Normandy. How many more of them throughout the war, and Brits, Americans, impossible to list how many more, and 20,000,000 Russians . . . I know the grief attached the death of one young man, my brother Jerry. Can human consciousness begin to grapple with what all this means? Life is tough enough. We all die. But deliberately to smash another human being's skull in . . . why am I going about this, no point. Have dreamed since I was nine, off and on, of German paratroopers swinging through the night sky and landing in the garden. The lunacy of war is certainly at the heart of my politics and my writing.⁵²

⁵⁰ Burns, 'Essay', p.65

⁵¹ Firchow, *The Writers Place*, p.51

⁵² Madden 'An Interview With Alan Burns', p.123

Burns casts around, unable to settle on a theme or an approach, moving very quickly from the general to the very personal, and then back again; beginning a thought and then chastising himself for it. He is clearly conflicted about how to speak about an event which, several decades on (the interview was conducted in 1994) still affects him profoundly, still invades his subconscious, and he is only able to offer platitudes in response to the question. The dream he talks about is recounted in *Buster*, which displays the manner in which it permeates his imagination, even making its way into his fiction. He writes: “He dreamt he was searching for someone among shopping crowds. He caught up with her, she changed, he saw her further on. He held her sleeve, it came away, it was a German, blackclad Germans swung from parachutes, columns of Germans with rifles marched over him.”⁵³ What the dream suggests is the encroachment of war, and of violence, into everyday existence. A theme which Burns continued and expanded in *Europe After the Rain*.

War in *Europe After the Rain* is perpetual, which seems fitting given Burns’ discussion with David Madden of still dreaming in 1994 of German paratroopers, but it also indicates the sense in which the war, occurring alongside the ideologies propounded by the family and by school, is linked to those institutions and is an extension, or exacerbation, of them. In particular, the family and the violence of war are linked, and in Burns’ fiction the moment of their linking is traumatic, but a trauma which produces, in the way in which the overt violence briefly reveals an underlying, more insidious violence, a political and politicising response. This kind of link, between violence, war and the family occurs throughout Burns’ fiction. It is visible in *Babel’s* sustained attack on the Vietnam War, “Two hundred men smudged the shape of the foreign smile with green food, the wooden plate on their dinner table was very fine, the guns were raw, the mortar bombs weighed sixty pounds, a hundred and seventy families felt like people who had lost more than others.”⁵⁴ And in *Revolutions of the Night*, in a scene where one of the protagonists, Harry, is briefly imprisoned, he speaks with another prisoner, Alec, who gives a straightforward anti-war speech:

“When I was sixteen, and going on demos three times a week I was very, very serious,” Alec replied. “I joined left-wing groups. I had my hippy period. Now it is anti-war. The fear of war which I have now I’m older is deeper, with more understanding of what a war would mean.” [...] “I register every detail,” said Alec, “every murder, every rape, each imprisonment or mutilation of innocent people. Don’t you feel disgust with yourself for being able to go on

⁵³ Burns, *Buster*, p.69

⁵⁴ Alan Burns, *Babel*, (London: Marion Boyars, 2009), p.45

with your little activities, your boiled egg for breakfast, and going to the movies, with all that going on?"⁵⁵

There is a change here from the way in which Burns depicted war in his earlier work; Alec's speech is much simpler, espousing a sober humanism that is concerned with individual lives. This change, which is characteristic of Burns' move away from the avant-garde and towards a more direct literary style will be discussed in the chapter on Burns' relation to the avant-garde and experimental writing, but the quotation also shows Burns' continuing concern with the impact of war.

Burns left school and undertook military service in the Royal Army Education Corps between 1949-51, an experience which extended the ideological conditioning of the family and the school, and consolidated Burns' emerging left wing political conscience. In *Buster*, this experience is recounted and, as with his Dr Johnson essay at school, Dan again rebels, this time by painting a Communist slogan on the ammunition store wall. Again, Burns shows us the ways in which state institutions are used ideologically. Dan becomes an officer, and is bombarded with regulations and activities designed to prevent individual thought:

An infantry officer must excel the best of his men in anything he may order them to do. Assault course, route march, musketry, manoeuvres, rope-climbing, weapon-training, swimming, fencing, rugger, drill. Drill. No time to think? It is intentional, you are going to be an officer, not a philosopher. Lectures on tactics, man-management, venereal diseases, regimental history, Russia, Korea, Malaya, mess-etiquette, signals, strategy, leadership.⁵⁶

Despite this unattainable ideal of physical and intellectual prowess, Dan moves increasingly towards a revolutionary consciousness. He gets into trouble for discussing American involvement in Korea with his fellow officers, joins the Communist Party and paints the aforementioned revolutionary slogan and finally is asked to resign his commission after delivering a speech which explains the cost of guns in terms of the amount of council houses or hospital beds they could pay for, which the army deems incitement to mutiny. The Communists refuse to support him following this incident, which contributes to Dan's disillusionment with organised protest. But what is most interesting here is the way in which Dan is able to occupy simultaneously two opposing positions - both an army officer and a Communist, and while the novel concerns itself frequently with the

⁵⁵ Alan Burns, *Revolutions of the Night*, (London: Allison and Busby Limited, 1986), p.105

⁵⁶ Burns, *Buster*, p.93

emergence of Dan's political consciousness, his sympathy for the international working class and his distrust of money and state power, it does not seem to extend that analysis to Dan's own privileged situation - his ability to fail, to refuse and to protest without much consequence, always with the safety net of his class and his family to fall back on. At the end of *Buster*, when Dan seems to have exhausted the patience of everybody he encounters, has failed to find a job he can do, has been evicted from his flat and has wandered the streets for a night, he returns home to his father and stepmother and is looked after. This scene of returning, which is meant to show the low-ebb that Dan has reached - the opening lines of the novel are repeated at its conclusion to emphasise his lack of progress - also displays the way in which he has security and safety.

This latter point raises an important question about Burns' education and career before becoming a writer. In this next section I will consider Burns' involvement in a series of institutions which seem to contradict the politics he later espouses. Following his military service, Burns began studying law at Middle Temple in London, one of the oldest and most prestigious law schools in Britain, and was called to the bar in 1956⁵⁷. Burns' relationship with studying and practicing law is complicated; he calls himself a "bad lawyer,"⁵⁸ in his interview with Charles Sugnet, and his portrayal of the atmosphere at Middle Temple in *Buster* is scathing:

The line of old men doddered along between the tables near close enough to touch. The Senior Judge thanked the Lord beautifully for His bounteous liberality and everyone sat down.

'Man, they're the ancientest,' said Montague.

'They are indeed incredibly old, and diseased,' said Dan. 'And remember that I, if I sweat and strain, I may become one of those.'

'It's a great incentive,' said Montague. 'Look at that little one, he's fantastic. Those facial muscles, that premature bulldog look. How does he do it?'

'Each morning,' Dan replied, 'after gargling, he informs the bathroom: "I, Mr. Justice Presley, Enshrine the Constitution. I have never heard of rock and roll." He [...] is conveyed to the Courts, where, robed and throned, ten miles above the multitude, he tells working class witnesses to "Speak up man!" because he can't hear a word.'⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See: Robert Nye, 'Alan Burns' in *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. James Vinson, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1976), p.211

⁵⁸ Burns and Sugnet, *The Imagination on Trial*, p.161

⁵⁹ Burns, *Buster*, p.130

Despite his contempt for the judges, who are depicted in animalistic terms, as though they were exhibits at a zoo - 'near close enough to touch' - there is a profound ambivalence to Dan's thoughts. The judges are old and out of touch with contemporary culture, they are haughty and dismissive of the people they encounter, but their position is still one that Dan aspires to, albeit with some ambivalence, and in doing so he tacitly recognises their authority. Elsewhere, Burns' depiction of lawyers is more straightforwardly negative. They are seen as representatives of an old order, and they wield power and control wherever they occur. In *Celebrations*, the lawyers and judges who arbitrate at the inquiry into Phillip's death resemble those in *Buster*, but their ability to exercise power is made more explicit:

The two judges resembled each other and all lawyers resembled them, they were dressed alike, without charm, no love on their faces which showed two black curves on the head, imitation eyebrows, a nose and lips, apparently a face, which could be studied, the neck of each different when examined closely. [...] The right wing of the judges' gowns overlapped and left and almost completely covered it, except for the hidden fold which encased the flank. [...] As for justice, they understood well enough how that should be arranged.⁶⁰

Again the description dehumanises the lawyers and emphasises their lack of individuality. They are a homogenous force whose style of dress acts as a crude metaphor for their right wing politics - the right wing of their gowns overlapping almost entirely the left. In *The Angry Brigade*, following the arrest of one of the members of the group, Jean goes to visit a lawyer who is apparently sympathetic to their cause:

He was sitting typing. He still wore a sweaty singlet and shorts from his game of squash. He didn't look up when I came into the room. My first impression was, a very ordinary little man, about forty-five, how disappointing, I thought he was going to be a Lenin or a Fidel, I thought he would sum up the case in a flash. But he ignored me and went on typing. I think it was part of his act, to treat me as if I didn't exist.

After about five minutes he looked up and smiled, quite pleasantly, then asked me a few things about myself.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Burns, *Celebrations*, pp.22-23

⁶¹ Alan Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, (London: Quartet Books, 1973), p.132

Burns makes the power relation explicit in the treatment of Jean by the lawyer. By ignoring her and making her wait, he shows the distance and contempt for his clients that Dan satirises in the above quotation from *Buster*, but rather than making Jean feel cowed, she is disappointed in what she sees. His display of indifference and delay gives Jean time to appraise the man she sees, and shows him to be petty and interested more in asserting his authority than in furthering her political cause. The depiction of the lawyer in *The Angry Brigade* is Burns' most human portrayal of a lawyer; the description moves out of the absurd, symbolic register of his previous work, and shows the lawyer as an ordinary person. This is disappointing to Jean, who hopes for someone who can immediately grasp her situation, but what Burns is also able to do with this description is make a point about the exertion of power. Power in the scenario he presents occurs indirectly, passively, and yet the hierarchy is still exerted.

In his final published novel, *Revolutions of the Night*, Burns presents his most sustained portrait of a lawyer, Bob, who acts as the novel's antagonist and as a representation of power and old money. Here, Burns describes Bob's house:

“There's a fortune invested in this place. The underground swimming pool is refilled daily with champagne. Our twenty-two toilet chains are all gold-plated. Here you don't get no warbling telephones, all you hear is the subdued hum of an automated system. What it does in an hour would take a typist five or six years.”

“Would there be a job for Harry here?”

“The project I like to think about is the working prototype of a light bulb that would burn for ever. They say it could make a million. All we need is a platinum alloy lighter than air. R&D takes imagination. [...] Harry would be treated like a son. He'd have to be mobile, flexible, and have a high energy content. We have a model contract which he would have to sign.”⁶²

The ridiculous excess of the description of the house bleeds into another idea of excess, or even infinity, with the idea of the perpetual light bulb, a concept which has connotations of infinite growth, and limitless expansion. But even within a context where money has enabled Bob to live a life of frictionless decadence, still he wishes to exert control. Despite claiming that Harry, one of the novel's protagonists, will be treated like a son, he still has to fulfil certain criteria and will still be contractually bound. Burns shows the way in which power continually wishes to expand its level

⁶² Burns, *Revolutions of the Night*, pp.119-120

of control. In Burns work, the figure of the lawyer always stands in for the exertion of power. The law colludes with those who already have control to ensure that they can maintain their dominance.

Given the role that lawyers play in his work, it's intriguing to note that Burns worked for several years in the late 1950s and early 1960s as a lawyer. Firstly as a barrister from 1956-59, then briefly as a research assistant at the London School of Economics in 1959, before working as an assistant legal manager for Beaverbrook Newspapers from 1959-62. Why would Burns align himself with these right wing interests when the politics that emerges in his writing is so directly in contrast with them? Why is his pre-writing career so conventionally middle class? There are no simple answers to these questions. It is possible to see, if *Buster* is taken to be largely autobiographical (and while it does seem to be in some senses, Dan's failure to pass his law exams and his abandoning of various jobs and opportunities contrast with Burns' relatively smooth passage through employment) then there are various moments of rebellion and sabotage that occur which indicate a dissatisfaction with the institutions that Dan encounters, but even in that novel there is no thorough break from, or disavowal of, those institutions, the critique almost always comes from within.

After qualifying as a barrister, Burns worked briefly as a court practitioner before leaving to work for Reynolds News, a group which was aligned to the Co-Operative Party. In 1959, Burns began working for Beaverbrook Newspapers, as a libel lawyer. Beaverbrook Newspapers published the Daily Express, the most popular right wing newspaper in the country at the time Burns was working there. The organisation was owned and run by Lord Beaverbrook, a former Conservative MP who used the newspaper to promote his political agenda, specifically he "used the paper largely to further what he regarded as his most important political goal in life, 'the cause of Empire.'"⁶³ Despite Britain's decline as a major world power in the post-war period, and the gradual loss of empire, Beaverbrook and *The Express* continued, in the time Burns was working for them, to act as though Britain's imperial identity could be retained. Patricia Waugh has stated that, "[...] from 1960 to 1963 a pervasive obsession with the decline of Britain occupied both the literary intelligentsia and the popular media,"⁶⁴ and Burns' first novel, *Buster*, with its damning portrayals of authority alongside the lack of direction of its protagonist seems to suggest a Britain which is in decline; he describes a train journey during which "Came odd hopeless triangles of desert: long

⁶³ Mathias Haeussler, 'The Popular Press and Ideas of Europe: The Daily Mirror, the Daily Express, and Britain's First Application to Join the EEC, 1961-63' in *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 25, No. 1, (2014), p. 110

⁶⁴ Patricia Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background 1960-1990*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.3

grass, planks, patches of stinging nettles, pram bits, small hills of gravel; nobody owned them.”⁶⁵ But at the time of writing *Buster*, “Combined with puritan ethos and moral conservatism, the Express styled itself as the most authoritative, independent voice in the British newspaper market, consciously adopting an aggressive, self-proclaimed identity as the ‘Empire Crusader’. With the 82-year-old Beaverbrook still exercising almost complete dominance over his editorial team.”⁶⁶ Again, this shows Burns’ deep entrenchment in right wing organisations, at a time when he was beginning to publish fiction that engaged with left wing debates.

In the early 1960s, Britain applied to become a member of the European Economic Community (EEC). The Express was the only newspaper to oppose this at the time,⁶⁷ and public opinion was largely in favour of the application. In 1971, Burns was a co-signatory to a letter written by Kingsley Amis in *The Times* which argued against Britain’s entry into the EEC. The letter, signed also by John Calder, B.S. Johnson, F.R. Leavis, Harold Pinter and Arnold Wesker (and others) suggested that friendly relations with academics and writers would not be enhanced by entry into the EEC. Amis writes that, “We regard the Common Market as no more or less “civilized” than any other blatant commercial arrangement.”⁶⁸ And while this position reflects a more general change in attitudes since the early 60s, and aligns the signatories with the position of the Labour party at the time, what it also shows is Burns’ mix of (sometimes radical) left wing politics alongside, and sometimes, as here, enmeshed with right wing institutions. And while scepticism about Britain’s membership of the European Union is an issue that can make uncomfortable bedfellows of right and left wing thinkers who approach the issue from very different standpoints yet still come to the same conclusion, it is intriguing to note that Burns here reflects, albeit for different reasons, the stance of his former employer, Beaverbrook.

In 1972, Burns compiled an abridged version of the Technical Report of the United States Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (1970), which was published for the UK market by Davis-Poynter as *To Deprave and Corrupt: Pornography, its Causes, its Forms, its Effects*. Burns is credited as a Barrister-at-Law in the text, despite not having practiced as a lawyer for several years. In his preface to the book, Burns describes his process in the following terms: “I wanted to make a readable and popular book without making concessions which would unduly affect its scientific

⁶⁵ Burns, *Buster*, p.115

⁶⁶ Twentieth Century British History, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2014, pp. 108–131// Mathias Haeussler* Robinson College, Cambridge. *The Popular Press and Ideas of Europe: The Daily Mirror, the Daily Express, and Britain’s First Application to Join the EEC, 1961–63*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *The Times* (London, England), Friday, Jul 30, 1971; pg. 15; Issue 58237.

value, and particularly its relevance to and impact on the current debate on censorship.”⁶⁹ The book exists as a curio in Burns’ publications, but it also displays two key components of Burns’ work and methodology. Firstly, the composition of the book, for which Burns edited a much longer report, resembles the way in which he put together his novels, assembling them from a mass of fragments. Secondly, it shows Burns’ continuing enmeshment within a legal system that he disdains elsewhere in his writing.

Burns addresses his ambivalent relationship with the state and its institutions in his interview with Peter Firchow, particularly with regard to the literary establishment. Despite calling himself a “fairly uncompromising radical,”⁷⁰ Burns acknowledges the support he has received from the Arts Council. He says that:

[...] they have treated me extremely generously. To that extent, what can I say? I don’t consider myself part of the old boy network, but the old boys have treated me all right is what it comes to, and therefore I beware of oversimplifying in relation to them. Particularly the ones I’ve met are nice folks. This again is another very awkward characteristic of the British socio-political scene: that our bourgeoisie, our tyrants, are nice folks. They’re nice to be with and they’re so cultivated and so understanding, that it’s difficult to hate them.⁷¹

The kind of power that bodies like the Arts Council have, for Burns, works in this subtle, insidious way, co-opting dissident voices. In this sense, Burns’ analysis is sophisticated, he is able to recognise that even the Arts Council, a body which was responsible for supporting a great deal of progressive art at the time, is still nonetheless an organ of the state, and, as such, represents concerns of the state. Burns, like many writers of his generation, has ambivalent feelings about being involved with the Arts Council, but acknowledges how important it is to literary culture. However, as I will cover in more detail below, Burns is also one of the first writers to move from a funding-based income to working in higher education as a creative writing tutor, first as a writing fellow at the University of East Anglia and then as a full time member of academic staff in Australia, the USA and the UK. Burns therefore begins a trend among British novelists of supporting themselves through work in universities.

⁶⁹ Alan Burns, *To Deprave and Corrupt: Pornography, its Causes, its Forms, its Effects*, (London: Davis-Poynter, 1972), p.11

⁷⁰ Firchow, *The Writer’s Place*, p.58

⁷¹ Firchow, *The Writer’s Place*, p.58

What is also notable in the above quotation, just as Burns is able to see the problematic nature of his relationship to the Arts Council, he is also seduced by it, describing the “tyrants” of the British bourgeoisie as “nice folks”, and admitting that he has been treated well by the “old boys network”, despite not considering himself a part of it. He goes on to say, of D.H. Lawrence, that “He was quite one of the boys, albeit a rebellious boy. But the club needs a few rebels too, to help make the scene.”⁷² There are a number of issues here. Firstly, Burns seems blind to the way in which the tone of his interaction with bodies such as the Arts Council (and with state institutions more generally) is shaped by his background and class. Burns’ solidly middle class upbringing and professional status allows him to move easily through these kinds of encounters, because the establishment figures he will be dealing with will be his social peers. It is very easy to describe the bourgeoisie as likeable tyrants when you can interact with them and gain benefit from them. Burns’ lack of insight into his own privilege in this interview seems to run counter to his writing about political exclusion, particularly in later novels like *The Day Daddy Died*. And while Burns’ recognition that the power of institutions like the Arts Council operates precisely in the way in which they are nice, and likeable, he does not allow for the fact that these qualities are a discourse which is, by its nature, exclusionary, designed to only be of benefit for those who have already mastered it.

Perhaps Burns’ position owes something to his experience of school, the army and the legal profession, a deference towards real authority that he encounters which contradicts his more abstract and radical political principles. This contradiction points to a key issue in the relationship between Burns’ politics and his writing. Throughout his writing career, Burns moved between forms and approaches, ranging from relatively conventional novels like *Buster* or *The Day Daddy Died* to the amorphous *Babel* or multimedia environments such as his play *Palach*. He seemed to be searching for an appropriate form which could deliver the political message he wanted to convey. In his interview with Peter Firchow, Burns says that, “I would hope to class myself with the radical element, which is to say the revolutionary element, the element that is wanting to change society.”⁷³ And though Burns later express dissatisfaction with the strength of this opinion, saying in his interview with Charles Sugnet that, “Early in writing I was naive enough to think I could change the world, a little. Or even quite a lot,”⁷⁴ it suggests that Burns, throughout his writing, is casting around for a form which can have a radical political effect and instigate change in his readers.

⁷² Firchow, *The Writer’s Place*, p.59

⁷³ Firchow, *The Writer’s Place*, p.55

⁷⁴ Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet, *Imagination on Trial*, p.167

In 1975 Alan Burns was asked to contribute a piece of short fiction and a reflective statement about his work to an anthology being edited by Giles Gordon called *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*. This anthology, which Gordon describes as “a collector’s item for the few who want to read it,”⁷⁵ was published shortly after the deaths of BS Johnson and Ann Quin and is really the last major publication to suggest a coherent movement of avant-garde writers in Britain in the period. Gordon goes on to note that the anthology was “ferociously attacked when published, notably by Christopher Ricks and a very young but spluttering Martin Amis with a reputation still to make.”⁷⁶ A statement in which it is already possible to feel the eradication of the relevance of Gordon’s authors (with one or two exceptions: Anthony Burgess, Gabriel Josipovici and, possibly Eva Figs), and the emergence of a new critical idiom which would find expression in Amis’ bullish, postmodern works. Although it marks an endpoint of the vague and ill-defined movement of the post-war experimental British novel, Alan Burns’ critical writing in the anthology sets out his writing career from its earliest moments and, as such, gives the best and most coherent picture of how he saw his writing, at a point in his career when he himself was moving from his avant-garde phase into something more conventional. Unusually, in an anthology which features a great deal of handwringing about the state of the experimental novel, and anxiety about the position of the writer of experimental fiction, Burns gives the reader an account of his juvenilia, and treats the essay as an autobiographical piece with little reference to the literary world or to other writers. Burns begins by recounting his beginnings as a writer:

I began writing short prose pieces in a rather pressured, affected style, trying to say something significant in each sentence. One piece was about digging a hole in the ground; one described a man rowing a boat. I started with something seen, then isolated and intensified it. The pieces were nearer to poetry than prose. Looking back I find them literary and a bit absurd. I remember writing in a lined exercise book in light blue Quink, a poem about a horse galloping across a stony beach. I’d seen the horse and the beach separately and put them together. I kept the poem for a long time. One verse described the horse like the sea ‘breaking across the beach’.⁷⁷

Burns does not give any information about his age or circumstances when writing these pieces and it is tempting to read solipsism in his description of them, their simplicity and their loneliness. It is also possible to see elements of his later style even in these early works, in the privileging of affect

⁷⁵ Giles Gordon, ‘Introduction’ in *Berg*, by Ann Quin, (Chicago: Dalkey Archive, 2001), p.xiv

⁷⁶ Gordon, ‘Introduction’, p.xiv

⁷⁷ Burns, ‘Essay’, p.63

over anything like plot or character. What Burns describes are fragments, and in the way that he pressurises and intensifies those fragments, there are echoes of his future long-form work. The image of the horse and the beach which he puts together is a crude premonition of his later assemblage style. What is absent though, at least from his descriptions of the pieces, is the political. The isolation of the characters and situations, the sense of his presenting a figure in a landscape, may have some existential resonance for the reader, but it lacks the more overt left wing interests of his later fiction.

While, as I have said, most of the authors who feature in the *Beyond the Words* anthology concern themselves in their reflective pieces with contemporary literary debates, what it is also possible to read, in Burns' desire to present to the reader his earliest works, is a return to the past and a concern with the origin of his writing. In the few interviews he gave, Burns speaks candidly about the difficulty he had with producing texts, and his use of found materials, cut-ups and collages is to some extent a way to mitigate against that difficulty. By surrounding himself with a surfeit of raw material, Burns was able to produce texts, and after *Buster* (though even that starts from something external, a photograph, despite its autobiographical quality), everything he writes relies on a variety of external sources which Burns rearranges, edits and assembles in a variety of ways. What Burns attempts to do is to diminish the role of the author, to seek what Foucault might call a "transcendental anonymity."⁷⁸ Brian McHale suggests that what Foucault means by this is that we ought to "[discard] the notion of the author as *entity*, and [begin] to think of the author as a *function* in texts and in the culture at large. [...] From this perspective, the author appears as an *institution*, governed by the institutions which in a particular society regulate the circulation of discourses [...]; as a *construct* of the reading-process, rather than a textual given; as a *plural* rather than a unitary."⁷⁹ In particular, the idea of the author as plural has application in Burns' work, but as McHale suggests, the Foucauldian author function allows for a far broader way of conceptualising the relationship of an author to their work. It also allows for the seemingly contradictory impulses that animated Burns' methodology, firstly as a writer deeply enmeshed in the material he used, extending even to the physicality of that material. Burns' references his similarity to Jean-Luc Godard in that respect: "[...] he is usually knee-deep in snippets and little cuttings of magazine, I recognized immediately that this is the way I work. [...] I create a mass of fragments, and then I search in and live with those fragments."⁸⁰ Secondly, though, it allows for precisely the kind of

⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), p.120

⁷⁹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.200

⁸⁰ Firchow, *The Writer's Place*, p.60

transcendental anonymity that Foucault speaks of; Burns sifting through the detritus, a curator, giving little of himself.

In his short biographical article on Burns, discussing the novel *Babel*, Nye describes its author as “writing as though he looks down on the rest of us from a private spaceship in unwilling orbit,” and that “the comedy cannot quite conceal something merely self-disgusted in such furious insistence on unmeaning.”⁸¹ Nye’s idea of self-disgust, a disgust that is pointed inwards, rather than outwards, is a provocative way of reading Burns’ work, suggesting that despite his distance, despite writing from his private spaceship, Burns’ writing always points back to the self, to the author. That despite his attempts to diminish his role, Burns the man remains present in his works, however abstruse their construction. Burns himself is aware of this, recognising the contradiction between his use of found material and aleatoric techniques and the continual emergence of his own traumatic family pattern in his work. He writes, in ‘Essay’, for example, of *Dreamerika*, that, “it was not until I had finished the novel that I realised the parallels between the Kennedy family pattern and my own: the same dominant father, the same martyred son.”⁸²

However, Burns is also aware, in a quite different register, of the way in which his work departs from the conventions of literature, and perhaps the self-disgust that Nye diagnoses has some application here too, perhaps it explains Burns’ need to discuss his juvenilia in his account of his writing career in ‘Essay’. He calls those early pieces ‘literary and affected’, a combination of adjectives which itself is intriguing, suggesting, perhaps, that the two are linked, that any attempt, or at least Burns’ attempt, to enter into literary discourse entails a falseness, an adoption of a voice or a tone that doesn’t come naturally to the author. Perversely, Burns’ solution to this problem is not to attempt to find a somehow more authentic voice (the closest he comes is perhaps his interest in dreams and the unconscious, but even these he positions as largely external, or separate from the self), but to look further outside of himself, and to reconstitute the role of the writer as somebody who sifts through the detritus of his age and pieces it back together, gives structure to it. This is the position that gives rise to Nye’s conceiving of Burns writing from a ‘private spaceship’, and Burns himself, discussing disconnection in his work, writes that:

I was also showing contempt for what I was doing, almost trying to write badly, from disgust with myself and with Literature which is not life but only marks on paper. Plus a political

⁸¹ Robert Nye, ‘Alan Burns’ in *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. James Vinson, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1976), p.213

⁸² Burns, ‘Essay’, p.67

rejection of bourgeois art as a self-indulgence irrelevant to the struggle for social justice, which, by playing the bourgeois art game perpetuates a system based on exploitation and greed. Disconnection also expressed my own social estrangement, my distance from others, with the dual sense of superiority and yearning for closeness. Paradoxically, the act of wrenching images apart expressed a need to hold them close, like people.⁸³

There is sadness in this passage that emerges alongside the rhetoric about the bourgeoisie and art's complicity in exploitation, a sadness that is almost buried by that rhetoric. The self-disgust that Nye writes of (Nye himself features in the *Beyond the Words* anthology, so he may well have been aware of Burns' essay when writing his piece), appears here, intermingled with Burns' political objections to literature, as though inseparable from them. Disgust with himself is connected to disgust with literature. This essay was written at a time when Burns was beginning his academic career, having already worked as a writer in residence at the University of East Anglia, by the time the anthology was published, Burns had moved to Australia and was working at the Western Australian Institute of Technology as a lecturer in creative writing. Here again is Burns' ambivalent relationship towards institutions - he is both inside and outside of literature. Literature and higher education provides him with work and income, but in personal and theoretical terms he is repulsed by it. He is implicated (to some, problematic, extent) in the *bourgeoisification* of writing, its entrenchment within the university, its professionalization even as he decries the practice of bourgeois art.

Burns speaks of literature as 'only marks on paper', a comment which seems to highlight the physical, gestural aspects of writing and its visible, even structural components. Burns seems to go as far as to suggest that that there is an aseptic quality to all writing, and that this writing is not life, is separate from the stuff of life, is utterly distinct from it. And while this remark should be seen in the context of Burns' attack on bourgeois art and perhaps should not be taken entirely and theoretically seriously, it nonetheless, alongside his disgust with literature and himself, provides a way into a question which will help both to historicise and theorise Burns' work. The question is simply: why literature? Why does Burns persist with writing novels and teaching creative writing if he feels such revulsion towards it? In his interviews, Burns shows an awareness of literary history and in his interviews with other writers in *The Imagination on Trial*, he is revealed as an astute close reader of other writers novels with a good grasp of the wider implications, both political and

⁸³ Burns, 'Essay', pp.64-65

literary, of the career of the novelist. But, for example, in his interview with JG Ballard, Burns, ostensibly asking Ballard about his use of language, says:

I've been trying to get out of the stylised language I got saddled with by using the tape-recorder and otherwise experimenting to escape my own style. To use the raw stuff of social reality even as I chop it up and change it around.⁸⁴

Elsewhere, Burns is asked more directly about the usefulness of literature by Peter Firchow, and the alternatives for writers in film and television. Burns' answer vacillates between an admission of the sensual qualities of film, which is, according to Burns, "incomparable as a medium,"⁸⁵ and a defence of the novel in terms of the intimacy it can have with its reader. Burns argues that:

The one thing the novel has got that the film and television don't is the peculiarly intimate relationship over a period of time between writer and reader. The reader can read and reread; he can answer back, as it were. In other words, there's a genuine dialogue here. It's a democratic thing: you writing, motivating, changing your reader in a way that television certainly and most films fail to do. Hence you can't achieve the same profundity in a film as you can in a novel. If, therefore, one can foresee a better society with leisured, cultured people, who won't merely absorb art in a passive way, then I see a great future for the book.

Having said all this, I'll say that, nevertheless, what I want to do now is make a film.⁸⁶

There is something specious about Burns' argument about the profundity of the novel against film and television, particularly given his remarks elsewhere about the bankruptcy of the bourgeois novel and his disgust with literature. But its speciousness says something about Burns' relationship with literary culture and, perhaps, why he continued as a novelist, and again it comes down to his ambivalent relationship with institutions and, even, ideologies. When speaking about influences, Burns mentions painters, political theorists and psychoanalysts at least as much as novelists, if not more. And by 1973, when the interview with Peter Firchow took place, Burns had already, in fact, been involved in making two films, writing the script for Peter Whitehead's *Jeanette Cochrane* in 1968 and working with BS Johnson on *Unfair*, a film made to protest the Industrial Relations Bill of 1971. Burns also mentions in his David Madden interview that the option for a film of *Europe*

⁸⁴ Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet, *The Imagination on Trial*, (London and New York: Allison and Busby Limited, 1981), p.29

⁸⁵ Firchow, *The Writer's Place*, p.59

⁸⁶ Firchow, *The Writer's Place*, p.60

After the Rain “was sold, but it got no further.”⁸⁷ It is not clear whether Burns pursued filmmaking any further than this, or whether he sought, as he claims to Firchow that many of his friends are seeking, to write for television. He extols the work of Godard, seeing similarities in the way Godard works with “snippets and little cuttings of magazines,”⁸⁸ to his own method of constructing fiction. But something holds him back from definitively rejecting fiction. In Burns’ own account in various interviews, the position of the novelist is a privileged one. To Firchow he says that, though novelists have lost a great deal of their audience to television and film, there are positive aspects to this loss:

I think it’s to his benefit that he has been driven out, because he’s being driven some place else and that’s a rather good place to be. he’s been driven, in fact, inside himself. [...] I think the way to react to the occupation of that territory is summed up in Trocchi’s phrase, “the cosmonaut of inner space.” That is to say, the novelist needs to explore his one imagination as never before. [...] One has somehow got to combine this concern with the exploration of one’s unconscious with [...] a concern for history.⁸⁹

Burns goes on to admit that there might be some contradiction between the idea of a concern for history alongside a deep examination of inner-consciousness, but, again somewhat speciously, explains that, “the answer to this contradiction lies quite possibly, though I’m not sure about it, in the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious.”⁹⁰ So for Burns, literature is able to combine a close examination of the self with an awareness of and engagement with history; literature also has an intimate relationship with the reader that other media lack. Burns’ novels do attempt to address the contradiction he identifies, though little in them hints at anything as grandiose as a collective unconscious. Rather, they employ an intensity of detail in each moment that is depicted (moments which can contain intense character self-reflection), out of which emerges a sense of the political. Burns attempts in those moments to show the workings of power. I will discuss the way in which Burns’ politics manifests in his writing in more detail in a subsequent chapter, but what concerns me here is the way in which Burns posits the writer as an outsider, one who has been ‘driven out’, but who obtains perspective from that outsider status, in fact benefits from the loss of audience. Again this relates to Burns’ ambivalence about institutions. Though he claims to be disgusted with literature, he nonetheless invests the figure of the writer with a privileged status which they have precisely because of the decline in popularity of the novel.

⁸⁷ Madden, ‘An Interview with Alan Burns’, p.137

⁸⁸ Firchow, *The Writer’s Place*, p.60

⁸⁹ Firchow, *The Writer’s Place*, p.52

⁹⁰ Firchow, *The Writer’s Place*, p.52

Burns' remarks on the change in the role of the writer are related to contemporary debates about the novel and its ability to remain relevant, debates which have wider permutations, calling into question the ability of the novel to accurately represent the social, technological and political changes of the post-war period. In 1970, George Steiner offers this account of the decline of the novel:

[The novel] expressed and, in part, shaped the habits and feelings and language of the western *bourgeoisie* from Richardson to Thomas Mann. In it, the dreams and nightmares of the mercantile ethic, of middle-class privacy, and of the monetary-sexual conflicts and delights of industrial society have their monument. With the decline of these ideals and habits into a phase of crisis and partial rout, the genre is losing much of its vital bearing.⁹¹

For Steiner, the novel is the product of a particular set of historical circumstances, and has become a monument to those circumstances. The novel form can only represent a particular class and their interests. Steiner seems to suggest that the novel has a built-in obsolescence, and that the crisis that it underwent after the Second World War is a product of that obsolescence. Steiner's views were shared by other critics of the time, including Bernard Bergonzi and David Lodge, both of whom, writing in the early seventies, diagnose their contemporary situation as one of crisis for the novel, and both see the avant-garde and experimental writing as one way to avoid the exhaustion of the novel form (though both ultimately reject it in favour of an approach which combines some experimentation with more conventional devices). Of experimental writing, Lodge writes that:

The assumption behind such experiments is that our 'reality' is so extraordinary, horrific or absurd that the methods of conventional realistic imitation are no longer adequate. There is no point in carefully creating fiction that gives an illusion of life when life itself seems illusory.⁹²

This chimes with Burns' approach in his experimental work, a sense of searching for a form that can contain a rapidly changing and fragmenting world. There is a political register to this in Burns' work too, a feeling that the novel can transcend its eighteenth century genus and represent a different set of interests, and Burns seeks to achieve this through his use of found material, cut-ups and multiple perspectives, which decentralise the individual in his work. The crisis of the novel can

⁹¹ George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, (New York: Atheneum, 1970), pp.421-2

⁹² David Lodge, *The Novelist at the Crossroads*, (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986), p.33

be experienced in Burns' fiction through a constant unmaking and remaking of the novel form, a testing of its possibilities. And here I return to Burns' remarks about his 'disgust' with literature, a disgust which manifests itself in his novels, but also in his interviews and remarks about literature. In a 1973 article for *Books and Bookmen*, Burns is in raucous, ebullient form, chastising exponents of middlebrow literature:

The boredom the boredom the boredom the boredom the boredom.

An intensely dramatic account of a love affair between a French politician and a beautiful empty desperately insecure model.

The boredom the boredom the boredom the continuous unmitigated incapacitating tedium.

A school teacher dying of an incurable disease spends her last months in a dilapidated cabin on the sea coast where she makes a curious friendship with a wandering Indian.

Who publishes who criticises who publicises who sells who buys who reads this predigested pap?⁹³

And later:

[...] it is precisely because the novel has in the main stuck fast in its 19th century rut that it gives off that stink of staleness and old age of which she [Storm Jameson] is tentatively aware.

It's not "society" (far less "everything") which is disintegrating: it is merely capitalist society: a passing historical phase, no more.

[...] I imply something about the simultaneous reporting of world events where "world time" alters with geography, and about the fluidity of time in the subconscious dream world in which the action of *Babel* takes place.⁹⁴

In iconoclastic style, Burns offers a complete abnegation of the realist novel. His tone is exasperated, satirical, expressing frustration with the novel's slow pace of change and its narrow parameters. Instead he proposes a dynamic, mutable writing which attempts to capture the simultaneity of modern experience. In this he resembles B.S. Johnson, whose critical writings similarly chastise a moribund literary establishment. Burns, at least in the mid to late sixties and early seventies was, like Johnson, firmly in favour of experimental fiction and opposed to its realist

⁹³ Alan Burns, 'The Disintegrating Novel', quoted in *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. James Vinson, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1976), p.212, originally published in *Books and Bookmen*, 15, (15 September 1970)

⁹⁴ Burns, 'The Disintegrating Novel', p.212

counterpart. This debate, between realism and experimentation, is how many later critics have framed the period, and here I return to Andrzej Gasiorek's account of post-war British fiction. Gasiorek recounts the debate and comes down firmly in favour of realist fiction, although he hedges his bets somewhat by suggesting that the delineation between realist and experimental fiction is too firmly drawn. He writes:

I shall also suggest that the old division between experimental and realist writing is untenable if that distinction is taken to support avant-garde claims that experimental writing is inherently radical (aesthetically and politically), whereas realist writing is essentially conservative. The link between artistic experimentation and progressive politics is at best a tenuous one, and Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which shows how and why the various avant-gardes were incapable of fulfilling their political aims, has shown how questionable this is.⁹⁵

Gasiorek's intention here is less a circumvention of the realism/experimentation dichotomy, than a means to criticise experimental writers. His citing of Bürger is provocative and intriguing, though it seems to be based on a (perhaps wilful) misreading of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which it is worth pursuing here because it is a misreading that says something about the way many critics have approached the post-war avant-garde in Britain generally and about Alan Burns' work specifically. Bürger's arguments remain relevant to any discussion of experimentation in the arts, and I will deal with them in detail in a later chapter, but here I will address Gasiorek's claim that Bürger shows that the avant-garde did not fulfil its political aims. This is particularly relevant to a consideration of Alan Burns' work, because Burns himself abandoned his avant-garde excesses in the mid-seventies, claiming that he wanted to write more plainly, for political reasons. Bürger deals with the avant-garde's relationship with politics in a complex way. While it is true that he considers later practitioners of avant-garde techniques (what Hal Foster calls the neo-avant-garde) to be merely reifying the techniques of the classical avant-garde, Bürger does show that the avant-garde of the early part of the twentieth century did succeed in its main aim:

The intention of the historical avant-garde movements was defined as the destruction of art as an institution set off from the praxis of life. The significance of this intention is not that art as an institution in bourgeois society was in fact destroyed and art thereby made a direct element

⁹⁵ Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction*, pp.18-19

in the praxis of life, but that the weight that art as an institution has in determining the real social effect of individual works became recognisable.⁹⁶

Bürger's contention, that the true job of the avant-garde was an attempt to reveal the workings of art as institution and to attempt to combat that institutionalism by reintegrating art with what Bürger calls 'the praxis of life', chimes with Alan Burns' working methods, even in Burns' later, less overtly experimental period - in *The Angry Brigade* and *The Day Daddy Died*, Burns uses taped interviews as raw material which he reshapes and edits, and this, along with his cut-ups of books and magazines, his integrating of detritus and fragments of voices other than his own is precisely an integration of reality, the praxis of life, into the work. As Bürger writes, of painting rather than literature, but the argument still applies: "The insertion of reality fragments into the work of art fundamentally transforms that work. The artist not only renounces shaping a whole, but gives the painting a different status, since parts of it no longer have the relationship to reality characteristic of the organic work of art. They are no longer signs pointing to reality, they *are* reality."⁹⁷ The political implications of this are clear, and though Bürger stops short of endorsing Adorno's view that the collage or montage style has a revolutionary quality, he does contend that the avant-garde has, through its methods and techniques, brought about a new visibility to art as an institution. Bürger's book, in its analysis of Brecht in particular, but also Duchamp, Picasso and Schiller, offers a number of examples of direct political engagement. To argue, as Gasiorek does, that the avant-garde failed in its own political project is reductive, even as Bürger is sceptical about the lasting impact of the historical avant-garde's institutional critique. Bürger is also deeply cynical about realism and its claims. In fact, in summarising the debate between Lukács and Adorno on the legitimacy of avant-gardiste art, Bürger suggests that "This is not the place to decide which of the two approaches is 'correct'; rather, the intention of the theory sketched here is to demonstrate that the debate itself is historical. [...] the premises of the two authors are already historical today and [...] it is therefore impossible to simply adopt them."⁹⁸ What Bürger suggests, in fact, is that the realist and avant-gardiste work can sit alongside each other demonstrates both the failure *and* the success of the historical avant-garde. There is failure because the institution of art was not destroyed, and art was not fully reintegrated into the praxis of life, but success because, as Bürger

⁹⁶ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.83

⁹⁷ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.78

⁹⁸ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.86

writes, “[the historical avant-garde] did destroy the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity,”⁹⁹ as realism had previously.

As such, Bürger is a somewhat inappropriate critic to bring out in a defence of realism, or to attack the political failings of the avant-garde. It seems to me, and other critics such as Jochen Schulte-Sasse in the foreword to the English edition of Bürger’s book, Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster (whose work I will discuss in more detail in a subsequent chapter), that Bürger is too negative about the achievements and potential of the ‘neo-avant-garde’ of the 1960s. Bürger’s theoretical rigour seems to blind him to the political possibilities of the radical art of the period, something Gasiorek seizes upon without any detailed discussion of the arguments that underpin it.

The debate between realism and experimentation was played out in book reviews, articles and publications by writers who were often firmly anchored to one position. Writers associated with the Angry Young Men movement, including C.P. Snow, William Cooper and Kingsley Amis contended that the experimental novel was decadent (and, as Rubin Rabinovitz has argued, this decadence could be subtly or explicitly linked to fascism¹⁰⁰), focused too much on the experience of the individual, and was incapable of dealing with larger social or political questions. Gasiorek writes, summarising the views of C.P. Snow, that it was “His own concern with writing novels that explored social experience, the workings of power, and the impact of science on twentieth century life that led him to favour realism.”¹⁰¹ What is striking about Gasiorek’s summary is that the same could be said of Alan Burns, but with an entirely different conclusion, that it was these factors - a desire to represent the social experience, to examine power and to look at the impact of science (here one might also add the impact of mass media) - that led Burns to favour experimental writing.

Alan Burns’ work is replete with contradictions. He is both a product of privilege, part of the legal and literary establishments, and a radical activist; his novels move from realism to the extremes of fragmentation, and back to realism again; he claimed to be disgusted with the novel, and yet was one of the earliest proponents of creative writing teaching in the United Kingdom. These contradictions suggest a writer who is constantly struggling with how his work should be, both in its form and its content. As I have shown in this chapter, Alan Burns’ work intersects with many of

⁹⁹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.87

¹⁰⁰ See Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960*, (New York: Columbia Press, 1967)

¹⁰¹ Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction*, p.3

the historical and theoretical issues of his time. His writing is profoundly shaped by the experience of the Second World War; the violence and trauma of that experience never left his consciousness, and its implications are felt in all of his work. In line with a range of thinkers and writers of his period, Burns saw an extension of the violence of the war in the institutions he encountered, and as I have shown, a great deal of his fiction critiques the ideological role these institutions play in shaping the political subject. These political impetuses, as well as a scepticism toward mainstream literature were critical in shaping Burns' writing methodology, which remained consistent, even after his books became less fragmented and more concerned with traditional plot and narrative. In the chapters that follow I will analyse in detail three key concerns: the role of trauma in Burns' work; his relationship to the avant-garde; and the role of politics and ideology in his work.

Chapter Two: Trauma

I used other random methods, variations of the cut-up technique. Given this, I showed a strange consistency in my choice of characters. With no preconception or conscious decision I repeated my family pattern. Powerful father, absent mother, slaughtered son, surviving son [...]. Whatever random techniques I used this pattern remained inescapable.¹⁰²

Each of Alan Burns' published works returns to the motifs alluded to in the above quotation. Each narrative contains a family which suffers the loss of one or more of its members (usually the death of the mother or brother of the protagonist, sometimes both). Each representation of such an intimate loss is a repetition of the circumstances of Burns' own life; his mother and brother were killed during World War Two, and the profound effect of these deaths on Burns is such that they insinuate their way into each of his novels. So doing provides an implicit structure which, however much he employs chance, found materials and other avant-garde techniques, he cannot help but return to repeatedly. These events shape both Burns' politics and his ideological and aesthetic approaches to the novel. The occurrence of loss in each of the novels is highly traumatic, and just as Burns' own trauma initiated a sequence of repetition in his writing, the characters in his fiction are changed in various ways by their experiences of trauma, but each undergoes that same process of repetition.

The families that Burns depicts each experience the death of one or more of their members, and these deaths represent crises in which the underlying structures of power that constitute the family are briefly brought to the surface, are momentarily revealed. These deaths always precipitate a splintering of the family, and I will argue that such a breakdown, for Burns, is precisely attributable to that moment of crisis, as though the violence of the traumatic event makes visible the violence which underscores the construction of the family (and, by association, the State and its institutions), as though the traumatic event represents a fundamental rupture, as though it is able to speak, albeit briefly, that which usually remains unsaid and unacknowledged. For Burns, the traumatic event is also a moment of politicisation, and the compulsion to revisit and repeat traumatic experiences which Freud discusses in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is also, in each of Burns' works an opportunity to examine that politicisation in a number of different ways. Freud writes that "[The

¹⁰² Alan Burns, 'Essay' in *Beyond the Words*, ed. Giles Gordon, (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1975), p.65-66

victim of trauma] is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of [...] *remembering* it as something belonging to the past.¹⁰³ In Burns' novels, this repetition functions on two distinct levels: firstly, Burns' own compulsion to repeat his trauma in the content of the novels, and secondly the traumatic repetitions enacted by the characters of those novels. Both of these levels have political resonance, since the traumatic moment is inherently political in Burns' work, and Burns' own struggle to find an appropriate form and methodology with which to express his politics is deeply enmeshed with the struggle of his characters against the institutions they move through and attempt to resist.

The field of trauma theory is a heavily contested one, which intersects with a number of disciplines and discourses. There are a wide variety of theories about how trauma works, its effects on both individuals and communities, and the ways in which its effects might be treated. While Alan Burns' work exemplifies some aspects of this body of theory, it fits only awkwardly with others, and therefore his fiction read in the light of such theory offers an intriguing and perhaps instructive case study of a writer who returns to the scene of trauma repeatedly in his work, no matter how disparate the subject matter. What Burns adds to this body of theory is a conception of the traumatic scene as a node in a wider assemblage of violence and power. As Manuel DeLanda defines it, an assemblage is defined by the interaction of a range of actors, both human and non-human, living and not living: "An individual organism will typically exhibit a variety of capabilities to form *assemblages* with other individuals, organic or inorganic."¹⁰⁴ For Burns, the traumatic moment can contain multitudes, unveiling certain actions of power and concealing others, collapsing certain distinctions and sharpening others. The implications of DeLanda's approach for the study of trauma and its political implications is a broadening out of the field of inquiry, a way of examining a wide spectrum of interacting forces. In Burns' work, this allows for a depiction of power as slippery and diffuse, acting in complex ways upon the individual and their environment.

While most trauma theory focuses on the individual (and some on the idea of community), Burns' focus is more macro, taking into account the reconfigurations of objects, people and systems that trauma can engender, and also more micro, dealing with a density and everyday specificity of detail and the particulars of time, place and character concerning a traumatic moment. As such, his work covers territory that most of the theory is either unable to cover, or is uninterested in featuring, and therefore acts as a useful counterpoint to theoretical writing on trauma. This chapter will analyse the

¹⁰³ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey, (New York: Norton & Company, 1961), p.12

¹⁰⁴ Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, (London: Continuum, 2002), p.63

traumatic moments in Burns' novels, and their consequences. It will also examine the moments of congruence between Burns' work and various areas of trauma theory, while also highlighting the ways in which Burns' work resists theorisation.

In her *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys describes the oscillation between two different theories of trauma that have emerged since the idea of trauma came to prominence in the mid-nineteenth century. These are the 'mimetic' theory, in which the subject of the trauma undergoes "a kind of hypnotic imitation or identification in which, precisely because the victim cannot recall the original traumatogenic event, she is fated to act it out or in other ways imitate it."¹⁰⁵ And the 'antimimetic' theory, which understands trauma as "[...] a purely external event that befalls a fully constituted subject; whatever the damage to the patterns of psychical autonomy and integrity, there is in principle no problem of eventually remembering or otherwise recovering the event."¹⁰⁶ Both theories allow for the revisiting or repetition of the traumatic event, but understand the subject's position differently. In the mimetic theory, the traumatic event "in its sheer extremity, its affront to common norms and expectations, shatters or disables the victim's cognitive and perceptual capacities so that the experience never becomes part of the ordinary memory system."¹⁰⁷ As such, repetition is never a direct encounter with the trauma in Leys' mimetic model, but rather one in which "the victim unconsciously imitated, or identified with, the aggressor or traumatic scene in a condition that was likened to the state of heightened suggestibility or hypnotic trance."¹⁰⁸ In contrast, the antimimetic model positions trauma as, "[...] a purely external event coming to a sovereign if passive victim,"¹⁰⁹ which, "has the advantage of portraying the victim of trauma as in no way mimetically complicitous with the violence directed against her, even as the absence of complication as regards the reliability of her testimony shores up the notion of the unproblematic actuality of the traumatic event."¹¹⁰ For Leys, the relation between these two models is not entirely clear cut, at various times one infects the other, they collapse into each other, and the history of attempting to theorise trauma is, for Leys, a history of these two models, their relative prominence being a response to particular historical, political and theoretical circumstances. As Leys writes, "[...] the concept of trauma has been structured historically in such a way as simultaneously to

¹⁰⁵ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.298

¹⁰⁶ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.299

¹⁰⁷ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.298

¹⁰⁸ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.8

¹⁰⁹ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.10

¹¹⁰ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.299

invite resolution in favour of one pole or the other of the mimetic/antimimetic dichotomy and to resist and ultimately to defeat all such attempts at resolution.”¹¹¹

Leys uses these two categories to trace a history of trauma theory. She aligns a medical model of trauma to the antimimetic model. This is the model expounded by Bessel van der Kolk and others, and has contributed to the development of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a particular category within trauma theory. For Leys, “by eliminating the question of autobiographical-symbolic meaning, [this medical model] makes manifest the mechanical-causal basis of much recent theorising about trauma.”¹¹² The problem that Leys has with this model is that in focussing on the action of an external event on the body - this action being any event which produces the symptoms of trauma - the antimimetic model suggests a particular kind of encoding of memory, one which differs from everyday remembering, and is ‘non-narrative’. Leys writes that, “[van der Kolk and his associates] hold that the traumatic event is encoded in the brain in a different way from ordinary memory [...] involving bodily memories of skills, habits, reflex actions, and classically conditioned responses that lie outside verbal-semantic-linguistic representation.”¹¹³ This kind of memory differs from regular ‘narrative’ memory both in that it is preserved entirely accurately and cannot be degraded. This accounts for the long-term effects of trauma. For Leys, the problem is that this conceptualisation of memory suggests “the existence of a pristine and timeless historical truth, undistorted or uncontaminated by subjective meaning, personal cognitive schemes, psychosocial factors, or unconscious symbolic elaboration.”¹¹⁴ It suggests an objective, unmediated reality that the victim of trauma briefly gains access to. For Leys, this eliminates questions of interpretation, morality, guilt and implication that, for her, constitute a major part of trauma. Alan Burns’ work, particularly when it deals with trauma, concerns the multiple viewpoints, lines of power and relations between humans and objects (or the position of humans as objects in these relations). The antimimetic conception of trauma and memory cannot fully contain and theorise everything he depicts. Burns’ work resists the notion of any kind of objective reality, and is too concerned with politics for such a system. However, the antimimetic model’s insistence on the role of the body in trauma does have something to say with regard to Burns’ depictions of bodies in *Europe After the Rain* and *Celebrations*, so I will examine van der Kolk’s work in that context. I will also analyse the work of literary critic Cathy Caruth, who has taken the medical model and attempted to apply it to a literary context. Leys is highly critical of Caruth, particularly her work on Freud, and this critique

¹¹¹ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.299

¹¹² Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.7

¹¹³ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.7

¹¹⁴ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.7

will inform my reading of her theories. Caruth focuses on the delayed effect of trauma, the gap between the direct experience of trauma and its expression which, according to her, must always be symbolic or 'literary'. This theory has some application to the work of Burns, whose trauma clearly finds expression in his literary output, but the function of this delay in Burns' work is more nuanced, it speaks to the politicising effect that experiencing trauma can have, as though the traumatic event creates in its victim a heightened awareness of their situation, but an awareness equally of its complexity, one which takes time to be able to be fully expressed. I will examine Caruth's work alongside Leys' and use them to read traumatic moments in Burns' novels.

Kali Tal's work on trauma has some similarities to Caruth's. She marks the traumatic experience out as unique and separate from other types of experience:

[...] the task of the traumatised author is an impossible one. For if the goal is to convey the traumatic experience, no second-hand rendering of it is adequate. The horrific events that have reshaped the author's construction of reality can only be described in literature, not recreated. Only the experience of trauma has the traumatising effect.¹¹⁵

But Tal is also interested in the politics of bearing witness to trauma, in the act of writing and in the way in which accounts of trauma are interpreted, both by communities of survivors and those outside those communities. Tal calls accounts of traumatic experiences "marginal literature,"¹¹⁶ and argues against Roland Barthes and others, stating "there are meanings available to survivor-readers that are not available to nontraumatised readers."¹¹⁷ For Tal, experiencing trauma shatters what she calls 'personal myths', that is the set of cultural, social and political beliefs that constitute a person's view of the world; the shared experience and overlap of these beliefs within a community makes up what she calls 'national myths'. The shattering that occurs as part of experiencing trauma marks the victim as an outsider whose personal myths have to be reconstructed, a reconstruction which inevitably marginalises the victim. For Tal, therefore, the experience of trauma is both political and politicising. Clearly this type of view has some resonance with Alan Burns' work; Burns' characters do undergo a process of politicisation following trauma, but, as with Caruth, the way in which Burns depicts trauma differs from Tal. Burns sees trauma as a kind of excess which leaves the victim changed, but which is not fundamentally separate from the experiences of everyday life. I will look in more detail at Tal's arguments about the act of writing and the

¹¹⁵ Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.121

¹¹⁶ Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, p.17

¹¹⁷ Tal, *Worlds of Hurt* p.16

construction of community alongside Jeffrey Alexander's work on collective trauma. Alexander is a sociologist and, as such, he is interested in how definitions of trauma are created by communities. Alexander writes against what he calls 'lay trauma theory', that is theories which stem from the Enlightenment and from psychoanalysis which see the effect of trauma as stemming from inside an individual whose sense of well-being is shattered by the traumatic event. These theories take a 'naturalistic' approach in focusing on the effects on the individual rather than the collective, and in their focus on the singular event of trauma rather than a longer process of realisation that takes place within the collective. For Alexander, this is the 'naturalistic fallacy' which he counters in stark terms: "[...] events do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution."¹¹⁸

Alexander's approach contrasts completely with that of most of the writers who examine trauma from a medical or literary model. He contends that an event need not even have happened for it to be traumatic, what matters is the response of a community to an event, whether real or imagined: "Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors "decide" to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go."¹¹⁹ This theory has application in Alan Burns' work in its questioning of the agency both of individuals and communities. In this context I will consider in particular Burns' portrayal of the effects of war in *Europe After the Rain*, and the damaged activist community of *The Angry Brigade*.

I will next examine the implications of Sigmund Freud's theory of the death drive on Alan Burns' work. Freud's death drive is the instinctual desire for a return to inorganic wholeness, which Freud first outlines in his essay, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. As Freud writes, "[...] the organism wishes only to die in its own fashion. Thus these guardians of life, too, were originally the myrmidons of death."¹²⁰ Freud developed this theory partly out of the experiences of soldiers returning from World War One, who experienced recurring nightmares in which they revisited the events that had traumatised them. The experience of trauma is a major constituent part of the death drive, and the compulsion to repeat and recreate traumatic experience is bound up in this instinct that Freud identifies, one that is rooted in chaos and destruction. As Nicholas Royle notes, "this

¹¹⁸ Jeffrey Alexander, 'Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma', in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* ed. Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, Piotr Sztompka, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) p.8

¹¹⁹ Alexander, 'Towards and Theory of Cultural Trauma', p.10

¹²⁰ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p.33

notion of constant recurrence of compulsive repetition [...] leads Freud to his theory of the death drive.”¹²¹ Lee Edelman writes that the death drive “functions not in a mode of absence but in a mode of an impossible excess haunting reality, an irrepressible remainder that the subject cannot separate itself from. In other words, while desire is born of and sustained by a constitutive *lack*, drive emerges in relation to a constitutive *surplus*.”¹²² This idea of excess or even surplus (hinting at a Marxist conception of the drive) can be related to Burns’ work, which in many ways exemplifies Freud’s theories on trauma and the death drive. Since most people writing about trauma begin with Freud, it seems fitting to start with Burns’ first and most autobiographical novel, *Buster*, as a means of analysing how both Freud and Burns conceive of the effects of trauma.

In *Buster*, Burns offers the first iteration of the traumatic event that he will subsequently repeat in each of his published works: the death of a family member and the impact of that death. In this novel, the events closely resemble those of Burns’ own life. Sarah Kofman writes that the death drive can be understood as an “internalisation of the forbidden mother,”¹²³ and there is something of that in this novel: the impact of the loss of the narrator’s mother sets in motion a process of repetition, of revisiting trauma that shapes the remainder of the book. This is most clearly seen in the repetition of the opening line, “They stood over him,”¹²⁴ at the end of the novel, a device which makes this process of repetition part of the structure of the novel. Dan is drawn repeatedly back to his family. The end of the novel depicts him as destitute, reliant again on his family for support; in Kofman’s terms, back to the wholeness that the mother represents. However, equally, Burns himself is looking back at and creating a narrative from the biographical events of his own life. This act of narration does two things. Firstly, it gives a coherence to events; the sequence of Dan’s life is fixed, immutable, and this fixing, encloses those events, containing them. That Burns would go on to narrate this traumatic event in each of his novels shows that these events can never be fully displaced by narrative, that they continue to exist in a non-narrative, messy form outside of the space of the text, and, relatedly, that this process of narration and re-narration exemplifies the repetition and reconstruction that makes up the traumatic relation. The second thing that this narration does is more personal to Burns and his family, but particularly in its presentation in *Buster* shows the way in which Burns conceives of the power relations in families in general, and this is to do with the desire to speak against the desire for silence. Late in the novel, Dan, drunk at a party, is

¹²¹ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.84

¹²² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004),

¹²³ Sarah Kofman, *Freud and Fiction*, trans. Sarah Wykes, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp.161-2

¹²⁴ Alan Burns, *Buster* in *New Writers 1*, (London: John Calder, 1961), p.63 & p.140

asked by his friend Montague if he has ever discussed his brother's death with his father. Dan replies:

‘The dirty words in our home are dead wife and dead son. Never mentioned.
Not a picture, not a word.’

‘Because the alternative to silence is a scream?’¹²⁵

Kali Tal writes about the need, among the victims of trauma, to write or speak about their experiences, for her, the “literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it “real” both to the victim and the to the community. Such writing serves both as validation and cathartic vehicle for the traumatised author.”¹²⁶ It is in this sense that Burns writes about the family and his own personal experience of trauma, the sense of giving voice to that experience as a means of dealing with it rather than succumbing to stultifying silence. Montague then suggests that Dan's father is happy with his new partner and asks why Dan feels the need to dwell on the past. Dan's response suggests that the direct confrontation of trauma is linked to an assault on middle class primness and respectability as well as individual transgression:

‘Why not wallow in it? Hell how grandma would have wallowed and wailed and bellowed and punched herself blue! With us each emotion is clipped like a privet hedge or a slick moustache. Throw away your lines, be polite, and after two gins be charming. That's all. But I want to learn Latin, be in the desert, kill with an axe, cover my ear in gravy, piss on their carpet, fill that bloody television set with cod. Ours is not an ikon, it's got doors, it's a triptych. Them, their actual heads and legs I love all right. But they've been suffocated by junk. They can't even cry for the dead.’¹²⁷

This quotation reflects precisely the role of trauma in Burns' fiction. The ‘dirty words’ that are the residue of trauma become, when spoken, barbs with which to assault the repression of the family, and the wider power relations within society. It's through trauma, the representation of his own trauma, that Burns unlocks the weapons to attack power: that is, Burns explicitly links the experience of trauma with the political. The surrealistic juxtapositions of Dan's speech are both the improvised language of the trauma victim, casting around for appropriate words with which to

¹²⁵ Burns, *Buster*, p.128

¹²⁶ Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, p.21

¹²⁷ Burns, *Buster*, p.128

represent his experiences, and the techniques which Burns uses (and will use to much greater extent in later works) to rebuke the middle class family (which here, as elsewhere, stands in for the ideological institutions of the State). Notice, in addition, the particular language that Burns employs, his choice of vocabulary. Burns puts together certain items – foodstuffs, household items, pieces of religious iconography, weaponry – and certain actions, and these contribute to a way of conveying meaning which is particular to Burns, and which is abundant in his work; a meaning which both draws a reader in through striking imagery and familiar objects, but also aims to disorientate and fragment by the density with which he presents that imagery. In this particular quotation, Dan’s speech moves from some sense of self-improvement (“learn Latin”), to a desire for relocation (“be in the desert”), to a move towards violence (“kill with an axe”), which then moves to a violence, albeit a bizarre mode – which suggests a desire to cease hearing – against the self (“cover my ear in gravy”), to vandalism (“piss on their carpet”), and then to another kind of – again bizarrely expressed – vandalism (“fill that bloody television set with cod”) which critiques the silence and blankness that television can inculcate, or which it represents for his family. The precise meaning or force of this utterance is difficult to discern – which of these particular desires he wishes to fulfil, and how – but I would argue that this is deliberate, that Burns repeatedly enacts this process making the familiar unfamiliar by means of juxtaposition and density. In this we can perceive the traumatic, but also the way in which the traumatic is politicised.

If trauma is inseparable from ideology and politics for Burns, this moment in *Buster* displays the way that they are enmeshed, and shows the way in which the effects of trauma are both a line of escape from the stagnation of middle class life, but also an impediment to finding comfort. Dan’s speech gets him kicked out of the party, continuing a series of humiliations and failures which ultimately leads to his returning to the same family he castigates in that speech.

The scene of the mother’s death in *Buster* is a version of the Freudian primal scene, underpinned as it is with sexual imagery and violence. For Freud, the primal scene is traumatic, and cannot be fully understood by the child at the time it occurs, rather the effects of the primal scene are not fully felt until later. Ned Lukacher writes, “The primal scene has conventionally been theorised as the observation by the child of the parental couple having intercourse; as, the child's witnessing of a sexual act that subsequently plays a traumatic role in his or her psychosexual life.”¹²⁸ As such, the primal scene follows the pattern of a traumatic experience often attested to: the experience of the

¹²⁸ Ned Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p.24

event followed by an ‘incubation period’ and then the subsequent emergence of symptoms of trauma in repeated actions which revisit the traumatic event. The primal scene functions as an ur-trauma, one which both reveals and instantiates the cycle of repetition which characterises the response to trauma. The death of Dan’s mother in *Buster* is the first published instance of a cycle of representations of similar traumatic scenes, a kind of primal scene of its own for Burns’ readers, in which a pattern is established. As such, the text demands and requires close reading. The scene contains many of the characteristics of Burns’ later depictions of trauma, but presented in a much plainer, less experimental manner which is close to literary realism. But this ‘realism’ only thinly conceals a density of representation in which various power relations are imbricated with each other. As I will argue, Burns never really abandons the project of realism except that for him reality is fragmented, often to the point of incoherence, and as such the novel should seek to represent that incongruity, disjointedness and unintelligibility. This scene from *Buster* only hints at that fragmentation, but its hints provide perhaps the clearest picture of the relation between Burns’ own experience of trauma and his attempts at the representation of that trauma.

The scene begins with Dan’s mother following him into the street on an errand. Dan, who has planned to cycle into the country, is eager to get away:

‘Wait Danny. I’ll walk with you a little way. I’m taking some cheesecake over to Dolly’s. Jack’s not well.’

He called back:

‘I must get to Hertford by lunchtime.’

But he waited for her, and they went along together, she holding the handlebar while he rocked his feet against the pedals. He wobbled over the road.

‘I must get on,’ he said, impatient.

He heard the hum of a plane.

‘Please leave go.’¹²⁹

Burns renders Dan’s impending separation from his mother in his eagerness to get away. She tries to hold onto him, hold him back, but cannot. A scene such as this might suggest the normal development of an adolescent, Dan’s breaking free on the bike standing in for his outgrowing of the family’s protection, his becoming independent, but by having Dan’s mother die moments later Burns shows the sense in which Dan’s desire for independence is bound up in the trauma of her

¹²⁹ Burns, *Buster*, pp.73-74

death. Dan rides off, and it is this desire for separation which saves him, but he is immediately drawn back. This pattern of attempted separation and traumatic return is then repeated by Dan throughout the course of the novel, which Burns emphasises by placing Dan in exactly the same position at the beginning and the end of the novel.

So, the traumatic moment provides the model for a repeated action, repetitions which extend and inflate the power of that trauma. Deleuze writes:

To repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent. And perhaps this repetition at the level of external conduct echoes, for its own part, a more secret vibration which animates it, a more profound, internal repetition within the singular. This is the apparent paradox of festivals: they repeat an 'unrepeatable'. They do not add a second and a third time to the first, but carry the first time to the 'nth' power. With respect to this power, repetition interiorizes and thereby reverses itself.¹³⁰

In repeating this pattern of separation and return - Dan's deliberate failing of his school exams, his act of political defiance which gets him demoted by the army, his inability to pass his law exams, his eviction from his flat and his unwillingness to find or keep a job - the spectre of his mother's death continually irrupts into the text. This would seem to fit with Caruth's notion of the unknowable aspect of the accident; this unknowable quality is what precipitates a cycle of repeated behaviour by Dan. But, to return to the moment of death, the sense of the enigma of the accident is compromised by Burns' attention to particular details:

He ran to his mother. She lay on her back, stretched out as he had seen her sunbathing in the garden. Only her foot seemed twisted. The weight of the foot on the ground. The brown leather shoe, lace pulled tight and neat, double bow tied precisely. The leather had the glow that comes from unthinking morning polishing over years, brown turning to black with work. The force of the blow against the asphalt road had torn open the outer leather in one place, exposing its yellow inside like the slit belly of a pussfilled pig.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, (London: Continuum Books, 2004), p.1

¹³¹ Burns, *Buster*, p.74

Synecdoche is used to emphasise Dan's sense of dislocation. His focus on the shoe showing his inability to take in the full magnitude of what has happened. But alongside that, and in fact what Burns emphasises, is the impact of work on the life of Dan's mother. The repeated action of cleaning the shoe and its neat appearance stands in for that work, and particularly for work that focuses on, or makes use of, the body. The synecdoche in fact functions by making the foot and the damaged shoe both a symbol of the corpse of the mother but also of the body as worker and, in the wear that has turned the shoe from brown to black, it represents the passage of time. It's possible therefore to see this as a moment of politicisation for Dan, that paradoxically it is the moment of death that reveals the toil that constituted the life, and also, perhaps, reveals the fragility of that toil, its futility. And this politicisation, which for Burns is a key part of trauma, is one which recognises the fragility of the body under Capital.

The shoe also functions as a 'lamella', in the Lacanian sense. As Žižek writes:

The lamella is an entity of pure surface, without the density of a substance, an infinitely plastic object that can not only incessantly change its form, but can even transpose itself from one to another medium: imagine a "something" that is first heard as a shrilling sound, and then pops up as a monstrously distorted body. A lamella is indivisible, indestructible, and immortal - more precisely, undead in the sense this term has in horror fiction: not the sublime spiritual immortality, but the obscene immortality of the "living dead" which, after every annihilation, re-composes themselves and clumsily goes on.¹³²

For Žižek, this sense of the object as undead - and the shoe here functions as an index of the work that Dan's mother has done throughout her life - it lives on as that index, bearing, like Žižek's undead, the wound that split it open. The shoe is disembodied through Dan's gaze, his inability to view the corpse as a whole leads to this focus on the shoe; but even as he averts his gaze from the whole, the shoe somehow transposes itself, becoming, for Dan, at once a reminder of his mother's life and a symbol of the violence of her death. Žižek links this kind of partial object to the Freudian death drive, which he describes as: "an uncanny excess of life, [...] an "undead" urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption,"¹³³ and there is a sense of the uncanny in the presentation of the shoe by Burns. Here we have an object which is usually part of a pair, one of a double, presented on its own, and damaged. The excess of life that it

¹³² Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, (London: Granta Books, 2006), p.62

¹³³ Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, pp.62-63

displays is precisely the location of its uncanniness. The violence of the event tears the leather of the shoe, separates it from its double, just as Dan is separated from his mother. But also, the shoe becomes the double of the mother, it meets Dan's gaze and is not simply itself, by averting his gaze from the entirety of the corpse and at the shoe, Dan is not really looking away at all. Within the death drive is a desire to return to wholeness, singularity, and by seeing all he sees in the shoe, Dan expresses this desire. His return to the corpse after the bomb has gone off expresses this desire for wholeness, as does his conception of the damaged shoe; he cannot help but let it stand in for the entirety of the corpse. There is already, then, here, repetition. For Freud, the death drive is characterised by a compulsion to repeat, and what is repeated is often the result of a traumatic event. This is certainly the case with Dan, whose continuous conflict with authority and inability to find a place for himself in the world seems to stem from this scene, and each conflict manifests itself in a deliberate distancing from his family followed by a return to them, a repetition of the pattern depicted in this scene. And even in this scene, it is possible to see smaller scale repetitions of that pattern of distancing and return, iterations of the death drive. The shoe, at the moment of being damaged, is distanced from the other member of its pair, becomes a singularity. But, through Dan's gaze, it becomes doubled with the mother, repeating Dan's own flight from and return to the corpse moments before. This is Deleuze's repetition to the 'nth degree', an obscene repetition of the original event that reveals its power. What Burns shows the reader is the disruptive power of the traumatic event. Dan's reality is shattered and the world remakes itself according to the coordinates of the trauma.

There is yet another way to read the focus on the shoe in this scene, which complicates my analysis above. In a footnote to his essay on sexual aberrations, Freud, having suggested that the foot is a primitive sexual symbol, writes, "The shoe or slipper is accordingly a symbol for the female genitals."¹³⁴ This somewhat obscure statement, if read in the context of this scene in *Buster*, introduces a sexual, even Oedipal dimension to the scene. To elucidate that, it is necessary to look at two other scenes from the novel.

In the first scene, from early in the novel, Dan's infant sexual expression is punished when his mother discovers he has been masturbating. firstly by his mother, who "held his hand, pointed at the sheets. His face pushed into the smelly sheets."¹³⁵ She exerts a sadistic power, and the moment is clearly sexualised, inscribing a power relation between her and Dan based upon his humiliation.

¹³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*, (New York: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co., 1920), p.41

¹³⁵ Burns, *Buster*, p.64

Her antipathy towards masturbation is described in three distinct terms: “It’s dirty,” she says, “It will make you go mad, like being bitten by a frothy dog,”¹³⁶ and, most distinctly, she links it to physical disability, recounting a story about a cousin who lost the use of his legs after slipping while masturbating in the bath. These three characterisations – of uncleanness or impurity, of mental illness and of physical disability, constitute, in Freudian terms, an attempt by Dan’s mother to repress his sexuality and return him to the oral stage.

The punishment his mother suggests fits her characterisation: the act of pushing Dan’s face into the sheets is an act which attempts to render him unclean. She then locks him in the dining room and tells him to wait till his father gets home, the implication being that his father will beat him on his return. This has a dual function, she both realises that the anticipation of the beating and the time spent in feeling guilt over his actions are more powerful than the beating itself, but this realisation also means that she must cede control over the consummation of the punishment to the father.

Burns allows us access to Dan’s waiting; he is clearly agitated and unable to settle. He at first arranges his father’s slippers in front of his armchair (which is described as “his job”¹³⁷) and then, when he hears his parents talking, kicks them away. This moment, in which Dan firstly asserts and then refutes the order of the institution he is in in (in this case, the family), introduces a pattern of behaviour which he will repeat again and again subsequently. The positioning and then discarding of the slippers, which clearly stand in for the father, shows Dan staging the traumatic event he is about to experience.

However, at the moment of consummation, with “the prickles of the hairbrush touching his bottom,”¹³⁸ his father relents and does not go through with the beating, instead changing the punishment so that now Dan has to go to bed without supper. It is unclear how to read this moment. The father contradicts the mother’s desired punishment, Dan hears them arguing and then the mother herself contradicts what the father has instructed by bringing Dan food. The father’s negation, followed by the mother’s negation of that negation, nullifies the punishment, but without exonerating Dan. His actions enter into a nexus of family relations; what he has done has been not only identified as wrong, but it is the cause of disharmony between his parents as well. In doing so it reveals their fallibility and their lack of a coherent, universal morality. His father’s refusal to administer the beating, though he goes through with the procedure right up to the point of

¹³⁶ Burns, *Buster*, p.63

¹³⁷ Burns, *Buster*, p.64

¹³⁸ Burns, *Buster*, p.64

consummation, may indicate a reluctance to go through with that particular punishment or a leniency towards Dan's actions.

Burns seems to invite such a Freudian reading with this scene, but it can also be seen both as an early example of Dan's spirit of refusal, and also a moment of his politicisation. A little later in the book he refuses to perform corporal punishment on a fellow pupil at school and in doing so is obliged to give up being a prefect. I will analyse this particular scene, and the politics that it implies, in detail in a subsequent chapter on politics and ideology. Sex and violence are intermingled in these two scenes, they are inextricable from each other. Returning home after his mother's death, Dan recalls a scene from earlier in his childhood:

He stood in the dining room, waiting for the solemn talk. He looked at her empty chair, remembered seeing her white bottom once when he'd gone into their bedroom without knocking.¹³⁹

His recollection contains all the coordinates of the Freudian primal scene, itself a traumatic experience which the death of his mother may only be a repetition of. Freud strove to emphasise the importance of the interpretation of the primal scene rather than the scene itself, and here it's possible to see that Dan associates it strongly with the violence of the traumatic event. Both of these scenes show the way in which Burns imbricates sex and violence, and the shoe which draws his focus at the scene of his mother's death represents that imbrication; sex is another component in the glut of symbols that Burns heaps onto the shoe. He creates a moment in which a single object can function in multiple ways, becoming a node through which various lines of power can pass. For Burns, the traumatic moment is one which allows for the becoming-symbolic of objects, which allows for objects to draw attention to themselves, come to prominence, and in doing so embody the density and complexity that Burns sees as being at the heart of the traumatic experience.

What Burns also shows us in the death of the mother scene in *Buster* is the role of the corpse in his conception of the traumatic moment. For Julia Kristeva, the figure of the corpse exemplifies the abject, being neither subject nor object it brings into sharp relief the border of being, and in doing so brings about a change in those that witness it. She writes:

¹³⁹ Burns, *Buster*, p.75

[...] What is *abject* [...], the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. [...] It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out.¹⁴⁰

Kristeva sets out the motion which Dan enacts in this scene. Having extricated himself from his mother, he is drawn back to her body. The collapse of meaning that Kristeva mentions is for Burns a collapse only in the sense that it is a surfeit, or excess, of meaning, the corpse acting as a node through which multiple assemblages of meaning pass. As well as standing for the healthy, working body, and as well as being a synecdoche of the whole body, the tear in the leather of the shoe, "exposing its yellow inside like the slit belly of a pussfilled pig,"¹⁴¹ disgusts Dan. Unable to take in the whole of the corpse, even the small aspect he focuses on cannot help but display the corpse's abjection. Here Dan sees the yellow interior of the shoe as the unhealthy discharge from a slaughtered animal body, and this encounter with the abject makes Dan aware of his own mortality. As Kristeva writes:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.¹⁴²

Is this "thrusting aside in order to live" not what Dan has done, moments earlier by leaving his mother's side as he hears the plane overhead? And afterwards he is confronted with the possibility of his own death. For Kristeva, "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject."¹⁴³ What is traumatic, for Kristeva, is the acknowledgement of our material existence. In encountering his mother's dead body, Dan witnesses a moment in which the fragility of his own existence manifests itself.

¹⁴⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.2

¹⁴¹ Burns, *Buster*, p.74

¹⁴² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.3

¹⁴³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4

By tying this experience of the abject to an experience of work, the shoe that both resembles the slit pig, but also reflects in its appearance a particular repeated labour that has kept it clean, and in doing so changed it, dulled its colour, Burns produces a density of affect which resists any simple interpretation. The corpse, for Blanchot, performs a similarly complex function:

The cadaver is its own image. It no longer entertains any relation with this world, where it still appears, except that of an image, an obscure possibility, a shadow ever present behind the living form which now, far from separating itself from this form, transforms it entirely into shadow. The corpse is a reflection becoming master of the life it reflects -- absorbing it, identifying substantively with it by moving it from its use value and from its truth value to something incredible -- something neutral which there is no getting used to. And if the cadaver is so similar, it is because it is, at a certain moment, similarity par excellence: altogether similarity, and also nothing more. It is the likeness, like to an absolute degree, overwhelming and marvellous. But what is it like? Nothing.¹⁴⁴

The corpse in Blanchot comes to resemble only itself, and in doing so withdraws from culture and so eludes our grasp. This withdrawal, Blanchot argues, is “disdainful”¹⁴⁵, the cadaver becomes a mere image, unable to return our affections, immediately distanced from us and it’s in this sense that the corpse doubles itself, and in doing so “is already monumental,”¹⁴⁶. Dan’s mother’s body, in his encounter with it, seems to take on these monumental proportions, inscrutable unless apprehended in small pieces. What the reader encounters in this scene is a depiction of this withdrawal and this becoming-monumental by the cadaver, and these are two components which function within the traumatic relation.

The scene continues, and moves into a different register:

A policeman wrote in his notebook: *Scratch on left shoe approx one inch.* [...]

‘She’s bought it,’ the policeman said.¹⁴⁷

The insertion of the policeman immediately after Dan’s encounter with the body provides bathos, it obliges the reader to step back from the intense proximity and intense scrutiny being given to the shoe and see the mother’s death from a more mundane, bureaucratic point of view. Trauma at this

¹⁴⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p.258

¹⁴⁵ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p.257

¹⁴⁶ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p.258

¹⁴⁷ Burns, *Buster*, p.74

point is coupled with an encounter with authority, and it seems that this contributes, rather than diminishes the traumatic nature of the scene. The combination of the officious recording of irrelevant detail (but nonetheless detail which in its minute focus recalls Dan's abject relation to the shoe) with the dismissive, colloquial declaration of the death are set against the preceding moments of interaction with the corpse. If the cadaver, in all its abjection, reminds Dan of his mortality, this moment which Burns imposes on the reader directly afterwards, is a reminder of his place within a system of power relations. It is another layer of complexity that infects that traumatic moment, a moment which, for Burns is always infected with the political. With Both Blanchot and Kristeva the encounter with the cadaver takes place in an unmediated environment, as if the presence of the corpse somehow empties out the surrounding context. For Burns, this is not the case. The presence of the policeman is significant here because it interrupts Dan's encounter with the abject, and in doing so allows us to see the mother's death in a wider sense. She is not just Dan's mother, but a casualty of the war, a corpse which Dan encounters in all its abjection, but also a body which must be dealt with by the State in its official, impersonal function.

This intermingling of the indifferent reaction of the State and Dan's personal trauma creates a complex depiction of the traumatic event, with Burns contrasting the personal and individual experiences of grief and trauma against the State's procedural, bureaucratic response. Cathy Caruth suggests that a key component of trauma is that there is some aspect of it which cannot be known, which is elusive, and that it is this unknowable quality which both leads to and is borne out in the repetition of the traumatic event:

[...] Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature - the way it was precisely not known in the first instance - returns to haunt the survivor later on.¹⁴⁸

Caruth's description of the traumatic event as "simple" in its violence is complicated by Burns' depiction of Dan's mother's death which contains a dense and multi-faceted conception of violence operating on a variety of different levels; there is the violence of Dan's separation from his mother, the violence of the bomb that kills her, there is a sense of violence in the way the shoes are worn down from polishing, an objective violence that represents the control of the body during work, and a more obvious violence in how Dan interprets the tear in the shoe. There is also a violence in the interruption of Dan's moment with his dead mother by the policeman, and it is in this sense that

¹⁴⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.12

Burns blurs the lines between Žižek's objective and subjective violence, with one revealing the other. The traumatic moment in Burns' work is always about an intermingling of different kinds of violence, and because Burns attempts to show the traumatic moment as a moment of politicisation, it is also a moment in which the objective violence that leads to death reveals, or contains in it, that subjective violence.

Trauma changes people, and, for Burns, that change is precipitated by a heightened awareness of the violence inherent in the State. Burns seems to suggest, in this scene, that the separation of objective and subjective violence that Žižek argues for is too clear-cut. For Burns, the coordinates of lived experience do not arrange themselves so neatly, there is always, in his fiction, a messiness, a sense that not only are the viewpoints, power structures, sounds, visual data that make up any scene impossible to unpick from one another, but that their very entanglement is precisely the point. This is what constitutes Burns' 'realism', a recognition of the density and chaos of lived experience (his avant-gardism could equally be said to be an attempt to capture exactly that chaos, to bring some sense of it to the page). The scene of trauma in Burns' fiction exemplifies this approach. The traumatic moment does not reveal something hidden, rather it makes only slightly clearer the violence which underpins society. The traumatic event does not separate itself out from the rest of life, the encounter with the corpse is still an encounter that takes place in the world. This is where Burns differs from both Kristeva and Blanchot, whose encounters are more rarefied. The encounter with trauma, for Burns, is not a special case which requires its own set of theoretical coordinates. However affecting for the victim, Burns wants the reader to see that the traumatic event is not separate from the everyday, it merely brings the chaotic density of everyday experience, and the violence that that entails, more sharply into view. This is shown in Dan's repeated cycle of withdrawal and return, which can be read, as I have read it above, as instantiations of the death drive, a Freudian return to the traumatic event.

Caruth writes about the unknowable aspect of trauma as one of its defining features. But rather than something unknowable, Burns presents the traumatic moment as one where there is an excess, too much to know, so that the victim is suffused with information that they cannot process. The traumatic event brings into sharp relief the density of information and the complex matrices of power that intersect with people's lives. Burns wants to show trauma as a kind of event which makes people at once aware of what's going on around them, an event that defamiliarises their surroundings and, in doing so, forces them to look again and reassess. The reader can see this in the level of detail that Burns suddenly puts into the death of the mother scene. In a narrative that generally moves relatively quickly through the events of Dan's life, the reader suddenly, at the

moment of the mother's death, is faced with a hitherto unseen density of descriptive writing. After the interruption by the policeman, the mother's body is dragged out of the street, carried into a nearby shop, and Burns writes:

He ran up the stairs and stood on the unfamiliar landing. A door was partly open, and through the E-shaped gap he saw a woman in a yellow electric lit room. She wore a yellow flowered dressing gown. She was kneeling in front of the fireplace, trying to pull the string from a bundle of firewood. It caught on splinters. She poked one stick through, then another, then two or three at a time until the whole bundle collapsed. She threw the sticks on crumpled newspaper. She added small coal to the pile, then put a match to it. She dropped the string on the flames.¹⁴⁹

With an attention to detail, but also a somewhat distanced, unemotional, even surgical tone that recalls Alain Robbe-Grillet's novels, Burns catalogues the movements of this anonymous woman that Dan encounters. The depiction is meticulous, so much so that the sense of the passage threatens to break down and become nonsensical, weighed down by its own fullness. Dan's flight from the corpse, which held his attention so completely just moments before, seems to be a reaction to the intrusion of the policeman, the intrusion of bureaucracy, the law, power, which interrupts his encounter with his mother. This flight can be seen then as a turning away from that bureaucracy, a desire to avoid the official business of death. In doing so Dan encounters this scene, one which cannot help but recall the domestic work that his mother must have done; even in turning away Dan is unable to forget what he has just seen. But more than that, the level of detail with which Dan examines the room, the woman, and finally her activity in front of the fire suggests a defamiliarised gaze, one which is seeing, as if for the first time, the detail of domestic work, with the woman so imbricated in the domestic sphere that the yellow of the light and the yellow of her dressing gown are run together. In this imbrication it is possible to observe the politicising influence of the trauma that Dan has undergone. Just as he saw in his mother's shoe the toil needed to keep it clean, immediately afterwards Dan encounters work, and focuses in detail on it. This detail suggests a heightened awareness of the work the woman is doing, in a political sense, but the distanced tone in which it is conveyed suggests that this awareness is not yet fully formed. The scene cuts off abruptly after this description and the narration moves to Dan on his bike, returning home from Hertford, having completed the trip that his mother's death interrupted, and this caesura in the narrative serves to underline the incompleteness of Dan's politicisation. Cathy Caruth writes about

¹⁴⁹ Burns, *Buster*, p.75

an “incubation period,”¹⁵⁰ following a trauma, a period before the symptoms of that trauma re-emerge and are repeated, which “is the feature one might term *latency*.”¹⁵¹ It is possible to read this scene as an expression of that latency, as though the experience of trauma has implanted something in Dan which will later emerge elsewhere.

I have focussed on this particular scene protractedly because it is not only the first instantiation of the traumatic event in Burns’ published work, and it establishes a pattern that will occur, in various forms, in every subsequent publication, but also because it is also the most autobiographical, the closest to Burns’ own experience.

While it is possible to theorise in numerous ways about the impact of this scene in *Buster*, it is also necessary to account in a more general way for the repetition of trauma that occurs across Burns’ various novels and other publications. Deleuze, in *Difference and Repetition*, writes:

Take an uncovered or bare repetition (repetition of the Same) such as an obsessional ceremony or a schizophrenic stereotype: the mechanical element in the repetition, the element of action apparently repeated, serves as a cover for a more profound repetition, which is played in another dimension, a secret verticality in which the roles and masks are furnished by the death instinct.¹⁵²

What Deleuze suggests is that each repetition contains two components: a visual component which is ‘uncovered or bare’, which in Burns’ case would be the repeated deaths of family members that occur in his novels. But there is also a concealed component, which for Deleuze is more profound, that exists alongside the first and which is characterised by the death drive. For Burns, this concealed component, I argue, is the density of the traumatic moment that he attempts to recreate in his fiction. The traumatic moment, or, as with the shoe in the analysis of the death of the mother scene from *Buster* above, the object that comes to represent that moment function rhizomatically, i.e. “ceaselessly establish[ing] connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles”¹⁵³. The traumatic moment is repeated in Burns work not merely out of a compulsion to revisit it (though doubtless that is partly the reason) but also because of what he can make the traumatic moment do, and what it reveals. The traumatic event allows for an awareness of the interconnectedness of the various types of violence that underpin society.

¹⁵⁰ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p.7

¹⁵¹ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p.7

¹⁵² Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, pp.17-18

¹⁵³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (London: Continuum Books, 2004), p.7

In his article about Deleuze and repetition, Žižek first quotes Deleuze, "We do not repeat because we repress, we repress because we repeat."¹⁵⁴, and then writes:

It is not that, first, we repress some traumatic content, and then, since we are unable to remember it and thus to clarify our relationship to it, this content continues to haunt us, repeating itself in disguised forms. If the Real is a minimal difference, then repetition (that establishes this difference) is primordial; the primacy of repression emerges with the "reification" of the Real into a Thing that resists symbolization - only then, it appears that the excluded/repressed Real insists and repeats itself. The Real is primordially nothing but the gap that separates a thing from itself, the gap of repetition.¹⁵⁵

For Slavoj Žižek, the underlying, systemic violence that shapes society under Capital, which he calls "objective" violence, is occluded (and, to a certain extent, legitimised) by the more obvious "subjective" violence that typically makes up the traumatic event. Žižek suggests that by focussing on the specific, personal aspects of subjective violence, the real function of violence is missed:

[...] there is something inherently mystifying in a direct confrontation with it: the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking. A dispassionate conceptual development of the typology of violence must by definition ignore its traumatic impact.¹⁵⁶

But for Burns, the objective and subjective components of violence cannot be so straightforwardly decoupled from one another. Capital, as Žižek himself, following Marx, has claimed, requires crisis to survive, and Burns seems to suggest that the underlying violence of Capital requires these irruptions of a more profound violence in order to maintain itself. This can be seen most clearly in Phillip's accident in *Celebrations*, which follows a trivial argument with his older brother, Michael:

The younger brother bent his head. The attitude demanded paralysis, a blow on the back of the neck, but it would have been too costly, the move would have taken up too much time, dislocated work schedules, added unduly to the engineer's excessive responsibilities.

¹⁵⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p.105

¹⁵⁵ Slavoj Žižek, 'Deleuze's Platonism: Ideas as Real' (www.lacan.com/zizplato.htm), accessed 18/3/14

¹⁵⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, (New York: Picador, 2008), p.4

Phillip was trapped by his machine. ‘You could crush me with a single turn of the wheel,’ he said to his brother. Then an accident crushed the apathetic boy; he jerked; only the head could move. ‘What happened?’ Blood and the usual gash in the face. ‘It hurts.’¹⁵⁷

Here, Burns renders literally the situation of the worker under Capital: Phillip is physically trapped at the time the accident occurs, embedded within the machinery of the workplace, which then injures him. And despite the text’s certainty that it was an “accident”, given the argument that precedes it, as well as Phillip’s earlier insubordination and inability to follow instructions, it is possible to surmise that Michael had a hand in causing it. Indeed, after Phillip’s death a few pages later, his widow, Jacqueline, obliges the company to order an investigation and, though both Michael and his father, Williams, are exonerated, and though Jacqueline becomes romantically involved with both of them, the sense that they are responsible for Phillip’s death pervades the novel. What the death and its investigation also bring about, though, is a change in the way the company operates, facilitating a loss of power for Williams and a gain for Michael, as well as a programme of modernisation and structural change which leads (though not unproblematically) to an increase in production and profit. This is, then, precisely the crisis that Capital requires to continue to survive, presented alongside a highly visible moment of violence and trauma. By threatening its existence, Phillip’s death allows the company to make measures to ensure its continued growth. What this incident shows is that the traumatic event, for Burns, represents a complex intersection of forms of violence and power. It can never be simply decoded and it often contains contradictory impulses. Phillip’s death precipitates a breakdown of Williams’ family; relations between him and Michael become increasingly strained, particularly as they both enter into a relationship with Jacqueline. But the death also allows the company to move into a new phase of production. By never revealing the exact nature of Michael’s role in the accident (and compounding that with a bureaucratic, legalistic investigation which is less interested in getting to the truth of the event than in its own procedures and protocols), it is simultaneously an industrial accident and an act of violence within the family. The moment of trauma functions as a site through which various power relations find their expression and which precipitates various, often contradictory results. Phillip’s death is described as an accident, and, drawing on Freud, Cathy Caruth suggests that in its impenetrability, the accident exemplifies the traumatic event:

[...] the recurring image of the accident in Freud, as the illustration of the unexpected or the accidental, seems to be especially compelling, and indeed becomes the exemplary scene of trauma par excellence, not only because it depicts what we can know about traumatising

¹⁵⁷ Alan Burns, *Celebrations*, (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967), pp.10-11

events, but also, and more profoundly, because it tells of what it is, in traumatic events, that is not precisely grasped. The accident [...] does not simply represent the violence of a collision but also conveys the impact of its very incomprehensibility.¹⁵⁸

Elsewhere in Burns' fiction, trauma presents itself in a more diffuse way. In *Babel*, perhaps his most abstract and difficult novel, the text presents itself as a clamour of unconnected voices, heaped on top of each other. The novel is arranged into short fragments, gathered from material which Burns cut-up, folded-in, rearranged and edited. In an interview with Peter Firchow, Burns describes the novel as, "[...] a series of almost completely disconnected paragraphs. Each paragraph might be called a novel in itself. Sometimes it's an aphorism, sometimes it's an anecdote, sometimes it's a simple picture."¹⁵⁹ As a result, the novel is a dense and complex book to read, offering no plot, a large cast of almost entirely anonymous characters (mostly referred to by their job titles, or simply as 'a man', 'a woman', 'a child' etc.), but also celebrities, politicians, literary figures and musicians, and sentences which jump erratically from one subject to another, from the microscopic to the cosmological, from the banal to the ridiculous. Nonetheless, the familiar Burns themes emerge, the text continually, to use Jenny Edkins' term (which she herself takes from Žižek), 'encircles', speaking about the role of the family in shoring up and extending state power; speaking about war (particularly the Vietnam War in this novel), sacrifice and death. Edkins argues that an attempt to speak about trauma in a straightforward, linear narrative serves only to depoliticise the traumatic event, "We cannot," she writes, "try to address the trauma directly without risking its gentrification."¹⁶⁰ Instead she proposes that the victim of trauma can only oscillate around the site of the trauma repeatedly, enacting the familiar process of traumatic repetition.

In *Babel*, this encircling is inscribed into the structure of the novel. Particular tropes and ideas emerge and re-emerge, surface and are submerged. The short sections that make up the novel orient the reader in a particular way; they are unable to settle upon any one thing for very long. Threads are repeatedly taken up and abandoned without the reader knowing where they will return, if at all. The form of *Babel*, then, and its meaning, emerge from the way the reader moves through these short sections. As well as being disorientating, this kind of construction has an effect on the experience of time for the reader. Because there is almost no narrative motion (even within the sections Burns often turns the narrative back in on itself, contradicting or subverting what has come

¹⁵⁸ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p.15

¹⁵⁹ Peter Firchow, *The Writer's Place: Interviews on the Literary Situation in Contemporary Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p.61

¹⁶⁰ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.15

before), the novel's conception of time is as a continuous, simultaneous present, with the reader able to somehow experience a vast chunk of reality all at once, as though they, as in the long, 360 degree tracking shot in Godard's film *Week End*, are a still centre around which the world moves. Time in the novel is not linear. Edkins writes about a 'trauma time'¹⁶¹. For her, trauma, "[...] upset[s] or escape[s] the straightforward linear temporality associated with the regularity of so-called 'politics' and appear[s] to occupy another form of time."¹⁶²

There are problems with Edkins' notion of a 'trauma time' separate from linear time. She describes the action of these two types of time as "like opposite poles of a dichotomy,"¹⁶³ and this it seems to me is simply a recasting of Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as being somehow outside of everyday experience, belonging instead to some other category of reality that imprints itself upon the victim differently to any other type of experience. Indeed, in her introduction, Edkins, following Žižek, introduces the idea that the traumatic event exemplifies the Lacanian 'Real', it represents a lack, something which 'cannot be symbolised,'¹⁶⁴ and thus exists problematically alongside the construction of social reality. Crucial to this construction of social reality is the idea of what Edkins calls a 'progressive linear notion of time,' one which obliges us to forget that social reality is itself constructed, a forgetting which also necessitates a suppression of its traumatic component. Despite the problems which this antimimetic model of trauma has, Edkins' coupling of trauma, time and politics is a productive one when considering Alan Burns' work. Edkins writes that,

Trauma time - the disruptive, back-to-front time that occurs when the smooth time of the imagined or symbolic story is interrupted by the real of 'events' - is the time that must be forgotten if the sovereign power of the modern state is to remain unchallenged. And trauma time is exactly what survivors of trauma want to keep hold of, and to which it seems they want desperately to testify. Their testimony challenges sovereign power at its very roots.¹⁶⁵

In *Babel*, this idea of smooth time is disrupted in precisely the terms that Edkins delineates. Burns' method is political in the way that it disrupts time for the reader. Trauma in this novel is diffuse and depersonalised; violence is presented as the inevitable consequence of hundreds of different events. It is an aggregate violence, exacted upon an anonymous population. The novel encircles violence, returning to it continually, violence accumulates. Unlike his other works, Burns does not want the

¹⁶¹ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p.16

¹⁶² Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p.xiv

¹⁶³ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p.16

¹⁶⁴ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p.11

¹⁶⁵ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p.230

reader to see the effect of trauma on one individual or family, but the event of trauma simultaneously occurring to hundreds of characters. Time in the novel is circular, turns back in on itself like a Mobius strip. Early in the novel this is exemplified in a long section:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THEIR SACRIFICE he saw, as his forefathers did in their time. He visited the town when a boy went to war, and photographed his history. When a girl married, he made the boys march round. There were some who claimed they had seen him running in a circle and saluting, and the girls recalled the inflicted shame as they curtsayed. He recorded these events which are visible today and still surviving. The war was remembered in church on Sundays although it was not pleasant. It seemed to be a town where everybody was as servile as the stabilising mechanism built into them, the population appeared to possess a surface which forbade collapse by refusing to be cut off from the surrounding area. The Duke would not permit any rapid movement from the rural areas, because of the atrocious roads. The one woman who used to delight him was gone, turning her bottom towards the dead. And now the war had started, the infants were thrown in the river. These bereavements were described in words and pictures forever. One mother made the photographic detail extremely difficult because her child had drowned in the pond and she never turned her head without bitterness.¹⁶⁶

This section deliberately disrupts the flow of time in various ways. The reader is moved without warning from a memorialising of a distant war, to the war just having started and an immediate encounter with violence. Burns complicates this picture by inserting details which might seem irrelevant - the state of the roads, the marching boys - but which are nonetheless inscribed with their own violence. The population of the town are trapped by the Duke's authority; the marching of the boys is a precursor to their going to war (though presented in the narrative as after their going). The section seems impossible to summarise, or to distil down to its essential components. In fact its confusion of time, event and character are essential to the passage and to the novel as a whole. The section contains various kinds of violence, the combination of which creates a picture of a town whose population continually experience and re-experience trauma. As well as the overt violence of infanticide, there is the Duke's imposition of a lack of freedom of movement, there is the war, there is, in the presentation of the protagonist of the section a sexual violence, an infliction of shame on the girls and, in a motif that recurs throughout *Babel*, a violence in the memorialisation of violence, both its recording in words and photographs and in the enforced remembrance on Sundays, with its

¹⁶⁶ Alan Burns, *Babel*, (London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd, 2009), p.12-13

religious connotation (a sustained attack on the hypocrisies of religion being another motif of the novel). Edkins writes about the way that certain kinds of memorials attempt to ‘gentrify’¹⁶⁷ trauma by re-inserting it into linear time. Burns resists this process by presenting the process of memorialisation alongside the traumatic events it seeks to reclaim, preventing the closure or gentrification that memorialisation can often attempt.

The politics of *Babel* lie in Burns’ particular presentation of the event - he combines the concreteness and density of the event with an aggregate (that is depersonalised), even abstract, presentation of character. Narrative in the novel is merely the movement from event to event, with various themes cycling in and out of focus. In *Dreamerika!*, Burns anchors this technique to his fictionalised retelling of the story of the Kennedy family, John F Kennedy’s presidency and assassination in particular. If *Babel* marks the high water point of Burns’ experimentation, *Dreamerika!* represents the beginning of a different phase of his career. *Dreamerika!* is highly critical of the Kennedys, and relies on a satirical tone to describe heavily altered versions of their lives in which the Kennedy family comes to stand in for State military-industrial power and celebrity. Nonetheless, Burns retains many aspects of his experimental technique in the novel, continuing to use cut ups and, for the first time, incorporating images and text taken from newspapers and magazines which he reassembles and includes alongside the text of the novel. More importantly, however, Burns’ retelling of the Kennedy story emphasises the various tragedies the family suffered, events which mirror what happened in Burns’ own family. So the presentation of the Kennedys contains both a mythical element, in which the family represents America in all its brashness and inequality, its obsession with money and power, as Burns sees it, but also something intensely personal for Burns which constitutes yet another site upon which he can revisit the circumstances of his own trauma.

Dreamerika! with its continual reference to real people and events, as well as its incorporation of found materials in their original format is also part of Burns’ ‘documentary’ phase¹⁶⁸, which begins, albeit obscurely, with *Babel*, and also includes his play *Palach*, and the novels *The Angry Brigade* and *The Day Daddy Died*. These novels explore what Dominick LaCapra has called ‘traumatic realism’¹⁶⁹, that is problem of representing trauma accurately in writing. The works that make up

¹⁶⁷ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p.15

¹⁶⁸ *The Angry Brigade* is described as a “documentary novel” and this phase of Burns’ work is characterized by the use of real people and events. In *Babel*, *Palach* and *Dreamerika!*, Burns uses real celebrities and other public figures in his narrative, while *The Angry Brigade* and *The Day Daddy Died* makes use of interview material which Burns transcribes and then cuts-up and fragments alongside other found material.

¹⁶⁹ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2001), p.186

this phase all contain reference to real events and real people, and seek to understand trauma through that particular lens. As LaCapra writes:

[...] traumatic realism [...] differs from stereotypical conceptions of mimesis and enables instead an often disconcerting exploration of disorientation, its symptomatic dimensions, and possible ways of responding to them. [...] Writing trauma would be one of those telling after-effects in what I termed traumatic and post-traumatic writing (or signifying practice in general). It involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analysing and “giving voice” to the past - processes of coming to terms with traumatic “experiences”, limit events and their symptomatic effects that achieve articulation in different combinations and hybridised forms.¹⁷⁰

What LaCapra proposes is that the articulation of trauma is elusive, any attempt to contain it within traditional models of realism rob it of its particular character. The writer of trauma cannot simply (as though the process were ever simple) recount a series of events. LaCapra instead suggests that the writing of trauma must attempt to contain some of the affect of trauma within itself. For LaCapra, traumatic realism is more ‘real’ than realism. It is a realism that does not seek to smooth over the fact of the text’s construction, its status as a physical object and its imbrication with the untidy stuff of life. The attempt to write trauma brings a heightened attention to these structural components which seek to replicate on the page something of the affect of trauma on the victim.

For Alan Burns, this affect of trauma that LaCapra mentions is inscribed in his choice of techniques. His dense, complex sentences are programmed to disorient the reader, and the real life found material that he draws upon make his works of this period exactly the kinds of hybrids that LaCapra speaks of. Burns’ novels do not resemble novels on the page: *Babel’s* chopped up structure looks more like a book of aphorisms, or perhaps of poetry, and its sections which use two columns of text on the same page emulate newspaper text. *Dreamerika!* takes this a step further, looking like a scrapbook or anonymous ransom letter, as does *The Day Daddy Died* with its photo collages, which replicate and nuance the traumatic content of the novel. These devices all emphasise the status of the books as artefacts, as objects, and this points to a kernel of truth about the representation of trauma that LaCapra seems to be getting at above. That is, that those very devices which seek to accurately represent the totalising experience of trauma as victim are also devices which are alienating to the reader. Devices which aim to make strange, to disorient, to change the

¹⁷⁰ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p.186

pace of reading, to confuse and to force the reader back on herself, to present an excess of experience are precisely those which show the blank page not as a clear and neutral surface upon which a narrative can be inscribed, but a space which itself has a density and a thickness, as Deleuze and Guattari write:

The painter does not paint on an empty canvas, and neither does the writer write on a blank page; but the page or canvas is already so covered with preexisting, preestablished clichés that it is first necessary to erase, to clean, to flatten, even to shred, so as to let in a breath of air from the chaos that brings us the vision. When Fontana slashes the colored canvas with a razor, he does not tear the color in doing this. On the contrary, he makes us see the area of plain, uniform color, of pure color, through the slit. Art indeed struggles with chaos, but it does so in order to bring forth a vision that illuminates it for an instant, a Sensation.¹⁷¹

Just as Fontana shows the canvas as an object in and of itself, and not a mere receptacle for representation, Burns' novels, particularly *Dreamerika!* are concerned with problematizing the space of the page. As Jeannette Baxter argues:

[...] this collage narrative poses fundamental questions about processes of reading and looking: How do we negotiate the text's varied typographies? Are we being invited to write on, or read, its blank pages? And how do we even begin to make sense of those textual columns that resist linear reading practices?¹⁷²

Baxter emphasises the problem for the reader of traversing the novel. In presenting this problem of how to read, where to start and what to prioritise, Burns pushes the reader away from the content of the novel, reminding them of the text's status as an object, a thing. This is key for the writing of trauma; it shows that there can be no clean, unmediated representation of trauma. The materiality of Burns' texts shows the limits of that representation.

There is a contradiction here, albeit a productive one. Is it possible for Burns' writing to both draw attention to itself as writing (and thus expose the limits of writing about trauma) and for that writing in its chaotic density to seek to replicate the effects of trauma upon the reader? Can Burns' work be both 'realer' than realism in the way that he presents the world as random and unstructured and also

¹⁷¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, (London: Verso, 2003), p.204

¹⁷² Jeannette Baxter, 'Accident and Apocalypse in Alan Burns' *Europe After the Rain*', p.64

highly concerned with the text as object in such a way as to alienate the reader? I would argue that the tension between these two impulses is precisely the tension of writing trauma, they exist in a dialectical relation, the result of which is an always (and necessarily) incomplete attempt to represent trauma. This is what I think LaCapra means when he refers to these kinds of texts as hybrids, they are texts that push in different directions, namely towards a sense that says that trauma is unrepresentable and towards a sense which says that trauma is a kind of excess of stimulation, which literature can gesture towards. It is also possible to see in this tension Ruth Leys' antimimetic and mimetic models of trauma.

Dreamerika! is the most striking of these hybrids. The text shows the Kennedy family to be part of a network of wealth and political power which extends to the highest echelons of global politics, but is also implicated in slum housing, scandal and even the Manson murders of the late sixties, which erupt at the end of the novel and subsume its narrative. By focussing on the family as a whole, and extending his representation to the multitudes that the Kennedys govern, Burns continues the process of de-individualisation of the novel that he began with *Babel*, and the novel can be seen as an assemblage which seeks to contain a range of viewpoints. Though written in the third person, the novel was again constructed out of cut-ups and reconstructed material that Burns collected, so there are huge shifts in tone even at the sentence level, veering from newspaper reportage to close-in, intimate narration, from incisive critique into absurdism. In addition to this, Burns includes in the novel images and pieces of writing cut out of newspapers and magazines, so that the text is constantly interrupted, added to and commented on, as though the attention of the reader is constantly flitting between the narrative and a parade of headlines and pull-out quotations from articles. This technique has a variety of effects on the reader, but in terms of how the novel deals with trauma, they exemplify LaCapra's idea of the hybrid form. The text is a hybrid in the sense that it exists somewhere between journalism, history and the novel; its inclusion of copies of these pieces of text in their original fonts and layouts injects something of the real world into the novel which highlights Burns' technique of using found text in a highly materialistic way. The reader can feel, in the construction of the novel's pages, the density and variety of Burns' source material. And that density confers on the reader a sense of being hemmed-in, an inescapable glut of material whose excess replicates the excess of the traumatic experience. As Baxter argues, it's not clear how this material should be read, at times it seems to complement the main narrative, elsewhere it is distinct and unrelated to it. I argue that this is a deliberate strategy on Burns' part to disorientate the reader, to place them in an uncertain relation to the text.

Dreamerika! deals explicitly with the traumatic events that befell the Kennedy family, and though they appear to be chosen by Burns precisely because of their wealth, their power and their celebrity status, perhaps in some sense for the way in which they represent a particular constellation of those factors which is (at least at the time of writing) uniquely American, it is also possible to see the resemblance between the family and Burns' own history - the powerful, authoritarian father, the dead, 'sacrificed' son - something that Burns remarks upon in his interview with David Madden:

I seized on the idea of referring to, using as a basis, some story line universally known—much like the Roman and Greek gods—part of the common language, common reference points, myth. I thought of Robin Hood, Bible stories, all sorts, and finally hit on the Kennedys as perfect to do the job I needed them to do. Only later did I realize that the Kennedys also repeated my family history, and my basic plot line, in their dominant father, and the double death of two young(ish) sons.¹⁷³

Yet again, despite looking externally for material, Burns cannot help but replicate his own trauma in the novel, and it seems to me that, ironically, this is the 'universal' quality that Burns was unconsciously seeking. He goes on to talk about how the Kennedys involvement with the media, their money and power perfectly suited his purpose, but the element that unites them with the other families that Burns writes about in his other novels is their suffering the loss of several members and the trauma that it precipitates. Whatever else it is possible to say about the politics of Burns' novels, about their technical construction or their involvement with literary history or tradition, what ties them together is trauma. Each contains an event which replicates Burns' own loss, and each is concerned with the fallout from that loss. While the death of the mother in *Buster* seems the closest to Burns' own experience, the most autobiographical, the assassination of John F. Kennedy in *Dreamerika!* encapsulates almost all of Burns' concerns about the representation of trauma, and the politics of that representation. Uniquely, too, this is an event which is also depicted in fiction by one of Burns' contemporaries, J.G. Ballard, himself no stranger to trauma and suffering, in *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

Ballard titles his account, *The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race* (after Alfred Jarry's text, *The Crucifixion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race*, immediately connecting the story to Jarry's modernism and to literary history). In doing so, Ballard

¹⁷³ David Madden 'A Conversation with Alan Burns,' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, (Vol. 17.2, Summer 1997), p.35

removes himself from the subject matter somewhat. By presenting his version of the Kennedy assassination as somehow a recasting of Jarry's text, Ballard maintains a certain distance from his source material, a distance that continues throughout the piece. Ballard presents the account of the assassination as straight reportage, and he 'keeps a straight face' throughout, never breaking character:

Several puzzling aspects of the race remain. One is the presence of the President's wife in the car, an unusual practice for racing drivers. Kennedy, however, may have maintained that as he was in control of the ship of state he was therefore entitled to captain's privileges.¹⁷⁴

In contrast to this, Burns' account is much more of a hybrid, changing narrative position and distance.

The motorcade approached, the unarmed guest entered, the convertible people crouching, the coat-collars turned up. Eight shots shouted, he was caught, hit, the unheard order came.

window

He had been frightened by a man in a window. The sound of cheers as he fell. He stood up instantly. He seemed to need the masses, he was making love, remember his good laugh, he did not want the narrow place.¹⁷⁵

The tone here moves, in the first paragraph, from that of a newspaper report to, in the second paragraph, a close-in third person narrator. Within that second paragraph too, what begins as uncertainty, "He seemed to need the masses," becomes more certain, and therefore more intimate, just a little later, "he did not want the narrow place," though with that intimacy comes a lack of clarity - is the narrow place death, or the acceptance of the masses? Is it somehow related to Kennedy's lovemaking? What is the reader to make of the direct address to them, "remember his good laugh"? There are no clear answers, and in fact the uncertainty, both of narrative perspective and of content, are deliberate. What Burns wishes to replicate is the confusion and chaos of the scene. The "window" insert, which is in large type in the novel, cut and pasted directly from a

¹⁷⁴ J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (London: Harper Collins, 2003) p.173

¹⁷⁵ Alan Burns, *Dreamerika!* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1972), p.31 NB: Parts of the quotation in bold text are newspaper or magazine clippings. I have tried to replicate as best I can their position on the page in the novel.

magazine or newspaper, seems to be at once the window from which Oswald supposedly shot, but also comments directly on this shift in perspective. It is the televisual window through which the footage of the assassination is played over and over again, and indeed it is the ‘window’ of the text itself, one which does not simply and straightforwardly allow unmediated access to the events it depicts, but a window which is continually altering and remaking itself. Burns shows us clearly that the meaning of the traumatic event cannot be fixed, that there are multiple angles and lines from which it can be approached and through which it can be interpreted. The large “window” draws attention to the text, as text, on the page and to ourselves as readers of that text, that is to the novel’s status as an object.

Where Ballard uses the device of the sports report to talk about the conspiracy theories that followed the assassination, the relationship between Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and about the Warren Commission and their findings, Burns remains decisively in the moment of trauma. Where Ballard seeks to reveal through imitation the smoothing-out of media accounts of traumatic events, their desire to seek closure in a narrative that inevitably remains open, Burns wants to represent that openness. For Ballard, the event is apprehended (and perhaps can only be apprehended) entirely through the lens of mass media. Burns, however, stays closer-in, and positions the reader alternately as a spectator through that same media lens, but also as a spectator at the event itself, as a reader with privileged access, via an omniscient narrator, to Kennedy’s thoughts and, briefly, as Kennedy himself. Burns follows the above quotation with:

JESUS, DID YOU SEE THAT

The convertible was long, three men stood on the trunk. A goat on the hood of the car screaming ‘Dee! Dee!’. The body shook, the man was hurt. The battered man in the back of the car surrounded by strangers, knees moving towards him, the heart stopped.



Something red gushed from his mouth.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Alan Burns, *Dreamerika!*, p.31. Again I have attempted to replicate the way in which Burns’ page is constructed.

Burns again uses multiple perspectives, and the effect is similarly disorientating, at turns intimate and distant. Burns in this quotation switches from referring to Kennedy as ‘he’ to referring to him as ‘the man’. By repeatedly referring to Kennedy as just ‘the man’, Burns positions him as just another figure in the crowd, depersonalising him. But ironically, this act of depersonalisation serves as a stripping away of the mythic components of the story of Kennedy’s assassination, and the reader is left simply witnessing a death. The heavy black line that breaks up the text serves as a marker of that death, reminiscent of the black page that marks Parson Yorick’s death in *Tristram Shandy*. With regard to Sterne’s black page, James Kim writes:

Haunting in its strangeness, Sterne’s famous black page offers a particularly dense example of a rhetorical formation that I would like to call “sentimental irony,” irony and sentimentality placed in a mutually constitutive, dialogical relationship. The black page’s sentimental appeal both deepens and complicates—and is in turn deepened and complicated by—its ironic implications. An overflow of ink, the black page seems to record Tristram’s overflow of feeling at Yorick’s death. It is as if, overwhelmed by the task of conveying his sentiments on Yorick’s demise, Tristram tries to say everything at once—and therefore can say nothing at all. The black page thus takes to its absolute limit the inexpressibility topos that is the hallmark of sentimental rhetoric: the formula “words cannot convey what I then felt” surely finds here its most extreme expression.¹⁷⁷

Kim reads the black page in *Tristram Shandy* as a representation of the inability to speak about death, and this kind of depiction can be read through the lens of trauma theory as an expression of the excess of the traumatic moment, as Kim puts it, an ‘overflow’. The traumatic event cannot be exhausted or contained in representation, it is infinitely deep. Burns’ black line is an attempt to show that depth, to mark it on the page. But in doing so Burns also shows the limits of language in conveying trauma and the paradox of attempting to represent it: that any representation which tries to show the excess of trauma risks becoming obscure, or unreadable, too dense. In addition, given that the rest of *Dreamerika!* contains text cut from newspapers and magazines, it seems fair to assume that this black line is itself cut from some other source, is not written or ‘drawn’ by Burns himself but found and inserted into the text, another reminder that the reader cannot encounter trauma directly, but only ever in a mediated, hybridised way, as LaCapra suggests.

¹⁷⁷ James Kim ““Good Cursed, Bouncing Losses”: Masculinity, Sentimental Irony, and Exuberance in *Tristram Shandy*”, *The Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 48, no. 1, (2007), p. 3

In contrast, Ballard does not attempt to show the exact moment of assassination, instead the piece turns away at the moment of death:

Kennedy went downhill rapidly. After the damage to the governor the car shot forward at high speed. An alarmed track official attempted to mount the car, which continued on its way, cornering on two wheels.

Turns. Kennedy was disqualified at the hospital, after taking a turn for the worse.¹⁷⁸

Ballard is clearly not concerned with representing the traumatic moment, in fact he downplays the traumatic aspect - Kennedy doesn't die, he is 'disqualified', a piece of terminology which seems to suggest that it is Kennedy's failure to apprehend somehow the rules of politics, his failure not to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, that led to him losing the presidency to Johnson. That is, Ballard's text deals with politics as a media event whose narrative shoehorns its actors into position as winners and losers, one in which Lee Harvey Oswald can be moved from assassin to race official without substantially altering his actions. Although Alan Burns wants to give a sense of that media lens, he is more concerned with the showing the way in which the traumatic moment generates a variety of meanings which cannot be fixed. If Ballard shows us that the action of power (here represented by the media) is to always want to fix meaning, to contain it, then Burns wants to show the obverse of that, the manner in which meaning is never truly fixed and can never be exhausted. The traumatic moment shows that surfeit of meaning, it is never reducible. It is in this sense that trauma is political for Burns, always able to generate new meanings and resist attempts to fix meaning in place. Texts about trauma are always, in Frank LaCapra's term, hybrids because they inevitably recognise their inability hold in place the entirety of the traumatic moment, and Burns' black mark on the page that follows John F Kennedy's assassination functions precisely in that hybrid sense.

Where LaCapra points to the hybrid, and Jeannette Baxter to the collage in Burns' work, Shoshana Felman speaks of the fragment. In a passage about Mallarme, which links the formal revolution in poetry that his work exemplifies to contemporary developments in psychoanalysis and political change, she writes:

¹⁷⁸ Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, p.172

Both *free verse* and *free association* undergo the process of fragmentation - a breaking down, a disruption and a dislocation of the dream, of verse, of language, of the apparent but misleading unities of syntax and of meaning. The passage through this fragmentation is a passage through a radical obscurity.¹⁷⁹

For Felman, the testimony of trauma is necessarily fragmented. Having explored fragmentation at the sentence level in *Babel* and *Dreamerika!*, Burns moves, in his next novel, *The Angry Brigade*, to a different type of fragmentation which expresses a different type of politics and, by extension, a somewhat different conception of trauma. In this novel, Burns offers multiple narrative perspectives presented in the form of interview transcripts, which allow the reader access to a variety of views of the events that the novel depicts. This device allows Burns to talk about the internecine conflicts within the group of protagonists, and about the problem of political organisation, group dynamics and the minutiae of debate and conversation. But on a structural level, the use of multiple narrators de-privileges the individual, and the novel becomes an aggregate or assemblage text where no single voice is given prominence. Trauma in the novel is collectivised, made diffuse, and though the group of activists that Burns presents in the novel come to, in some senses resemble the family and replicate familial structures, he nonetheless is able to offer, through a fragmented narrative process, a broader scope for the representation of trauma.

Felman's book is concerned with the act of witnessing and subsequently giving testimony about the traumatic event. Felman emphasises a connection between formal fragmentation and political change:

The revolution in poetic form testifies, in other words, to political and cultural changes whose historical manifestation, and its revolutionary aspect is now noted accidentally - accidentally breaks into awareness - through an *accident of verse*. The poetic revolution is thus both a replica and a sequence, an effect of, the French Revolution.¹⁸⁰

In this sense, and I think this certainly has application in the work of Alan Burns, it is possible to read literary experimentation and the fragmentation of form as in some sense traumatic repetitions of earlier political upheavals. This certainly seems to be the case in *The Angry Brigade* whose story can only be told through multiple narrators who often contradict each other's version of events and

¹⁷⁹ Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1992), p.23

¹⁸⁰ Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, p.20

use their narration to settle scores, defend their actions and offer contrasting interpretations. The novel has a complex relationship to trauma and offers the least prominent version of Burns' own traumatic story, though it is there in a piece of narration by Ivor, who says:

My mother was working-class. My father, who died when I was young, came from quite a rich Jewish family. My grandfather was a well known Rabbi. He was a most remarkable man, the contradictory type of puritan who is able to inculcate grave moral guilt, but also a man who loved live, a man of tremendous vitality. As I lacked a father, my grandfather was a powerful influence on my life.¹⁸¹

This piece of Ivor's story is not expanded upon, but I note it simply to catalogue yet another example of Burns' story inserting itself into his narration. The novel deals more explicitly with trauma in its later sections, most clearly in the accounts of the group's confrontation with police after a prolonged sit-in at the Ministry of Housing building. The protest is broken up and several of the group are beaten and arrested. One of them, Ivor, then appears to sell out two of the group, Barry and Dave, to the police so as to avoid being charged himself. They are given custodial sentences while Ivor is set free. Burns then presents various accounts of the after-effects:

SUZANNE:

As a matter of fact, it's probably not significant, but I had a nervous breakdown about three weeks after that, and it was suggested by the doctor who treated me at the time that that had been a factor in it, the whole experience had been so traumatic.

MEHTA:

So one had a sense of catastrophic loss, catastrophic personal let-down. It was a quasi-parental thing, this relationship with an activist commune, very intense indeed. [...]

BARRY:

[...] I still scream in my sleep if I lie on my back, though I've taught myself to wake up. I did six months, and most nights I screamed if I slept on my back [...]. It was real fear,

¹⁸¹ Alan Burns, *The Angry Brigade* (London: Quartet Books, 1973), p.16

perhaps laced with childhood remembrance, fear of the dark, that sort of thing. I can remember screaming as a child and being scared by my own screams and screaming some more and carrying on like that.¹⁸²

Individually these accounts offer a familiar picture of the relation to the traumatic moment, a combination of recurrent episodes in which the event is repeated and a sense of loss and separation with commensurate physical effects. Mehta's description of the commune as "quasi-parental" emphasises this, and again we see the loss of a parent as emblematic of the traumatic event for Burns. And the intensity of Barry's physical symptoms also connects to a sense of childhood fear. These individual accounts offer a personal view of trauma, but what seems to interest Burns in this novel, though, are the simultaneous effects of the traumatic event on an entire group of people, none of whom (including Ivor, who saved himself by informing on his friends) emerge from their encounter with the police without some traumatic symptom. This idea of trauma experienced collectively is problematic for accounts of trauma which seek to separate it from normal experience. If trauma is, as some writers, including Caruth and van der Kolk, would have it, encoded somehow differently into the brain of the victim, if trauma belongs to a different register of existence, how can this account for cases where trauma appears to effect entire groups of people? Does the existence of a notion of collective trauma do damage to Caruth's idea that:

[...] trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.¹⁸³

What Burns offers us in *The Angry Brigade* is a refutation of this idea of trauma being a different kind of truth, and he achieves this precisely through multiple, fragmented narration. Whatever 'truth' emerges from the novel does so only out of a reading of accounts from a variety of actors, all with different perspectives and biases. In this novel, Burns replaces the density of his earlier presentation of the traumatic moment with a simple acknowledgement of the effects of trauma on the various people that experience it, and it is in this simpler register that Burns seems to attempt to portray the intersection of radical politics and traumatic experience. As such, he moves towards a presentation of testimony that chimes with the work of Felman, who writes that "the notion of the testimony [...] turns out to be tied up, precisely, with the notion of the underground."¹⁸⁴ Trauma,

¹⁸² Alan Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.127-129

¹⁸³ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* p.12

¹⁸⁴ Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, p.12

for Burns, is political in the sense that it positions its victims as outsiders, members of the underground that Felman writes about. In *The Angry Brigade*, this political experience of trauma has a particular resonance: the traumatic incident causes members of the Brigade to question their activism and their belief that violence against the State is a viable form of protest. What the reader sees subsequently is a fragmentation of the group and its beliefs that seems to mirror the fragmentation that Felman talks about; a fragmentation that is itself represented in the structure of the novel and its multiple narrative perspectives.

Jeffrey Alexander's work on collective trauma operates differently when compared to much of the other trauma theory discussed above. For Alexander, trauma is not something that can be attributed to an individual, rather it is a particular conceptualisation of events that can only be established by the agreement of a wider community. He writes:

Even when claims of victimhood are morally justifiable, politically democratic, and socially progressive, these claims still cannot be seen as automatic, or natural, responses to the actual nature of an event itself.¹⁸⁵

And later:

Traumatic status is attributed to real or imagined phenomena, not because of their actual harmfulness or their objective abruptness, but because these phenomena are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully, affected collective identity.¹⁸⁶

Taken together these statements are a radical dismantling of any trauma theory that has roots in psychoanalysis. What Alexander is suggesting is not merely that trauma has a political dimension, but that the political is by definition inscribed in any event that can be considered traumatic. The trauma resides, in fact, in the breaking down of collectives and, crucially, its status as traumatic is dependent upon those collectives deciding it as such. Alexander's formulation returns some agency to the victims of horrific events, it is the victims, as a community, that decide that an event is traumatic. That is, trauma is not imposed externally, but comes out of a process that takes place in a community of survivors. *The Angry Brigade* contains such a community, and after the

¹⁸⁵ Alexander, 'Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma', p.9

¹⁸⁶ Alexander, 'Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma', p.10

imprisonment of Dave and Barry, they experience a breakdown in relations with each other and a disenfranchisement with the activism they've been undertaking.

What Burns diagnoses in *The Angry Brigade* is a breakdown which stems not so much from the way the group are treated by the police, something that they have all experienced previously on an individual basis and are well aware of in sophisticated political terms, but rather from a disjunction in their experience of an event, a difference of interpretation of the effectiveness of the sit-in and its fallout. Ivor, who saves himself at the expense of the rest of the group (but nonetheless stays part of it, even retaining his role as leader of sorts) precipitates through that betrayal a wider questioning of everybody's roles within the group. As Alexander writes:

Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors "decide" to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go.¹⁸⁷

Trauma for Alexander is a two-stage event - the event itself and the collective decision about its designation. It is in this latter stage that the politics of trauma truly emerges. For the characters in *The Angry Brigade*, their experience of trauma leads to both a questioning of the validity of their group: Jean says that, "I was so confused I couldn't have explained to the press or anyone else why Ivor's weakness had put me off activist politics for good."¹⁸⁸ But equally, simultaneously, the group continue to engage in political actions, though what they do has a different, less dynamic quality to it. Two of the members, Jean and Mehta, agree to blow up a wall near a housing estate, and paint some graffiti alongside. Jean's whole account has a distant tone to it, and Jean constantly reiterates her trepidation about what they are doing, but also her disengagement from it:

We were being very cool about it, at least I thought I was, at first. Then the fear of being caught and sent down for a long time (I was still bound over to keep the peace) got the better of me. I went through with it but I was really shaking. The whole process seemed slowed up. It was like that cliché thing about falling from a height and having your whole past flash by.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Alexander, 'Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma', p.10

¹⁸⁸ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.127

¹⁸⁹ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.138

These actions, it seems to me, constitute a repetition of the original traumatic event, in the Freudian sense. Jean's narration has a dreamlike quality, as though she is merely observing what's happening from outside herself. Jean's evocation of falling, even of falling to her death, as well as her specific sense of time moving more slowly, shows her distance from the violence she is performing, a performance which, for her, is a kind of death. Linking her own violent actions (which themselves aim to repeat an earlier violence) with the moment of death is a repudiation of that violence. Jean sees, in the way that one falling sees their life flash before them, the various consequences – physical, mental, social – of this violence kaleidoscoped before her. But, as Burns shows, however self-damaging, the compulsion to repeat in trauma is nearly impossible to resist. She and Mehta set the bomb, which explodes, blinding a child in one eye. Jean's reaction says something about her relation to the group and to activism more generally.

It wasn't an effective way of protesting. We didn't think anyone would take much notice, we didn't think that the toe-rags would revolt. It was pretty futile, but we had to do something and that was all there was left for us to do. I didn't agree with it really. I didn't deep down think it had any effect. It may seem irrational to take that trouble and risk for a useless act.¹⁹⁰

Her reaction is a profound ambivalence. She feels obliged to do something, but whatever she does do she sees as futile and ineffective, meaningless. In this quotation, Jean's words are blank, affectless. Notice in particular the way in which Burns repeats negatives in the passage. Jean gives the reader, and herself, all the reasons not to have acted, but nonetheless felt powerless to do other than to act in the way that she did. And notice as well the prevarication in her final sentence, "it may seem irrational" – this sense of uncertainty, despite her admission of the futility of her actions displays the profound effects of trauma: it is as though, regardless of all the good, concrete and expressible reasons for holding back from violence, something inexpressible compels her towards it.

Jean's ambivalence speaks to a traumatic relation, the breakdown of the group leads to a questioning of the values of the group and their tactics. It is as though the experience of trauma for Jean forces into the open questions about her own politics and the value of direct action. In Alexander's terms, the longer, two stage process of trauma that occurs for the group causes a reconstruction not just of their relationship to each other but, commensurate with that, their

¹⁹⁰ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.142

relationship with the State and power. Their treatment by both the police and each other shows the fragility of their group, their weakness and vulnerability. As Alexander puts it:

Only if the patterned meanings of the collectivity are abruptly dislodged is traumatic status attributed to an event. It is the meanings that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events in themselves. Whether or not the structures of meaning are destabilised and shocked is not the result of an event but the effect of a sociocultural process. It is the result of an exercise of human agency, of the successful imposition of a new system of cultural classification. This cultural process is deeply affected by power structures and by the contingent skills of reflexive social agents.¹⁹¹

This idea of the meaning of trauma, the definition of trauma, emerging out of interpretation rather than being a constituent part of an event has application elsewhere in Burns' work. *Europe After the Rain* deals with a populace whose distance from the events that are occurring around them, and the violence of those events, suggests a kind of collective trauma. The blankness of the characters allows Burns to blend them into the landscape, the environment. *Europe After the Rain's* characters are nameless, or only given the names of their roles - the Commander, the Driver etc., and so Burns gives the reader the sense of an anonymous population undergoing continual suffering. The novel depicts horrific violence, but that violence is never discussed or interpreted. In Alexander's terms, at least, *Europe After the Rain* may not be a novel about trauma. Alexander provocatively suggests that it's a failure to create narrative around a horrific event which can lead to it being insufficiently dealt with. For Alexander, designation as trauma involves a process in which collectives are destabilised but then subsequently are reconstituted. Part of the political dimension of trauma, in Alexander's account, is a process of memorialisation and holding to account. He writes:

[...] for both social structural and culture reasons, carrier groups have not emerged with the resources, authority, or interpretive competence to powerfully disseminate these trauma claims. Sufficiently persuasive narratives have not been created, or they have not been successfully broadcast to wider audiences. Because of these failures, the perpetrators of these collective sufferings have not been compelled to accept moral responsibility, and the lessons of these social traumas have been neither memorialised nor ritualised. [...] More primordial and more particularistic collective identities have not been changed.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Alexander, 'Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma' p.10

¹⁹² Alexander, 'Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma', p.27

Burns appears to understand this line of argumentation. The total chaos that *Europe After the Rain* presents does not allow for this kind of process of reconstitution to occur. Where there has been a complete breakdown of collectives, there is no possibility of a collective response to violence.

Burns achieves this effect through the cut-up, which allows him to distance himself from the material he presents. As he writes in his essay about his work: “Perhaps some of *Europe After the Rain*’s ‘numbness’ derives from this distanced technique of writing from the unconscious.”¹⁹³

What Ruth Leys shows in her analysis of various instantiations of these two theories of trauma, is a profound anxiety about the role of the subject in the traumatic event. What does it mean to say, for example, that the victim unconsciously identifies with their aggressor? But equally, what are the implications of arguing that the traumatic event is a straightforward event that can be accessed (though often with great difficulty) by the victim? The mimetic model seems to partition off the traumatic event as a special case whose effects are singular and unique to trauma, and which creates a particular psychic configuration in which the traumatic event is not accessible directly, but which is characterised by the acting out or repetition of that trauma, whereas the antimimetic model seems to see trauma more simply, as something which impinges upon the subject from the outside and, though it might affect that subject profoundly, the traumatic event is subsequently recoverable and can be represented by the victim. These two types of subjects, the mimetic model’s victim whose trauma is bound up in identification with the perpetrator and whose access to the traumatic event is stymied, manifesting itself in an acting out whose relation to the original trauma may be deeply unclear; and the antimimetic victim, whose relation to the traumatic event seems to be worn physically, and whose compulsion to revisit their trauma is bound up in the profundity of the effect it had upon them, are both visible in the Alan Burns’ novels. Just as Leys writes that the two theories have a habit of becoming intertwined, these subjects are not straightforwardly either mimetic or antimimetic, they display characteristics of both theories, sometimes simultaneously. This suggests a number of things about Burns’ conception of trauma. Firstly, it is not theoretical; Burns does not offer the reader a set of characteristics or ideas from which they might be able to construct a general picture of how trauma works, instead he offers the reader a range of individuals and groups, and a range of responses to trauma out of which no definitive components can be theorised. Burns does not just focus on the individual effects of trauma. As I have shown above, Burns’ depiction of the traumatic event is always a depiction which contains a variety of impulses, which seeks to show the collective, or structural effects of trauma alongside the individual and

¹⁹³ Alan Burns, ‘Essay’, p.65

which invariably contains the political, whether that is the potential for politicisation which is contained in the traumatic event, or the forces which come together to create the event. In that density of description, Burns opens out the traumatic event, de-individualising it. The enigma of the traumatic event is not just the relation of the victim to their memory (or lack of memory) of what happened, and how they deal with that memory, but also the question of how the event is constructed, the power structures that are present, and the impact of the event upon multiple human and non-human actors. As such, Burns' approach to trauma is Deleuzian, he sees the traumatic moment as an assemblage, a complex construction of impulses and lines of power which, at the moment of trauma undergo a process of deterritorialisation and subsequent reterritorialisation as the structures are reconstituted in the aftermath.

As such, Leys' genealogy, which largely focuses on the role of the subject/victim of trauma and how that has been conceptualised by various theorists cannot, in its identification of the mimetic and antimimetic models, fully account for the way in which Burns depicts trauma. But nonetheless they are useful and provocative ways to examine the way in which Burns treats the victims of trauma in his work.

There is a blankness that pervades *Europe After the Rain*, whose characters are often listless, affectless, seemingly inured to the violence that surrounds them. Leys writes that, "For Freud, trauma was thus constituted by a dialectic between two events, neither of which was intrinsically traumatic, and a temporal delay or latency through which the past was available only by a deferred act of understanding and interpretation."¹⁹⁴ This delay was termed *Nachträglichkeit*, and for Freud, trauma is constituted by a process of interpretation; the traumatic event does not complete itself until it has been elaborated upon by the individual psyche. This period of latency, where trauma is embedded within consciousness but does not find its full expression, accurately describes the mood of *Europe After the Rain*. It is as though the novel is unable to confront directly the violence that makes up so much of its content. Burns writes: "My parents were separated by my mother's early death. My elder brother and I were separated by his early death. The consuming nature of this experience showed itself not only in the disconnected form, but also in the content of my work. *Europe After the Rain* is concerned with brutality and physical extremity but not with pain. Much physical damage is done, but there is little emotional or psychological response to it. The characters seem numb."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, p.20

¹⁹⁵ Burns, 'Essay', p.65

Cathy Caruth would describe this numbness, this period of *Nachtraglichkeit* as an “incubation period”¹⁹⁶ and though Leys criticises the way in which this conceptualisation medicalises trauma, it fits with Burns’ notion of brutality and physical extremes, but without pain, and also with the sense of the war as a disease, or parasite, a state of mind as much as a state of politics. The war in Europe After the Rain, seems perpetual, it is described several times as having finished, as when the Driver tells the narrator, “Then the war ended,”¹⁹⁷ but it still continues. There is a difference, Burns suggests, between any officially sanctioned end to a war and the way in which the war persists in the minds of its victims. Caruth’s notion of the incubation period emphasises trauma as an external event, and so maps onto Leys’ antimimetic model, whereas Freud’s *Nachtraglichkeit* is dependent upon the individual’s interpretation of the event for trauma to be fully constituted, and so can be more closely aligned to the mimetic theory. Both seem necessary to account for the way in which violence is manifested in the novel, and the reaction of the novel’s characters to that violence.

The girl’s story in Europe After the Rain resembles Dan’s in *Buster*, and Burns’ own: the absent mother, the brother who dies and the tyrannical father that the girl tries to escape from but cannot help returning to. Europe After the Rain is therefore another repetition of these traumatic motifs, another instantiation of the pattern that Burns will subsequently repeat in all of his novels.

The story of Europe After the Rain was close to mine: a young man killed and a family broken, in a landscape of war and purposeless suffering. Yet I did not use introspective methods to gather the material. I came across it by chance. Three accidents happened: I saw the Max Ernst painting of the title, at the Tate. In a second-hand bookshop in Lyme Regis I found the verbatim record of the Nuremberg trials, and in another shop in Axminster I bought a journalist’s report on life in Poland after the war. This last provided most of my background material. I had this badly written guidebook on my desk and I typed from it in a semi-trance. My eyes glazed and in the blur only the sharpest and strongest words, mainly nouns, emerged. I picked them out and wrote them down and made my own sense of them later.¹⁹⁸

Burns’ technique is a method of dealing with the relation between his material and his own experiences during the Second World War; the son of the rebel leader dies an ignominious death,

¹⁹⁶ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p.7

¹⁹⁷ Alan Burns, *Europe After the Rain* (London: John Calder, 1965), p.40

¹⁹⁸ Alan Burns, ‘Essay’, p.65

and his father's growing power and violence unites the narrator and the girl against him. What Burns' approach in *Europe After the Rain* shows is the way in which the excess of the traumatic moment always engenders a political response which draws attention to structural, or, in Žižek's terms, objective violence. The novel continually asserts the cyclical nature of trauma, and the way in which violence continually reasserts itself. Burns writes, for example, that: "She knew she was threatened with capture. She had been given her freedom after being kept locked in for years, and in the end liberty would lead again to capture."¹⁹⁹ And subsequently: "Fleeing from the dogs with the speed of a greyhound, her life a struggle against attack, she knew of how to reserve her strength when running. [...] She escaped by mingling with them."²⁰⁰ In both of these quotations, what is emphasised is the inevitability of violence, and the way in which it is inescapable: freedom can only lead to recapture, and the only way to avoid being the victim of violence is to somehow merge with it, becoming implicit in it. The second quotation in particular has a breathless quality, and the run-on, multiple-clause sentences that Burns uses serve almost to mask the contradictions that he presents, moving the reader smoothly through a passage which turns in on itself, repudiating what has come before. The effect of this movement, specifically an effect of the language and sentence-structure that Burns employs, and gives a sense of traumatic encircling: the freedom of flight is unavoidably compromised by the stasis that the girl's necessary mingling with her enemies suggests.

The only possible conclusion to be reached from this presentation is that there must be a structural component to that violence which renders it inevitable. Considered in this way, trauma has the potential to destabilise not just the individual victim and produce the effects that critics like Edelman, Caruth and Tal identify, but also, more broadly, to destabilise the components of a particular situation and reveal, for a moment, their construction. In this sense, trauma in Burns' work is always collective.

To conclude this chapter I will look at two death scenes which again are instantiations of Burns' own trauma, from his later novels, *The Day Daddy Died* and *Revolutions of the Night* which encapsulate this version of the traumatic event. *The Day Daddy Died* continues Burns' use of documentary material, here interviews with a working class woman give Burns the raw material out of which he constructs a novel of hardship and oppression for the main character, Norah. At the beginning of the novel Burns' recounts the death of Norah's alcoholic father:

¹⁹⁹ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.102

²⁰⁰ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.105

Two weeks before he died her father was... he could not get his breath, he was... he sat on the bed and said, "I won't mind dying." Two weeks later Dr Peck came and gave him an injection and said he would not last the day. She passed the rest of the day, going into his room but afraid to go in, not knowing if she would find him dead, which gasp would be his last, and he died about half past five. The men came in and she would not go in. Her grandfather had come down from Oldham for the funeral, he said, "Why are you afraid of him? He never hurt you while he was alive and I'm sure he won't hurt you now he's dead."²⁰¹

The ellipses that open the quotation break up the narration, render it fragmentary, as well as replicating the father's shortness of breath. The ellipses also suggest a hesitancy, a reluctance to speak, and in particular to speak directly about the father, about what he was. This is reflected in Norah's unwillingness to cross the threshold of her father's room as he is dying, she remains in a liminal space, neither outside nor in. That is, trauma here cannot be encountered directly, and finds its expression yet again in a fragmentary form. The traumatic event here concerns the disintegration of the family, a topic that Burns returns to frequently, though here it is dealt with in a more direct way than in previous novels. What is also significant in this passage is the manner in which Burns represents time, as the narrative moves very rapidly from moment to moment, event to event, giving the reader only brief instances. The effect of this is not only to render a certain effect of memory and trauma, skipping over the death to focus on that which surrounds it, but also, and more significantly, Burns puts together Norah's reluctance to go to her dying father and her grandfather's words about her fear of him. Burns creates a connection between the father and Norah's feelings of fear right at the beginning of the novel. The undercurrent of menace in the grandfather's words serves to undercut all the subsequent positive evocations of the father on Norah's part, showing him to be a figure that impinges on her life in a much more complicated way.

The father's death seems to bring about a crisis in Norah, who, in its aftermath, runs away from home with a soldier:

²⁰¹ Alan Burns, *The Day Daddy Died*, (London: Allison and Busby, 1981), p.9

That was the first time she ran away from home; she was fourteen, it was just after her father died. During the two weeks she and George did not sleep with each other, but it was sexual; they would walk in the park, or sit in front of the fire and pet, it was romantic.²⁰²

This crisis continues throughout the novel, with Norah going through a series of relationships with men, most of which are older and most of which exploit her in some way. There is clearly a political dimension to this for Burns, who shows that her exploitation by the men mirrors and is connected to the exploitation of Norah by a series of employers and institutions. This connection is made most clear in the figure of Dr Peck, who later becomes Norah's lover (and the father of one of her children), as well as prescribing her drugs and arranging for her and her family to move to the labour camp whose depiction makes up most of the latter part of the novel. In all of this the figure of the dead father looms large. In one scene, Dr Peck visits Norah, who has moved to Manchester with her children, and she talks about the effect of her father's death:

In the beginning I felt guilt, then disbelief, then loneliness. He wasn't there. I don't know, he was my rock, my everything. Daddy was always there no matter what. Then came other feelings, about what he had done, and resentment that he had left me, that I was so young and his death so pointless.²⁰³

In this scene, Norah's fear of her father, and her inability to move away from her sense of perpetually being judged by him, is made more explicit. Burns leaves the issue of "what he had done" deliberately ambiguous, rendering Norah's other remarks about his continual presence and her age more disturbing. Again, Burns achieves this effect through the way in which he puts this material into proximity.

In *Revolutions of the Night*, Burns again gives us a scene which deals with the death of a parent, this time the mother of the family:

Mother was dressed in white, starched and pressed for the occasion.

"I'll get the doctor," said Max.

The children retreated to the window. Puffing and whistling, the doctor arrived. When she died, he said he was sorry. His other attribute was the right of no reply.²⁰⁴

²⁰² Burns, *The Day Daddy Died*, p.11

²⁰³ Burns, *The Day Daddy Died*. p.71

²⁰⁴ Alan Burns, *Revolutions of the Night*, (London: Allison and Busby, 1986), p.12

Again, there is a looking away at the moment of death, and again there is the uncomfortable presence of a doctor. As with the father in *The Day Daddy Died*, who expresses some comfort at the idea of his death, the mother here again is prepared for death, her appearance and manner of dress already suggestive of it. Trauma in the later novels is tinged with a sense of the inevitable, is less of a rupture than in earlier works. Burns opts for a third person narrative voice which maintains an even distance from the material. This type of depiction renders the political aspect of trauma less visible, but seem to reflect a growing sense in Burns that it is the family that is the key political unit, and an understanding of power in the family is an understanding of power in society, and trauma is what shapes the relations in the family. In this sense, Burns' return to the family is also a return to his first novel, *Buster*, and, again, repeatedly, a return to the site of his own trauma.

Chapter Three: The Avant-Garde

Charles Sugnet writes that Alan Burns has “always been uncompromisingly political and uncompromisingly avant-garde at the same time; the work demonstrates at the sentence level Burns’ conviction that these two positions are inseparable.”¹ This chapter will examine Burns’ relationship to the avant-garde, and whether Sugnet’s contention is fundamentally correct. I will consider Burns’ work by examining theory from the period of the ‘classical’ avant-garde, from the ‘neo-avant-garde’ (as Hal Foster calls it) of the 1960s, and also critical contemporary debates on the subject. I consider how Alan Burns’ work plays into debates about the relationship of the avant-garde to political practice. Sugnet proposes an uncomplicated relationship between the avant-garde and politics: in his essay he argues that Burns is able to occupy both simultaneously, but a great deal of the theory concerned with such a relationship, particularly the work of Peter Bürger, deals with the complexities of that relation. In Bürger’s book, *The Theory of the Avant Garde*, he argues that the political function of the classical avant-garde of the early twentieth century (a function he claims cannot be recuperated by artists and writers after that period) was the integration of life with the praxis of art as a means to critique the status of art as institution. Bürger defines the purpose of the avant-garde as a process of unveiling, whereby “the weight that art as an institution has in determining the real social effect of individual works bec[omes] recognisable.”² It is not, he contends, that the avant-garde destroys art as an institution, but rather that the way in which that institution mediates between the work and the public becomes more visible through the integration of life and art.

Bürger’s thesis is provocative in that it both suggests that the project of the avant-garde cannot be completed, that it is a continual process of becoming, but also that it is tied to a particular historical period. For Bürger, this constitutes a failure to create a truly socially integrated art, and, as such, the artists and writers of the 1960s who sought to engage with the ideas and techniques of the historical avant-garde were unable to prevent their work becoming what Jochen Schulte-Sasse calls a “false sublation or overcoming of autonomous art.”³ That is, the work of art itself is unable, in Bürger’s view, to overcome bourgeois art without bourgeois society first being overcome. It is possible therefore to see the attempts of the 1960s to create new forms of and spaces for art as being inextricably tied to the power structures they seek to critique. As such, the attempts made by

¹ Sugnet, ‘Burns’ *Aleatoric Celebrations: Smashing Hegemony at the Sentence Level* p.193

² Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.83

³ Jochen Schulte-Sasse ‘Foreword’ in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.xlii

experimental writers and artists in the post-war period, including Alan Burns, by re-using or updating the techniques and political impetus of the classical avant-garde are condemned to replicate the political failure of the classical avant-garde. I will argue, therefore, that Charles Sugnet's contention that Alan Burns is both uncompromisingly political and uncompromisingly avant-garde, presents an unrealistically simplistic version of what Burns attempts to achieve through his ideologically-informed fiction. I will use Bürger's two fundamental categorisations of avant-garde practice to examine this: firstly that the avant-garde aims to critique art as an institution and secondly that it seeks to reintegrate everyday life into the praxis of art. I will begin, however, by considering Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the avant-garde, as Bourdieu offers a way to analyse Burns' work in terms of its relation to history.

Pierre Bourdieu positions the status of the work of art by emphasising the function of the past in the production of avant-garde art. The past, for Bourdieu, impinges directly on any consideration of avant-garde production because avant-garde art can emerge only through an engagement with the past and an attempt to, as he writes, surpass⁴ it. This is of particular importance when considering Alan Burns' work, which draws extensively on his own traumatic experiences, both in the context of the family, but also the experience of war and violence. In addition, Burns' concern with extending a conception of 'the novel', moving beyond established forms and methodologies, suggests a concern, albeit an antagonistic one, for the history of the novel as a form. For Bourdieu this means that the past exerts control on the field of production, because an awareness of what has come before is necessary to be able to move beyond it and produce something new. He writes:

[...] the very intention of *surpassing* which properly defines the avant-garde is itself the result of a whole history, and because it is inevitably situated in relation to what it aims to surpass, that is, in relation to all the activities of surpassing which have occurred in the structure of the field and in the space of possibles it imposes on new entrants.⁵

What this leads to is an inevitable narrowing and constraining in the way that a particular field is perceived, which Bourdieu identifies as an increasing aestheticisation. The field comes to be defined increasingly in relation to an internal logic, and to become separated from external concerns. Bourdieu suggests a folding-in of the avant-garde impulse, its encapsulation and, to some extent the neutering of its power of critique, when he writes that "It is the very logic of the field

⁴ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996) p. 242

⁵ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p.243

which tends to select and consecrate all legitimate ruptures with the history objectified in the structure of the field, that is, those ruptures which are the product of a disposition formed by the history of the field and informed by that history, and hence inscribed in the continuity of the field.”⁶ This Bourdieu identifies as paradoxical, and he would argue that there are in fact two paradoxes in his presentation of the function of the avant-garde. These are firstly that the avant-garde gesture must come from a position of historical knowledge, that is, it must emerge from inside a particular field of production, entry to which is contingent upon an awareness of a particular discourse; that is, in Burns' case, the history and form of the novel. Secondly, that the attempt to surpass that history contributes to the rarefying of that field, which makes it less comprehensible to outsiders. That is, it makes that field even more for insiders as it becomes more and more concerned with formal considerations. For Burns, for example, the issue of form is related explicitly to the rejection of the traditional novel and the certainties that realism implies: “My recent book [*Babel*] was composed of a series of almost completely disconnected paragraphs. [...] There is, in fact, an association between that which precedes and that which follows and the whole is informed by an elemental construction but this is very far, nevertheless, from the conventional novel.”⁷ Bourdieu suggests that this concern with form is a process of purification, and that the more a field tends towards this purification the less it can fulfil what he calls ‘impure’ social functions⁸. So, the avant-garde gesture is doubly hampered by the history it seeks to surpass, as Bourdieu makes clear: “Absolutely nothing is more connected to the proper tradition of the field, including the intention to subvert it, than avant-garde artists who, at the risk of appearing as naïfs, must inevitably situate themselves in relation to all previous efforts at overtaking which have occurred in the history of the field.”⁹ It is not simply that the avant-garde cannot escape the historicity of its gesture, but that in making any gesture which seeks to surpass that history, the result may well be constraint rather than freedom, exclusivity rather than openness.

For the artists and writers working during Alan Burns' experimental period (roughly speaking the mid nineteen sixties to the mid seventies), issues of relation to tradition and the ability of avant-garde or experimental work to make changes both in a formal and political sense were of vital importance. And this is a period in which a great deal of experimental art is produced and in which conventions are routinely challenged. Whether this resulted in the stultification that Bourdieu diagnoses or not depends upon how broadly the avant-garde is defined, but clearly avant-garde art

⁶ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p.243

⁷ Firchow, *The Writer's Place*, p.61

⁸ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p.249

⁹ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p.301

produced in this period is bound not only by the history of the fields, both literary and cultural, in which the writers and artists operate, but also by its relation to the ‘classical’ avant-garde, which comes to be seen by critics such as Peter Bürger as itself an unsurpassable historical moment. In this chapter I will focus largely on two of Burns’ novels to examine the way in which his work plays into notions of both tradition and innovation. Firstly I will examine *Europe After the Rain*, which sits, somewhat awkwardly between a revivification of certain concepts and approaches of modernism and the classical avant-garde and an attempt to transcend those ideas. Next I will consider *Babel*, a novel in which Burns seeks a thorough redefinition of the avant-garde novel in the late 1960s. Burns continued this process of redefinition with his next novel, *Dreamerika!*, but following disappointing reviews and sales, as well as a dissatisfaction with the capacity of such avant-garde material to convey the political message that Burns wanted to convey in a way which was comprehensible to his readers, led to a complete change in his style. Hence, next published novel, *The Angry Brigade*, was far more straightforward both structurally and even in terms of expressiveness at the level of a sentence. While I will touch on those later works, as well as Burns’ first novel, the relatively conventional bildungsroman, *Buster*, they are analysed more comprehensively in other chapters.

Europe After the Rain, published in 1965, was Burns’ most critically successful novel. With its release, Burns came to be regarded as a writer to be taken seriously; John Calder, for example, writes that “[...] it was the nearest we came to finding a Kafka-like writer.”¹⁰ It seems to me that the success of the book can be attributed to several factors related to the novel’s use of modernist devices, and its relation to the classical avant-garde.

Europe After the Rain’s central conceit is that the violence and chaos of wartime cannot be definitively distinguished from that of peacetime, and that it is rather a matter of scale. War is merely an exaggerated and more explicit version of the violence and control that underpin everyday life in peacetime under capitalism. I analyse the particular kinds of violence that the novel presents, and the way in which Burns connects it to a network of control and power in the previous two chapters. What is of particular interest in this chapter is the way in which Burns presents that violence, the sources he draws upon and the literary techniques that he employs. My argument here will be that Burns uses strategies which are familiar from artistic and literary modernism, as well as from the classical avant-garde to create a text which presents a particular kind of alienation and

¹⁰ Calder, *Pursuit*, p.273

affectlessness for its characters, which, despite the representations of violence and degradation, does not move beyond a modernist conception of character and violence, as I will argue below.

Throughout the novel, Burns avoids naming his characters, instead giving them generic titles that indicate their position in the devastated society he presents. The function of this namelessness is to empty-out those characters' relation to class and to history. The reader cannot connect them to a nation, a race, and they become mere screens onto which an anonymous violence is projected. The effect is to lend these characters some universality, allows them to come to represent something broader than just themselves. Burns emphasises this with his flat, matter of fact descriptions of characters, which almost always eschew any physical detail. This is particularly notable in the descriptions of the girl, the main antagonist of the novel. Almost no detail of her physical appearance is given, but passages like the following occur frequently:

For years she had lived an abnormal life. She had been intensively trained. This had lowered her capacity to concentrate. She had formed habits of thought. Here was a powerful and unknown force. Her structure had been completely destroyed in blood and burning. The structure of this girl was a new and unknown factor in history. It would be known only in the future.¹¹

This quotation offers an index of violence and control which have been exerted and which have definitively altered the girl's character. The key aspect of the description is Burns' move from, and elision between, the particular and the general, from the specific and the physical to the structural and historical. It is not that the particular violence done to this particular girl means that she will perform actions of historical significance, but rather that she is an example (an anonymous, non-specific example, a cipher) that displays the structural effects of violence. This presentation of an anonymous figure who is an index of systemic violence is a familiar strategy of modernism, and Burns' anonymous figures moving through desolate landscapes recall modernist touchstones such as Francis Bacon's 1945 work, 'Figure in a Landscape'.

Later in the novel, Burns extends this sense of a figure embedded within a network which comprises not only human relations, but also objects, the landscape and other networks of violence and power. On the run from her despotic father, the narrator and the girl hide out in the mountains, and Burns' anonymous characters seem to meld with their environment, increasing the sense of

¹¹ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.12-13

them as mere objects, components in a system with no more privilege or autonomy than the rocks that surround them.

Her head lay in a small clear area where the sand was a dark colour and the stones made a straight edge, hard and sharp. With flint I entirely removed the roughness where the grains projected. We were not alone in bed. Built around us in successive layers were old patterns, fixed in design, immovable without breaking the body.¹²

This passage is characteristic of the way in which Burns uses language in the novel. *Europe After the Rain* continually elides the individual and the general. The narrator here enacts that process, sanding away the rough grain of the stone. It is tempting to read this passage as an encapsulation of the position of the avant-garde artist, embedded, almost entombed (the same section of the novel describes the pair as “enclosed”¹³ within the rock) by a tradition that can be subject to gestures of opposition, and reshaped in minor ways, but such resistance serves only to highlight the hardness of the tradition and further embed the artist within it. This view of the avant-garde is congruent with Bourdieu’s assertions that resistance against tradition perversely serves only to solidify it.

It is this sense of hardness and enclosure which Burns cannot escape in this novel. Its enmeshment in a genealogy of modernist alienation and fragmentation, which are incorporated into the narrative, may account for its success, however modest (being the only novel of Burns’ for which the film rights were sold, though no film version was ever made), but it’s also Burns’ least successful attempt to surpass that tradition and to create a truly contemporary work.

The novel’s presentation of violence, and the way in which this is filtered through the nameless narrator is intriguing in that it demonstrates the ways in which Burns remains beholden to modernist and classical avant-garde traditions in this novel. His narrator in *Europe After the Rain* can move freely through the environment of the novel; he is an outsider, and though his official function is never made explicit, he is able to confer with both factions of the conflict, and is occasionally complicit in the novel’s violence, without much consequence. *Europe After the Rain*’s mode of narration emphasises the fragmentation of experience, while also positing the work as a kind of official record, or at least an account of the narrator’s experiences while performing an official function related to the conflict. In doing so Burns’ emphasises the unreliability of narration itself

¹² Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.103

¹³ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.104

(but also, by making the narrators nameless Burns lends him a certain universality, and his outsider status gives him a sense of apparent impartiality), which implies unease with the idea of an objective truth, or even of the possibility of a ‘true’ account of events. These techniques embody what Viktor Shklovsky would call ‘defamiliarisation’, the sense that the completeness and density of experience cannot be accurately conveyed, and so any narrative should be treated with some suspicion and scepticism. Or, as Shklovsky puts it himself:

An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it, its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object - it creates a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it... ¹⁴

The slipperiness of narrative itself is a theme which Burns will return to with more gusto in subsequent works, but in *Europe After the Rain* it manifests itself in a particular narrative technique which in its tone is affectless, blank, matter of fact, but that tone conceals a perpetual lurking violence. The violence in the novel is frequent and often brutal, but is always presented as if viewed from a distance. Burns uses this technique to evoke the Holocaust in the presentation of the routine of death in the concentration camps which the narrator encounters. I will quote here at length to show the way in which Burns presents not only the normalisation of extreme systematic violence, but also the place of that violence within a network of other social and political relations. The aim being to destabilise the idea that such violence can be regarded as an aberration, distinct and separate from the violence of everyday life.

We were in normal surroundings. We walked along grated steel floors to the dining hall. The commander had tickets which gave the number of our table. Small tables were set along three walls leaving the centre clear for dancing. At the far end a jazz band played. The driver sat alone at the next table. There were few women, the place was full of thick-necked business men. ‘They made their money,’ the commander explained, ‘and they like to spend it. They don’t have to tell me where they got their money from.’ It was incongruous in that room, where each piece of furniture spoke of former owners. We talked of difficulties, lack of this, lack of that. Food was scarce, food was a constant theme. He would not say much about his work. ‘Large packages, they send us the dead, discs, portraits, paper soaked in blood. We are

¹⁴ Viktor Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’ (http://web.fmk.edu.rs/files/blogs/2010-11/MI/Misliti_film/Viktor_Sklovski_Art_as_Technique.pdf) accessed 4/3/15

obliged to sort them, handling each object with care, repacking and redirecting, sealed boxes in thousands.'

I asked him which room had been used for the children. He said: 'This room.' He described the six hundred children packed into the darkened room, the marks of their fingers could be seen on the walls. 'They must have known what was to happen.' 'We told them it was to be a concert, we provided music, from a violin and a piano, until a woman stepped in front of the curtain and called for silence.'¹⁵

The event depicted here is attended by businessmen whose means of accumulating wealth does not concern the commander. The use of music in this scene, the jazz band playing for the businessmen and the sinister concert that is given for the children, emphasises the connection of those attending the event to the slaughter of the children. By placing them at the scene of the slaughter of six hundred children, Burns emphasises the way in which the accumulation of capital is imbricated with large-scale violence. The slaughter is discussed as if rationally, the processes explicated by the commander without remorse or sentimentality, without seeking to justify or give explanatory reasons. Burns also emphasises the bureaucracy that accompanies this violence, the obligation to carefully sort through the effects of the dead. The slipperiness of the language the commander uses elides between the dead and the objects they leave behind, the "sealed boxes" recalling coffins, and the objects themselves arrive soaked in blood, traces of their former owners.

Burns also, though, makes it clear that the narrator is neither surprised nor moved by these reports of mass executions. He does not challenge the commander or seek further information from him, but instead he changes the subject. His response to violence is always somewhat distant. Clearly, he may be desensitised to it after repeated exposure, or his response may be more pragmatic, a kind of realpolitik, practised to ensure his own oblique goals are kept in sight. As he says to the commander, "'I don't wish to cause any trouble. I want to things to go on as they are, I want to keep the wheels turning.'"¹⁶

In the extended quotation above, Burns employs techniques and themes familiar from modernist works: the anonymous narrator surrounded by anonymous characters and a distanced, routinized depiction of violence, a violence which has become commonplace. This is not to say that the

¹⁵ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.62

¹⁶ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.63

slaughter of children mentioned in the novel, or the realities of the concentration camps which it alludes to are not exceptional, but rather - as Burns shows in the lack of concern about how money is made on the part of the commander, alongside his matter of fact indifference to the deaths he is responsible for - that they suggest an unwillingness or lack of ability to reflect upon the consequences of the processes one is part of. Such unwillingness is a component of successful wealth creation under capitalism, and is also the type of thinking which leads to these types of atrocities, Burns suggests. Burns shows this through the use of methods of defamiliarisation, anonymity and fragmentation which recall his modernist forebears. Ironically, in the wake of the modernist tradition and the collective trauma of the Holocaust, this defamiliarisation can feel somewhat familiar. Where Burns does extend these techniques is in the novel's construction and in the sources that he draws from (though these would not be immediately clear to the reader), and it is in this construction that Burns more closely aligns himself to the classical avant-garde, and to the processes that he will develop in subsequent works.

Burns mentions that even his earliest works begin with an image or images, something external to him that he then builds around, constructing the narrative from these sources. For *Buster* it was a photograph of a young couple onto which Burns projected the image of his parents¹⁷. As a starting point, this is concise, personal, even sentimental, reflecting the autobiographical content of that novel. *Europe After the Rain* draws on a wider and more disparate set of sources, namely the transcript of the Nuremberg Trials, and a book about post-war Poland, both of which Burns found by chance¹⁸.

Here I pause briefly to note Burns' use of the Nuremberg Trials transcript reflects his continuing interest in the law and the incorporation of the legal profession into his fiction, as well as his interest in transcribed speech, which will come to greater prominence with the publication of *The Angry Brigade* and subsequent works. Compared to Burns' wide ranging and indiscriminate accumulation of material for his later projects, particularly *Babel*, the source material for *Europe After the Rain* is focussed and narrow, though it is used in much the same way as in later works, i.e. as an accumulation of fragments that Burns draws from to form his text. Both the book about post-war Poland and the Nuremberg Trials transcripts are used by Burns to form a collage text in which the sources exist as traces. Despite his antipathy towards the revival of avant-garde techniques in

¹⁷ See Burns, 'Essay' in *Beyond the Words*

¹⁸ See chapter two, p.97 for the quotation in which Burns' discusses this

the 1960s, Peter Bürger's analysis of the function of the collage as a major constituent part of the avant-garde is instructive here.

Burns' choice of materials recalls Bürger's comments concerning the role of chance in the production of avant-garde artworks. "Objective chance," he writes, speaking of the chance encounter depicted at the beginning of Andre Breton's *Nadja*, "rests on the selection of congruent semantic elements [...] in unrelated events."¹⁹ His use of the word 'selection' is significant here, because, for Bürger, the specific role of chance in the avant-garde, as exemplified by the Surrealists, is not to reveal something free from bias or ideology, but the construction of meaning through "painstaking calculation"²⁰ of scenarios, events or sources. This could be applied to Burns' selection of source material for *Europe After the Rain*, no matter how much the discovery of the books was apparently unplanned, and regardless of how random and scattershot his use of them is in the construction of the novel, Burns' practice exemplifies what Bürger describes as "the attempt to gain control of the extraordinary."²¹ That is, any reading of production through chance must take into account the methods employed to produce that apparently chance scenario, an important factor one ought to consider regarding Burns' literary technique, particularly as it grows more fragmentary in his novels of the late 1960s.

Burns' choice of the Nuremberg Trials transcript, as well as showing his abiding interest in the functioning of the legal system, is also a document of great historical significance and authority. Burns' use of it is provocative. By dismantling the text, cutting it up and attributing fragments of it to his anonymous characters, Burns profanes the text, and re-immerses the finality and closure of its legal discourse into the murky and uncertain networks of power and violence presented by the novel, a novel which seeks, I think, rather than to attribute blame to individuals, instead seeks to widen the scope of attribution to something more structural or cultural. For Bürger, this desire to present fragments is central to the practise of the avant-garde, a desire which presupposes the absence of a totality, or "organic whole."²² *Europe After the Rain's* fragmentation of the trial transcript contributes to the lack of centre in the novel. Bürger draws on Walter Benjamin to elucidate the role of the fragment and the way in which the assembling of various fragments in a work creates meaning which, "does not derive from the original contents of the fragments"²³ but is instead mutable and unstable, lacking the coherence and inviting a variety of perceptions and

¹⁹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.65

²⁰ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.65

²¹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.66

²² Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.70

²³ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.69

interpretations. In Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which is the source of Bürger's discussion of fragmentation and allegory, Benjamin writes:

Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealised and the transfigured force of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *fascies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape.²⁴

Thus, for Benjamin the use of allegory is essentially melancholic, emblematic of, as Bürger writes, "history as decline."²⁵ The petrified landscape, meaningless history presented in fragments describes well the environment of *Europe After the Rain*:

We drove through the sunset over miles of new roads towards a chain of hills in red stone, through stone quarries which provided the stone for the great stadium, the modern hospital, for constructing the aerodrome. Ruins, alternately red and grey, were splashed with red, the red grew from inside the ruins. Without moving, the earth shaped, the red persisted as we drove, at dusk a crowd of domed red blown away into water, red arches opened straight onto water on either side.²⁶

Burns envisions a history with violence splattered across it. Burns' repetition of the word 'red' evokes a conflict that the ruins make explicit, its aftermath viewed as if by a passenger, moving through without any particular emphasis, shock or moral sense articulated, in awe of a phenomenology of destruction. The red connotes blood and violence, but Burns' repetition of it also continues his process of rendering individual people and objects indistinguishable from each other. In the landscape that the narrator drives through, objects seem to blur into one another, and Burns underscores this by showing the way in which elements of the landscape are transformed into buildings; buildings which are then damaged or destroyed. In this way, the landscape of the novel reflects the idea that the war is only an exaggeration of everyday peacetime: it only accelerates cycles of accumulation and destruction.

I will now consider some of the other structural components of *Europe After the Rain* in the light of more contemporary theories of the avant-garde, particularly drawn from the visual arts. In her

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, (London: Verso, 2003), p.166

²⁵ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.69

²⁶ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.57

essay, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, Rosalind Krauss suggests that the grid is one of the defining figures of the avant-garde, a figure which is non-representational (except in the sense that it represents the canvas it is painted on), self-referential, unoriginal, and resistant to the encroachment of language:

The grid promotes this silence, expressing it moreover as a refusal of speech. The absolute stasis of the grid, its lack of hierarchy, of center, of inflection, emphasizes not only its anti-referential character, but – more importantly – its hostility to narrative. This structure, impervious both to time and to incident, will not permit the projection of language into the domain of the visual, and the result is silence.²⁷

The grid is also, she goes on to say, infinite; it “*can only be repeated.*”²⁸ Each iteration is bound only by the limits of its canvas. For Krauss, the grid is a figure which is continually rediscovered by new generations of avant-garde artists who find in it “the newly evacuated space of an aesthetic purity and freedom,”²⁹ “emblematic of the sheer disinterestedness of the work of art,”³⁰ but, once they succumb to the grid’s structuring of their work, they are ensnared by it; the grid becomes a prison, which only permits further repetitions of the grid.

For Krauss (and, in her view, the artists she discusses who use grids in their work), the grid is only ever a surface. By arguing both that the grid refuses both speech and narrative, and that the grid merely “*follows the canvas surface, doubles it,*”³¹ Krauss does not seem to allow for the specific local meanings that the grid might have. That is, she does not historicise the grid.

Just as the grid is a structuring device in avant-garde visual art, so the cut-up is a key technique for avant-garde writers. The cut-up, which conceives of texts as grids, able to be reconfigured, or to move beyond themselves to be combined with other texts is a technique which, as Gerard-Georges Lemaire argues,

[...] is therefore the negation of the omnipresent and all powerful author – the geometrist who clings to his inspiration as coming from divine inspiration, a mission, or the dictates of

²⁷ Rosalind Krauss, ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition’ in *October* Vol. 18 (Autumn, 1981), p.54

²⁸ Krauss, ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde’, p.56

²⁹ Krauss, ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde’, p.54

³⁰ Krauss, ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde’, p.54

³¹ Krauss, ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde’, p.57

language. It is the negation of the frontier that separates fiction from its theory. It is, finally, the negation of the book as such – or at least the representation of that negation.³²

Krauss' grid painters and Lemaire's writers desire the same thing: a rejection of the privilege of the figure of the artist; artists that, nonetheless, even as they employ readymade sources (the grid, or the cut-up, 'gridded' text), wish to claim originality for their work. For William Burroughs, though, the cut-up does not only negate the book, or the separation between fiction and theory, but also, "establish[es] new connections between images, and one's range of vision consequently expands."³³ For Burroughs, language behaves as a virus which structures human subjectivity, and the cut up provides a way to subvert that structuring. The rearrangement of a text, or several texts, allows new subjectivities and mutations to form, as well as revealing new meanings hidden within the originals. Cutting-up is concerned with the generation of meaning and narrative. Where Burroughs' cut-ups are multi-vocal and heterogeneous, capable of being deformed and reconstituted, Krauss' grids are silent.

This the notion of the mesh, or the grid, could be connected to Manuel DeLanda's 'flat ontology', and with Bruno Latour's idea of the network. In all of these ontologies, grids, or grid-like schemas overlay and come to represent or describe the interactions of objects. They are all woven out of the grid and though each of their schemas is malleable, just as Paul Klee's painted grids are warped, irregular, interrupted by the presence of figures, or structures, they all require the certain rigidity of the grid's structure, its boundlessness and its ability to double the surface it overlays.

Just as the gridded text can be cut-up and rearranged to form a new kind of text, it is my contention that these ontologies, these meshes and networks can themselves be cut-up, and that this is precisely what is encountered in Alan Burns' *Europe After the Rain*.

Europe After the Rain is a novel which is deeply concerned with the idea of the network, with the relation not only between humans, but between all objects, living and non-living. Set during an interminable war, the novel does not concern itself with the politics of the conflict. The reader is not told about movements of armies, casualties, troop numbers, instead the focus is on the everyday, obtaining food and shelter, moving from place to place, boredom and low-level violence. This is the first way in which Burns 'cuts-up' the idea of the network. He seems to suggest that the way that the wartime situation intensifies these everyday activities allows it to better show the relations that constitute them. For the Burns of *Europe After the Rain*, a decrepit institution, operated by the

³² Gerard-Georges Lemaire, '23 Stitches Taken', in William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), p.12

³³ William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), p.5

coerced, frightened or wounded, exemplifies the way bureaucracy functions more effectively than a fully functioning institution in a peacetime state.

The narrator visits a prison, or concentration camp, “In five rooms I counted maybe thirty women and children, with perhaps two or three men. [...] They squatted silently, keeping back from the heavy doors, only the children crept closer, peering curiously at us. I spoke to one of the women crouched at the other end of the room. She shouted back in a harsh unpleasant voice: ‘They took them. They sent them back.’ ‘What do you mean?’ ‘My husband and my two children.’ ‘Where are they now?’ ‘They sent them back.’ She would not come nearer.”³⁴ Forced together with others, this woman still withdraws from the narrator, and from those she’s with. Her reaction to the violence and hopelessness of her situation is to remain apart from her fellow prisoners; the narrator’s reaction to the violence he observes is also withdrawal, “It was not that I was indifferent, I was not, but I was calm, I had no part of her trembling, there seemed no place for me. I felt that I did not care for the means by which this woman’s mind had been broken, but I was relieved when I was no longer with her. This was deplorable, but the fact remained.”³⁵

By positioning his narrator in the way that he does, a foreigner belonging to neither side of the conflict, Burns is able to place the reader in a very particular relation to the violence he depicts in the novel. Despite the narrator’s nonpartisan stance, he does not react strongly to the violence he sees, instead he relays the moments of torture and death in the same rote way as he lists the items of food he consumes, “We had coffee. A baker’s assistant carried on his head two large wooden trays loaded with cakes, pastries, loaves. Hot milk poured steaming into glasses. She ate four excellent cakes, reaching for another cake she almost upset her coffee over me.”³⁶ Here one could make a point about the characters in the novel becoming desensitized to the violence that pervades their situation, and there is a sense of that, they are unsurprised by a violence which is a constant factor in their lives and which can, at any unexpected point, erupt into prominence and thoroughly change their circumstances. But what I think Burns also wants us to see is that, despite the damage done by the war to state institutional frameworks, the violence enacted in the novel is still very much an organized, bureaucratized, state violence. And so what the novel wants to do, in depicting a wartime situation, is, in fact, display the violence that is at the heart of the organisation of our everyday lives – a violence which has the power to displace, to wound, to curtail freedom and to break apart families. Despite his privileged status as an outsider and observer, the narrator cannot escape this violence, cannot even escape some complicity in it: “Then there had been a horrible incident. They

³⁴ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.59

³⁵ Burns, *Europe After the Rain* p.27

³⁶ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.19

had held up a car and robbed the passengers, the driver had been taken out and shot. And I had discovered the fun in such business.”³⁷

Charles Sugnet discusses Burns’ fictional methodology with him in their interview in *The Imagination on Trial*. Sugnet asks Burns: “When you talk of organizing your work you mention photographs, table tops – what you’re describing is spatial rather than temporal. It doesn’t consist of putting material in time sequence, the way some novelists might do. You’re talking of the kind of inspiration that comes by juxtaposing things in space?”³⁸ Sugnet’s characterisation of Burns as a novelist who arranges material in space rather than in time seems apposite when considering *Europe After the Rain*, given the novel’s arrangement and re-arrangement of grids, networks, maps, frontiers and scenes of violence to form a system which, in the space of the novel, is resistant to the conventional movement of narrative. Part of this resistance stems from Burns’ use of the cut-up, a device which he employs, as Burroughs does, as a means of dismantling language’s power.

Burroughs conceives of language as a virus, a parasite whose principal function is merely to reproduce itself. He writes, “My basis theory is that the written word was literally a virus that made spoken word possible. The word has not been recognized as a virus because it has achieved a state of stable symbiosis with the host.”³⁹ Steven Shaviro links Burroughs’ notion of the language virus to Michel Serres’ work on the parasite, which “traces endless chains of appropriation and transfer, subtending all forms of communication.”⁴⁰ Serres writes:

Man is a louse for other men. Thus man is a host for other men. The flow goes one way, never the other. I call this semiconduction. This valve, this single arrow, this relation without a reversal of direction, “parasitic.”⁴¹

Burns positions the narrator of *Europe After the Rain* in such a parasitical position. In his interview with David Madden he says:

The narrator’s uncertain role and status is vital in maintaining the novel’s precariousness and ambiguity. Give him a job, and the novel becomes more reportage—everything would have been watertight, rational, the reader would demand it. But I have made a contract with

³⁷ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.28

³⁸ Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet, *The Imagination on Trial*, (London and New York: Allison and Busby Limited, 1981), p.163

³⁹ William Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution* (Web: Ubu Classics, 2005), p.5

⁴⁰ Steven Shaviro, 'Two Lessons from Burroughs' in *Posthuman Bodies*, ed. Judith Halberstam, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), p.44

⁴¹ Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p.5

the reader that allows me the freedom to slip in and out of the rational. That has to be established from the start and iterated and reiterated (implicitly, by conduct) consistently throughout.⁴²

By emphasizing the ambiguity of the narrator's position, Burns also implicitly emphasizes his parasitical nature. A foreigner, with no defined role, yet with privileged access to the command of both sides of the conflict, as well as freedom of movement with assistance from the army, he is parasitical of the conflict itself; much of his authority stems from the wartime situation.

For Serres, the interrupted meal exemplifies the parasitical relation, "To parasite means to eat next to."⁴³ And the interruption of the meal is the parasite being parasited; for Serres this brings into focus the relations within a network. Burns gives us two scenes in which such a relation is observable, the first with the girl's father, in which the narrator drinks the father's wine and tries to obtain information about him and his daughter. The father explains how he makes his living:

'You still work?' 'I am a worker.' 'But what exactly does that mean?' He looked slightly embarrassed. 'I obtain meat, and the town buys it. More or less.' [...] 'Where did you get the meat from?' 'The countryside. It came by lorry.'⁴⁴

Already the father is positioned parasitically; his status as a military leader, although in hiding at this point in the book, gives him a point of entry into the economy of the town. He does not produce the meat, but he profits from it. The narrator drinks with the father, asks him questions, seeks information in the name of helping the girl. He can move freely, but the father cannot. "The commander's armoured car drove slowly past."⁴⁵ The house they are in is being watched. Burns sets up an assemblage largely constituted by parasitical relations: the meat, the lorries that carry it, the wine, the house, the armoured car, the town, the photographs of the girl that the father carries, the information that the father has but doesn't want to tell: "'I shall tell you everything, the bad as well as the good. What do you want to know?' I knew this game, I had played it with both sides, the more open-handed the host appeared, the more he had to hide."⁴⁶ At this point, the narrator is at the apex of the parasitical system, but this is immediately interrupted as he is ushered out of the room, past "a long low room containing tables, we walked down the narrow corridor between the tables, past a notice for 'Silence', readers intent on newspapers, forty readers to a table,"⁴⁷ through to

⁴² Madden, 'A Conversation with Alan Burns', p.125

⁴³ Serres, *The Parasite*, p.7

⁴⁴ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.31

⁴⁵ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.31

⁴⁶ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.31

⁴⁷ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.31

another room where the father's son is delivering a lecture. The meal has been interrupted, the narrator has himself been parasited, and the assemblage has been, as DeLanda would put it, deterritorialized, a process which "destabilizes the identity of the assemblage."⁴⁸

DeLanda's 'flat' ontology comprises an organising of objects in a specific way, as Graham Harman explains:

DeLanda organizes the world along two separate axes [...]. The first axis is the difference between the material and the expressive, while the second is the familiar pair of territorialisation and deterritorialisation. The crossing of two separate axes always yields a fourfold structure.⁴⁹

This fourfold structure is itself a grid through which relations can be characterised, but for DeLanda, unlike Krauss, the lines, or axes, of the grid represent specific attributes of the assemblages that they map.

The schoolroom which the narrator is bundled into, and the lecture he hears the son deliver, and the room full of people reading newspapers reveal the true complexity of the system the narrator has entered into. Despite being in hiding, and seemingly under observation by the enemy, the father has managed to construct a complex network of tools which underscore his power; he is not just the man who spills wine on the narrator's shoes and then stoops to mop it up, or the man who is unable to see the lack of resemblance in the pictures of his daughter that he brings out, but also, under the guise of one importing and selling meat, has created an assemblage which will, later in the novel, propel him to military power, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, "[...] each block-segment [is] a concretization of power, of desire, or territoriality or reterritorialisation, regulated by the abstraction of a transcendental law."⁵⁰

The lecture the son delivers illustrates this abstraction, "No doubt it was a lesson in arithmetic but to a casual observer it seemed to consist mostly of history."⁵¹ Military history infects what is being taught. It continues:

"In the occupied areas the population slowly but steadily decreases while in the liberated territories it as inevitably expands.' He pointed to a map, a large space containing gold, enclosed by forts,

⁴⁸ Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*, (New York: Continuum, 2007), p.19

⁴⁹ Graham Harman, 'DeLanda's Ontology: Assemblage and Realism' (<http://dar.aucegypt.edu/bitstream/handle/10526/3534/DeLanda%27s%20ontology.pdf?sequence=1>), accessed 7/6/13, p.370

⁵⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, Trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1986), p.86

⁵¹ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.32

squares of black.”⁵² The narration returns to the map, here a grid that depicts the distribution of power, demarcating the two sides of the conflict. The map and the lecture, the conflating of history and mathematics are instantiations of the territorialisation of the father’s power; “[...] variable processes in which these components become involved [...] that [...] stabilize the identity of an assemblage, by increasing its degree of internal homogeneity or the degree of sharpness of its boundaries.”⁵³

But, as Deleuze and Guattari state: “[...] we must declare as well that an assemblage has points of deterritorialisation; or that it always has a line of escape by which it escapes itself and makes its enunciations or its expressions take flight and disarticulate [...]”⁵⁴ One such line of escape which Burns employs is the cut-up, which allows him to distance himself from the material he presents, as he writes in his ‘Essay’: “Painters often screw up their eyes when looking at a landscape so that in the blur they catch the essence.”⁵⁵ Burns’ technique is a method of dealing with the relation between his material and his own experiences during the Second World War; later in the novel the son will die an ignominious death, and the father’s growing power and violence unites the narrator and the girl against him. “My parents were separated by my mother’s early death. My elder brother and I were separated by his early death. The consuming nature of this experience showed itself not only in the disconnected form, but also in the content of my work. *Europe After the Rain* is concerned with brutality and physical extremity but not with pain. Much physical damage is done, but there is little emotional or psychological response to it. The characters seem numb.”⁵⁶

In addition, the cut-up provides an entry point into thinking about the parasitical relations that Burns presents. The cut-up itself is parasitical in its dependence on other texts, and each iteration of the cut-up constitutes a parasitical chain. By placing his narrator in a parasitical relation to the environment he moves through, Burns is foregrounding his technique. Steven Shaviro quotes Burroughs, who writes, “Which came first, the intestine or the tapeworm?”⁵⁷, adding himself that, “Burroughs suggests that parasitism--corruption, plagiarism, surplus appropriation--is in fact conterminous with life itself.”⁵⁸ Here, Shaviro, using the terminology of surplus appropriation, which he takes from Marx, emphasizes the economic aspect of the parasitical relation, linking the behaviour of capital to language’s viral aspect: “Yet language, like a virus or like capital, is in itself

⁵² Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.33

⁵³ DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Science*, p.12

⁵⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, p.86

⁵⁵ Burns, *Essay*, p.65

⁵⁶ Burns, *Essay*, p.65

⁵⁷ Shaviro, 'Two Lessons from Burroughs', p.43

⁵⁸ Shaviro, 'Two Lessons from Burroughs', p.43

entirely vacuous: its supposed content is only a contingent means (the host cell or the particular commodity form) that it parasitically appropriates for the end of self-valorisation and self-proliferation. Apart from the medium, there's no other message.”⁵⁹ There are two things here, both of which the reader can observe in *Europe After the Rain*, firstly the emptiness of language, its desire only to be replicated, which we can see in the various circular conversations in the novel, conversations which are about passing the time rather than conveying meaning, or content, conversations which display the desire to use language, even when there's nothing to say: “She remained in the wagon. She called out: ‘I want some hot tea. Can I have some tea?’ ‘No.’ ‘Please speak. I like to hear it.’ ‘Tea?’ ‘Do you understand?’ ‘I’ll get you some tea.’ ‘Don’t leave me.’”⁶⁰ And secondly, Shaviro sees capital behaving in the same viral way, infecting relations within a network or assemblage, something which Burns shows in the way the novel presents work and the systems of exchange that the wartime situation necessitates: “She bought two and a half pounds of sweets. Everyone did a little buying and selling. Loot. Though there was very little left. There were other ways. Casual labour received high wages. She did private work in the evenings. Quality work.”⁶¹ In both these areas, the viral nature of capital and of language is revealed, and Burns uses the wartime situation, which inevitably intensifies them, but also wants to show that these are also the relations that constitute any late capitalist society. The fact that the crisis of wartime merely intensifies these relations, by which I mean that with the breakdown of peacetime institutions and normal power relations during wars, these relations are spontaneously reproduced in ad-hoc networks which can only act as crude simulacra of those peacetime bureaucracies. For Burns, war is not markedly different from peace; power and violence still function in the same way. Burns shows us this in the various statements made in the novel about the war ending; we are told several times that the war has ended, but these declarations⁶² are just more empty reproductions of language, they change nothing. The war cannot simply be switched off. Burns’ shows that, in almost all aspects, the war resembles peace.

To return to Burroughs’ formulation, “Which came first, the intestine or the tapeworm?”⁶³, it is possible to rephrase it as, which came first, the host or the parasite? For Michel Serres, “We parasite each other and live amidst parasites. Which is more or less a way of saying that they constitute our environment.”⁶⁴ It is not that the network, the intestine or the host provide the space in which the parasite can grow, but rather that these structures form around parasites and are

⁵⁹ Shaviro, 'Two Lessons from Burroughs', p.44

⁶⁰ Burns *Europe After the Rain*, p.18

⁶¹ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.9

⁶² See, for example, Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.40, as quoted in the previous chapter

⁶³ Shaviro, 'Two Lessons from Burroughs', p.43

⁶⁴ Serres, *The Parasite*, p.9

constituted by them. By placing his narrator in a parasitical position, and, though his role is left deliberately vague, as an observer, a recorder of some kind, someone who is free to leave and can move freely, who has privileged access to both sides of the conflict, and by having this person be the point of access into the novel for the reader, Burns displays the way in which the parasite constitutes its environment; the narrator constructs the world of the novel through his narration, and the reader is unavoidably placed in that parasitical relation.

But what Burns also does with his narration, through the medium of the cut-up, a technique which itself is parasitical upon other texts, is an attempt to dismantle, or deterritorialise, the parasitical chains and networks of power that constitute the assemblages that make up the novel. Burns' text, the sentences he has written and their source material, function as entry points into the novel's critique of those networks of power. Despite the 'numbness' that Burns alludes to, the blank way in which the characters react to the brutality they experience, the cut-up allows Burns to catalogue that brutality. And in the absence of an emotional or psychological response from the characters, the acts of violence become co-ordinates in that catalogue, they are depersonalised (consider also the way in which none of the characters in the novel are named), and in this way Burns' analysis becomes political; it becomes a critique of state power and violence.

She fell downwards and inwards, it occurred several times, her body was dragged back, the nature of the pain was not understood, the pain in the stretched membrane remained, portions of the membrane stretched in fine threads, detached by a blow, the blood lay red and fresh then black, a fly moved slowly across and came to rest, glittering spots, small particles of white, appeared in the blood and danced about with slightest tremor of skin, lasted for several minutes and disappeared, leaving the surface wet.⁶⁵

In this passage the girl's body becomes an index of the violence done to it by the commander, and by focussing closely on the broken skin, the bodily fluids, on the detail, Burns depersonalises the violence. The girl's body becomes a map upon which we can trace a larger violence of which this instance is just one iteration. The passage is one long sentence of multiple clauses separated by commas. By using syntax in this manner, Burns emphasises the relentlessness of this violence, but he also creates deliberate ambiguity, which further contributes to the sense of depersonalisation. It is not clear, in the latter part of the passage whether it is the fly creates the "particles of white" that appear and dance around, if this is an effect of the light, of movement, or some combination of those. The focus in this passage, then, is typical of Burns, using a minute focus on the violence that has occurred, but a focus which does not take in the entirety of the wounded body, nor the

⁶⁵ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.70

environment in which it exists, but moves much closer, into the materiality of the wound itself, so that it is rendered to near abstraction, patterns of light and movement. But that micro-focus has a fractal-like quality, wherein the proximity of the viewpoint perversely allows the reader to see a much broader, depersonalised sense of the violence.

Burns' approach to brutality, his close-in focus, and his use of the cut-up are a means of creating a network, one which contains the violence found in the Nuremberg transcripts, the Max Ernst painting which gives the novel its name, and in the book on post-war Poland; a network which, in fact, takes this violence and renders it structurally, depersonalising it, in favour of an abstract political violence. This is not to suggest that the reader needs to be aware of the source material to be able to understand the implications of Burns' technique, but rather that the cut-up text itself (regardless of its source), the language which Burns uses amalgamates, or assembles, a network of violence which cannot be reduced to individual instances. DeLanda writes, "It may be argued [...] that a whole may be analysable into separate parts and at the same time have irreducible properties, properties that emerge from the *interactions* between parts."⁶⁶ Here, DeLanda is writing against Hegel and his followers, who would argue against his assemblage theory, in favour of, "[...] a seamless whole in which agency and structure mutually constitute one and other dialectically."⁶⁷

Michel Serres also, though in a more general context, argues against the dialectical method. Speaking about his notion of time, he says, "This [i.e. narratives of linear time, progress leading to improvement] isn't time, but a simple competition – once again, war. Why replace temporality, duration, with a quarrel? *The first to arrive, the winner of the battle, obtains as his prize the right to reinvent history to his own advantage.* Once again dialectics – which is nothing more than the logic of appearances."⁶⁸ Serres argues that dialectics reflects the type of competition in human society which leads to war; as theory it privileges the successful, or the new. Serres' approach, which moves rapidly through historical periods without seeking what he would see as an artificial synthesis. He continues, "This error is the source of all the absurdities recounted since then, on war, "the mother of history." No, war is mother only to death, first of all, and then perpetually to war. It gives birth only to nothingness and, identically, to itself."⁶⁹ *Europe After the Rain*, with its structure of perpetually recurring war, characters who contradict each other about whether the war has ended or not, as well as the repeated cycles of violence, reflect Serres' view. But more than that, Burns' focus on assemblages, structures which are not, as DeLanda argues, reducible to a dialectical view,

⁶⁶ DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*, p.10

⁶⁷ DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*, p.10

⁶⁸ Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, Trans. Roxanne Lapidus, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p.49

⁶⁹ Serres and Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, p.50

seems to imply a belief that war is infinitely reproducible, it behaves, as language does, as capital does, virally.

Rosalind Krauss argues that, “[...] the modernist grid is [...] logically multiple: a system of reproductions without an original.”⁷⁰ And Shaviro writes that, “A virus is a simulacrum: a copy for which there is no original, emptily duplicating itself to infinity.”⁷¹ *Europe After the Rain* is itself an assemblage made up of copies without originals: the grid, which overlays both the territory of the novel and the text which Burns cuts-up; the war virus; the language virus; capital. It’s in the intersection of these areas that Burns’ avant-gardism is located. Hal Foster defines what he calls the neo-avant-garde as, “[...] a loose grouping of North American and Western European artists of the 1950s and 1960s who reprised such avant-garde devices of the 1910s and 1920s as collage and assemblage, the readymade and the grid, monochrome painting and constructed sculpture.”⁷² Foster likens this re-emergence of avant-garde practice to new readings of Freud and Marx by Lacan and Althusser in the same period, “In both returns the stake is the *structure* of the discourse stripped of addition: not so much what Marxism or psychoanalysis means as *how* it means.”⁷³ And this seems an important point to consider when reading *Europe After the Rain*. Burns’ focus on nonhuman actors, bridges, rivers, empty buildings, as well as his nameless, blank characters and austere, staccato sentences are his way of seeking new ways of creating meaning, “She brought her dead to the river where they were torn by fishes, perhaps I had never seen them seven feet away, I saw each move, I watched, during all that eventful time I saw nothing impossible.”⁷⁴ Here Burns, through the accumulation of details, sets up a system – the dead are brought to the river, they are eaten by fish, but the narrative position shifts, contradicts itself. By presenting this macabre scene in this particular way, the narrator simultaneously having not seen, having seen, and having seen nothing impossible, Burns diffracts the narrative plane, allowing the reader multiple entry points into what is being described, with no fixed, stable position from which to view the events. The narrator of *Europe After the Rain* could therefore be described as an unreliable narrator, but Burns seems to want to go further than that, it’s not simply that the narrator is unreliable (or if he is, this is merely a by-product), it’s rather that unreliability, instability, evasiveness, these are the only ways to convey the truth of the situation he wants to depict, because that truth itself is unstable and evasive. The narrative techniques Burns employs, particularly the cut-up, allow for nonsense, non-sequitur, density of information and sparseness of information, all of which allow Burns to build up a

⁷⁰ Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', p.58

⁷¹ Shaviro, 'Two Lessons from Burroughs', p.43

⁷² Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), p.1

⁷³ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.2

⁷⁴ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.87

narrative voice which is unreliable, but unreliable as a structural condition, rather than a character trait.

Hal Foster argues against Peter Bürger, stating that, “[...] *rather than cancel the project of the historical avant-garde, might the neo-avant-garde comprehend it for the first time?* I say “comprehend”, not “complete”: the project of the avant-garde is no more concluded in its neo moment than it is enacted in its historical moment. In art, as in psychoanalysis, creative critique is *interminable* [...]”⁷⁵ For Foster, the avant-garde art of the 1960s performs a structural re-evaluation of the techniques of the historical avant-garde similar to the structural re-readings of Freud and Marx performed by Lacan and Althusser. By titling his book after Max Ernst’s painting, *Europe After the Rain*, Alan Burns makes clear his connection to surrealism. In his essay, *Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia*, Walter Benjamin highlights the surrealist’s preoccupation with slightly out of date technology, “He [Andre Breton] was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded”, in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation of these things to revolution—no one can have a more exact concept of it than these authors. No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution—not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors/enslaved and enslaving objects- can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism.”⁷⁶ At the beginning of *Europe After the Rain*, Burns gives an example of this,

We were approaching the river. The modern bridge had been demolished, a wooden one constructed. [...] Seventy yards away the permanent bridge, massive steel and concrete, was still half completed. Danger threatened the wooden bridge, ice pressed against the log piles supporting it.⁷⁷

Though one is described as modern, none of the three bridges here performs the function for which it is intended. The technology does not meet the requirements of the wartime situation. Later in the novel the wooden bridge will be swept away by the current, and the partially constructed bridge will be, with the narrator’s assistance, blown up. For Benjamin, these objects bring about what he calls ‘revolutionary nihilism’, “They bring the immense forces of “atmosphere” concealed in these things

⁷⁵ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.15

⁷⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, (<http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcsurrealism.htm>) accessed 10/6/13

⁷⁷ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.7

to the point of explosion.”⁷⁸ What Benjamin seems to be saying, is that these objects have agency, they are able to exert influence as part of a network. By paying attention to objects, such as the bridges in the first chapter, Burns reveals the importance of networks in his conceptualisation of wartime. The bridges represent the difficulty of movement in the novel, they render visible the barriers to freedom which are implicit in the military-bureaucratic structures that Burns depicts, but they also are key strategic objects which act as sites of conflict – they are built, they are demolished, swept away, blown up – and in this sense they both act upon and are acted upon by the other actors within the network. As Bruno Latour writes, “An ‘actor’ in the hyphenated expression actor-network is not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it.”⁷⁹

Hal Foster makes three claims for the neo-avant-garde, forming a dialectic, the third point of which is the most important for the consideration of *Europe After the Rain*: “(3) rather than cancel the historical avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde enacts its project for the first time – a first time that, again, is theoretically endless”.⁸⁰ It is possible to read Foster here as suggesting that the avant-garde itself, or at least each iteration of it, is a copy without original, a process of repetition.

If the anonymous narrator and affectless violence of *Europe After the Rain* hearken back to works of modernism and the classical avant-garde, Burns subsequent works, in particular *Babel*, published in 1969 extends these techniques into something singular and contemporary. Comprised of a riotous mix of cut-up fragments, the novel represents a more radical break with tradition, but may also, to echo Bourdieu’s observations, represent a hardening of Burns’ style, rendering it more abstract and fragment

Babel is a true montage text, made up of short, abrupt paragraphs whose narrative style often presents its surrealistic content in the form of straight-faced reportage.

THE SUBURBAN CINEMA CHRIST WAS THERE, spending a week in Britain, preaching at the Albert Hall because Billy Graham was in bed with ‘flu. They were boys together, they fell in love, pointing his finger at Mary, going bang bang, it’s war. The spiritual scum lead others to the Lord while Billy and Mary spent six months in the States. Then he rang up from

⁷⁸ Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’

⁷⁹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.46

⁸⁰ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.20

Birmingham and asked the people to go on a crusade. He decided he needed an organisation in October, professionals to work at it. Billy was looking for businessmen, (his chunky cardigan cost four hundred pounds), his relations were scattered round the country working for the Lord at reduced rate. The Lord told him to marry a young American girl, and he went away on a youth night with Betty Lou and her psychedelic rhythm while his transcendental wife was missing.⁸¹

The way in which this passage, which appears as a discreet unit in *Babel*, among other similarly narrated passages, is typical of the way in which Burns both frustrates the reader with his use of odd syntax and non-sequitur, but also his understanding of the way in which a reader can move through a passage like this, using familiar reference points as handholds. This combination of the familiar and the alienating allows for the particular sense of dislocation that characterises the experience of reading Burns' avant-garde work. In this quotation, individual actions and circumstances (which, on their own are straightforward), accumulate, and through their juxtaposition, Burns creates a series of images whose specific meaning may be obscure, but the affect of which has a direct impact upon the reader. The words in capitals, which Burns uses to begin almost every section in *Babel*, function like headlines, drawing the eye towards them and giving them emphasis. In this particular section, "SUBURBAN CINEMA CHRIST" introduces the paragraph with an image of conservatism and inauthenticity, an ersatz Christ filtered through the lens of cinematic representation (which can be contrasted with the "missing" transcendental wife at the close of the passage). These factors are highlighted, and they set the tenor of the entire paragraph, both in terms of the type of imagery, but also the rhythmic quality of the passage, the short clauses which stack together, and the repeated names, details and actions. This sense of rhythm, alongside the repeated motifs of movement and relocation, compromise the difficulty of comprehending what is going on in this passage. Meaning in Burns' avant-garde work emerges from this precise combination of form and content.

The novel's use of real names represents a departure for Burns, entering the narrative into its contemporary situation and into a specific history in a way that his previous works had been unable to. The evocation of Billy Graham and the hints about his infidelity and religious hypocrisy evince a fascination and repulsion with a media-saturated, celebrity culture. In Burns' novel, the celebrities become fragments, components of a work which functions allegorically in the manner suggested by Walter Benjamin. Montage, Peter Bürger suggests, "presupposes the fragmentation of reality and

⁸¹ Burns, *Babel*, p.16

describes the phase of its constitution of the work.”⁸² The way in which Burns depicts Billy Graham is not to tell in detail the story of his life and to find some coherence in it, some reason for it, but rather to simply present a few details and then move on to the next thing. He is not interested in Billy Graham the person, but rather what Billy Graham can stand for, what he can represent, how he can become a node in a system of representations within the novel. And although Burns in some senses anticipates trends in contemporary writing which focus on the imagined lives of real media figures⁸³, as well as more broadly the role of the celebrity in contemporary culture, Burns’ approach is significantly different in that the real life figures of *Babel* are not objects of fascination to be lingered over, they resemble more the red and grey ruins of *Europe After the Rain*, they are monuments in a petrified landscape. They function as part of what Bürger calls a “paradigmatic nexus.”⁸⁴ Writing about the construction of avant-garde texts, Bürger states that:

New events of the same type could be added, or some of those present could be omitted and neither additions nor omissions would make a difference. A change in order would also be conceivable.⁸⁵

These statements are certainly true of *Babel*. While an underlying structure can be discerned - several consecutive sections will often feature the themes, and occasionally the same characters, and motifs, particularly: the role of the celebrity, the Vietnam war (as well as war and violence more generally), the role of the media, the role of religion and the hypocrisy of religious figures, the exploitation of women and class division - there is no move toward a cohesive whole in the novel, in fact its emphasis is on disorder and fragmentation. Underlying the novel’s construction is its commitment to a wide-ranging and voluminous sense of scale. At the back of the book, Burns lists a cast of more than two hundred characters. This list recalls the various (some possibly apocryphal) dictionary definitions of the word ‘Buster’ that preface *Buster*, as well as his late ‘Imaginary Dictionary’ piece. The ‘Imaginary Dictionary’ offers a range of alternately glib, witty, expansive and nonsensical definitions of words and mixes text, images and concrete poetry together:

⁸² Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.73

⁸³ See, for example, Megan Boyle’s short story ‘Rihanna Goes to the Hospital’ (<http://meganboyle.org/rihanna>), accessed 5/7/15, and David Peace’s novel *The Damned Utd.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007)

⁸⁴ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.80

⁸⁵ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.80

Burns' use of celebrity, as suggested above with regard to Billy Graham, marks them out as components of a system, part of an increasingly prevalent media landscape at the time of writing. But Burns is also, I want to suggest, doing something different with his use of celebrity which marks him out from his literary contemporaries (with perhaps the exception of JG Ballard, though Ballard's engagement with celebrity culture seems more pointed and straightforwardly critical than Burns' was). On the one hand, the use of real life celebrity figures is a continuation of Burns' inclusion of real life matter in his work, from his own teenage essay on Dr Johnson which he inserts into *Buster*, to the recorded interviews that make up the raw material that formed *The Angry Brigade* and *The Day Daddy Died*. Like Picasso pasting newsprint or pieces of woven basket onto his canvases, it's a strategy of the avant-garde which is deployed as part of a wider aim to, in Bürger's terms, reintegrate art with the praxis of life. On the other hand, the role that celebrities play in Burns' work is distinct. Alongside Ballard in literature as well as art world contemporaries such as Andy Warhol as well as early electronic musicians interested in montage⁸⁷, Burns anticipates the rise of celebrity culture and delineates its importance as part of the media spectacle.

I will quote at some length here to demonstrate Burns' most sustained example of engagement with celebrity culture in *Babel*:

THE SHALLOW SEA OF GREY SMILING MATERIAL prolonged the day, he carried the night in his overnight bag. The young woman on the telephone promised the fully-equipped recreation he demanded. Next day the well-built delegate from Britain, wearing pearls in his hair, a devotee of silver, made plain his deep respect for private aircraft. Peter Sellers certainly seemed funny trying on his trousers. The lounge filled up with Germans aware of her Swedish shape at the dead end of the long hotel, pursuing her legs between the sheets from spiritual motive. Her bosom grew bigger and bigger until she stopped breathing altogether. 'In South America the young women last two months. Here it is possible to strike lucky with loads of francs and make the girl last longer.' David Frost laughed joyfully in the great hotel, his little joke a forlorn attempt to create nothing whatever. He had totally subdued his daisy. Frank Sinatra stated his preferences too. The courageous younger sister distrusted him. For three days she lived on cups of tea alone. Christ, he was a Greek sculpture, and like Jesus he smoked hash on and off. Apart from getting high on sacramental wine he had no personality problems, he had a dynamic wish to play a leading role in public affairs. David

⁸⁷ For example, Steve Reich's piece 'It's Gonna Rain', in *Early Works* (Elektra Nonesuch Records, 1986)(discussed below), and Ruth Anderson's collage work 'DUMP' in *Dump / State Of The Union Message / Tiger Balm* by Ruth anderson and Annea Lockwood, (Opus One Records, 1970)

Frost was bloody rude to a blonde actress a few minutes before he finished with a terrified smile, he'd been playing poker with Yvette Mimieux and Gypsy Rose Lee by mistake. He said goodbye to Ted Hill who loved good conversation.⁸⁸

Like much in Burns' work of the period, the specific purpose of this passage is deliberately unclear. The cup-up sentences, fragmentary references and uncertain pronoun use dislocate meaning and produce confusion in the reader. The familiarity of the names does not aid comprehension, in fact, their presence, particularly the simultaneous presence of so many well known figures, creates further dissonance, as all their histories and associations intermingle and are juxtaposed. However, as is typical of Burns, this dissonance is compromised by the internal consistency, the rhythmic quality of the passage and the familiar reference points which, though they may not contribute to the comprehension of the overall meaning of the passage, nonetheless they steer the reader through it. In addition, at the level of the individual sentence, there is a way in which Burns uses syntax and vocabulary choice to bring certain images to prominence. For example, "THE SHALLOW SEA OF GREY SMILING MATERIAL" does not immediately suggest anything in particular, in fact the hardness of the "grey" and the "material" contrasts almost self-defeatingly with the softer images of water. It is as though the image turns in on itself. But, through the capitalisation of some words at the beginning of each paragraph and not of others, Burns creates a tension which the reader struggles to resolve in deciding how to read these sentences. The image is further complicated by what follows: "[...] prolonged the day, he carried the night in his overnight bag." Images which are suggestive of convenience and portability which again contrast with the image of a sea (even a shallow one) which suggests abundance and breadth. By following these images with those of celebrity and salaciousness, Burns allows the reader to retrospectively view this opening sentence as an image of the tabloid newspaper – shallow but abundant, smiling but grey, having the quality of water in its ability to slowly and persistently erode every obstacle and cover every surface, even as its smallness ensures it can be carried anywhere.

Though precisely what occurs is unclear, the effect of the passage is to show the figure of the celebrity (and here I think it is worth pointing out that it is white male celebrity in particular) as occupying a position of privilege in society, one of increased power, wealth, visibility and freedom of movement. The celebrity has access, which Burns links to power and to sexual exploitation. Whatever David Frost has done in this passage, it seems to involve the abuse of power (a power specifically linked to sexual exploitation), with him using and then casting off women. The

⁸⁸ Burns, *Babel*, pp.119-120

celebrity has the opportunity to speak, to be heard and to pass comment, as Frost does here, and to have it recorded, however nonsensical or offensive the speech. But there is a consequence to this power and privilege, which is to become the focus of attention, to become the subject of a prurient public gaze. There are shades in this quotation of tabloid discourse, where the sexual proclivities and drink and drug habits of celebrities become fodder for gossip. But there is also something more in this repeated use of celebrity in Burns' work too, and I want to argue that it's part of a broader strategy of representation which aims to update and reconfigure the avant-garde to suit the period in which Burns was writing.

Two of Burns' other works from this period also employ this extreme fragmentation, but in different media, namely his play written in 1969, *Palach*, and Peter Whitehead's 1967 film, *Jeanette Cochrane*, for which Burns wrote the script and the subtitles. Whitehead's film is a montage of images captured of the emerging counterculture (a genteel, moneyed, perhaps even apolitical version of the counterculture in the main, one might add) in London, including footage taken at the UFO Club and at the Slade School of Art. The film features brief shots of musician and actor Nico and is sound tracked by an early recording of Pink Floyd, from before they signed to EMI Records. Burns' intervention into this already hectic assemblage is to further complicate it. He writes subtitles which present questions and observations, such as, "How should I behave?", "Should I talk to my daughter?"⁸⁹ etc. On top of these there is a voiceover which critiques and passes negative comment both on the subtitles and the images in a patrician tone, which calls into question the ability of this kind of art to convey meaning. Here is an example from the voiceover: "Try asking them what they mean by all this and of course the only answer you get is, Mean? Mean? We don't mean anything, it's art. Art. As soon as there's something any ordinary human being can't understand, that's art."⁹⁰ *Palach* presents a highly stylised version of the story of Jan Palach, a Czech student who committed self-immolation in 1968 in protest against the Soviet Occupation which put an end to the events of the Prague Spring. The play was performed with the audience sat at the centre of four stages, upon which the action often occurs simultaneously, the actors speaking over each other, or singing or performing actions, alongside blasts of music, recorded voices and televisions. Jinny Schiele in her brief account of the play's first performance in 1970, directed by Charles Marowitz, suggests that Burns' aim was "enveloping his audience in a total environment."⁹¹ I will return to this concept of the total environment, which nicely

⁸⁹ Whitehead, *Jeanette Cochrane*, (My transcription)

⁹⁰ Whitehead, *Jeanette Cochrane*

⁹¹ Jinny Schiele, *Off-centre Stages: Fringe Theatre at the Open Space and the Round House 1968-1983*, (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2005), p.50

encapsulates Burns' approach during this period of his writing (as well as that of many of his contemporaries), in a moment. Harold Hobson's review of the play (reprinted as an introduction in *Open Space Plays: Selected by Charles Marowitz*) emphasises the cacophonous nature of the first production of the play: "I do not write this easily. The production employs means – simultaneous action on four separate stages, the blaring of loud-speakers drowning the voices of the players, the players themselves overlaying each other's speeches[...]."⁹² Hobson concludes that Burns and Marowitz's presentation, "establish[es] in beauty and vulgarity the extreme qualities of our civilization."⁹³ The extremes of the total environment that Burns and Marowitz create is exemplified in the indifferent reactions of the cast to Palach's self-immolation, the act and its politics is lost among the accumulated voices, as indicated in the stage directions:

For the next sequence the page is divided into five columns, with characters' names placed at the head of each. Where, reading across, speeches overlap, this indicates that the actors speak simultaneously. A crescendo will thus be built up in which all five speak together, creating a noise reminiscent of the Prague Noise, in which individual speeches are incomprehensible. In particular, the BOY'S frantic attempts to communicate are frustrated.⁹⁴

What Burns is seeking in these pieces, to which I would also add *Dreamerika!* with its emphasis on the materiality of the page, is a particular kind of affect which moves beyond mere recapitulation of the themes and techniques of the classical avant-garde. That is, a surfeit of information, a sense of excess, which the reader (or audience member, or viewer) experiences and cannot fully comprehend or process in its entirety.

In structural terms, this reconfiguring of strategies of representation leads to a focus on the fragment as the key component in Burns' experimental fiction. *Babel's* short, cluttered paragraphs and cut-up sentences are a truer representation of the media culture of the late 1960s than conventional narrative techniques are capable of. By decoupling himself from those techniques, Burns creates a novel which, as with his work in film and the theatre, creates a total sensory environment, and he does this through his use of the fragment. In contrast to *Europe After the Rain*, these fragments emerge from an abundance of sources; there can be no sense of the palimpsestic weight and

⁹² Harold Hobson, 'Introduction', in *Open Space Plays: Selected by Charles Marowitz*, ed. Charles Marowitz, (London: Penguin, 1974), p.193

⁹³ Hobson, 'Introduction', p.194

⁹⁴ Alan Burns, *Palach*, in *Open Space Plays: Selected by Charles Marowitz*, ed. Charles Marowitz, (London: Penguin, 1974), p.236

authority of the Nuremberg Trials transcripts laid over the text of *Babel*. Instead, Burns sifts through material, picking out and putting together pieces of text in an assemblage. The effect is to create a heteroglossic text, in the Bakhtinian sense, a multiplicity of voices and discourses.

As a representational strategy, Burns' texts of the late 1960s are demanding for the reader. More than any other writer of the period he aimed to represent the extreme surfeit and density of information in the world. This is the period in which Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* is published, for example, a text which diagnoses the inability to adapt to the incredible pace of change at the time as a kind of sickness. If the Surrealists saw the newspaper page, with its competing, unrelated blocks of text, as an environment that could be entered into, read and deterritorialised in multiple ways, then Burns extends this insight outwards into lived experience itself, so that every moment contains multitudes, a dense matrix of perspectives, voices and lines of power.

THE LEAF AT HIGH ALTITUDE withers before the cold, the less delicate stay soft and pliable. The grey spout rises, the forkful of snow is thickened with beer, the systematic cruelty of cold increases. As the ice-like mountain forces the shiver of weakness, the sunsilk hair uncurls its beautiful colours, the menthol-fresh actress in her sprint flush spurns the unlit set, the hair on the young buds brings unhappy memories of milk, for six minutes she seems less strong, she looks for milk in her memories, her delicate years are used, the years ago are prized, the lemony feeling is warm and long.⁹⁵

In this quotation even time itself becomes pliable, the text able, in one simultaneous narrative instant, to look at a variety of indices of time – that of the seasons changing (a cyclical time), an extremely extended, distanced time that can incorporate the movement of mountains (a large scale, planet-historical time), and that of a moment of remembering, which is simultaneously in the present but also at a moment in the past. In addition, the paragraph seems to take place on a set, and so is perhaps artificial, an ersatz rendering of, or a representation of these multiple perspectives on time. These kinds of resonances and contradictions occur throughout the novel, and, as in this quotation, the raw material of the fragment is juxtaposed with others, and that creates a particular kind of affect, which demands a particular kind of reading.

The affect that Burns' total environments create, is to take the strategies of the media and of state control to extremes. This is the philosophy of the cut-up, as espoused by Burroughs and Gysin,

⁹⁵ Burns, *Babel*, p.111

applied ad-hoc to all of experience. If most conventional fiction is a conscious narrowing, a shaping of events and characters to create a complete symbolic wholeness, then Burns' is a radical refusal of that wholeness in favour of an untidy, dense and scattershot system of representation.

I will now examine a theorist whose work on music impinges upon avant-garde theory, and has particular application to Burns' work. Jacques Attali's book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* is a work which, in his introduction to it, Frederic Jameson describes as part of a "[...] renewal of a whole series of attempts [...] to write something like a totalizing history of social life."⁹⁶ Attali's book - which presents a history of the organisation and use of noise (and its relation to music) as an index of power and control in society – not only attempts in the structural terms that Jameson suggests, to 'totalize', but also, in its focus on noise, that which is usually considered extra-musical (the part of a signal that the sender does not want to be received, for example white noise, distortion etc.), his work seeks to account for that which is outside of conventional accounts of power and control, as well as that which is beyond the scope of much academic criticism of art and literature. As such, it is a useful companion to Burns' own totalising strategy, which also seeks to incorporate 'noise' (that is, to incorporate the detritus of culture, sifted out from cut-up clippings of text and assembled without reference to, or respect for, the signal it was originally trying to convey), even to suggest that the hierarchy between signal and noise ought to be broken down if one truly wishes to represent the environment of the late sixties and early seventies. This breaking down also implies, as does Burns' indiscriminate use of sources, a removal of the distinction between high and low art. Attali writes:

A network can be destroyed by noises that attack and transform it. [...] Noise is the source of these mutations in the structuring codes. [...] noise does in fact create a meaning. [...] The absence of meaning is in this case the presence of all meanings, absolute ambiguity, a construction outside meaning. The presence of noise makes sense, makes meaning. It makes possible the creation of a new order on another level of organisation, of a new code in another network.⁹⁷

In Attali's account, noise is the untidy adjunct of strategies of state power. The ability to record sound, heralds, for Attali, greater control: "To listen, to memorize – this is the ability to interpret

⁹⁶ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p.vii

⁹⁷ Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, p.33

and control history.”⁹⁸ By repeatedly and systematically inserting noise, which Attali claims, “[...] betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality,”⁹⁹ Burns attempts to resist such strategies of control, precisely through fragmentation and the ‘total environment’. Attali enjoins the interdiction of noise, but also the use of noise as a means of control, with a totalitarian politics. What resists that totalitarianism is, perhaps ironically, the openness and cacophony of the total environment of the kind that Burns’ creates in his fiction of the late 60s.

FOUR OR FIVE TIMES A DAY THE RECORDED VOICE IS VISIBLE FROM THE TALLER BUILDINGS. ‘Oh, don’t go there,’ twice a day across the road, from police officers investigating infiltrators. The local automatic experimental officers check their instruments sooner or later, each with a telephone and delicate equipment around the neck. They sit close to the measured mast, their life in the limelight, examining a small mechanism. One man inscribes numbers on a ticket of orange steel. On a fine day the men sit on the roof, full of blue, until the spots of rain fall on the toy windmill. The highest roof has three tin cans tied to it, the copper rain inside the cans relays messages by radio. John bursts his parachute and brings it down patiently to his office on the forty fourth floor. Fourteen times a day he looks at the clouds and can tell you the time by counting the specs of rain in his eyes. Suspended from a tall government tower a balloon soars to the other side of the world. (It travels to China and meets problems when it gets there).¹⁰⁰

Burns is concerned, in *Babel*, with strategies of control through recording and surveillance, as this quotation demonstrates. There are, similarly, many references to photography, to filming and to other methods of information gathering throughout the text. I highlight this passage in particular as it deals explicitly with covert surveillance and recording, but there is, in it too, the irruption of several kinds of noise. Not only does Burns burden the paragraph with superfluous detail and non-sequitur, but the purpose of the surveillance is unclear, and the data collected is bulky, vast in quantity and either unreadable, or so abstruse as to make it legible only to a cadre of experts. For Attali, the meaning of this is clear, noise and signal cannot be decisively decoupled and each can be discerned in the other.

The absence of meaning [...] is also the possibility of any and all meanings. If an excess of life is death, then noise is life, and the destruction of the old codes in the commodity is

⁹⁸ Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, p.7

⁹⁹ Attali: *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, p.7

¹⁰⁰ Burns, *Babel*, p.137

perhaps the necessary condition for real creativity. No longer having to say anything in a specific language is a necessary condition for slavery, but also of the emergence of cultural subversion.¹⁰¹

This is the contradiction that Burns confronts in *Babel*, and in other works of his experimental period: radical alterity of meaning and representation is perilously close not just to the absence of meaning, but also to the totalitarian (and here one can perhaps discern a link between the avant-garde and political extremism, manifested most clearly in the elision between Italian Futurism and fascism, and those other modernist or avant-garde artists whose beliefs allowed them to be aligned with fascism). By opening up his work and letting noise in, Burns cedes control of his material, allowing multiple lines of entry and interpretation.

In his staging of *Palach*, director Charles Marowitz placed the audience at the centre of four stages, upon which action occurs simultaneously. Positioning the audience in this way is an encapsulation of the affect of Burns' avant-garde work: the audience surrounded by stimulus, by information, with no way of discerning what to privilege or pay attention to. A surfeit of material, familiar and unfamiliar, signal and noise. But the staging of *Palach* also serves as a metaphor for the way in which Burns' work of the period moves beyond the tropes and techniques of the classical avant-garde.

Alain Badiou's essay, 'Avant-gardes', which appears in a volume of essays about the twentieth century (so it's possible to say, already, that Badiou sees the notion of the avant-garde, or avant-garde works as being a key component of the twentieth century), observes that the avant-garde comprises "a strong current within the century's thought which declared that it is better to sacrifice art than to give up on the real."¹⁰² What Badiou means by this is that art, by a process which he designates as "destruction and subtraction"¹⁰³, seeks to rarefy established forms "through arrangements that place these forms at the edge of the void, in a network of cuts and disappearances."¹⁰⁴ This approach is symptomatic of a crisis of representation. . Elsewhere in the book Badiou writes that "representation is a symptom (to be read or deciphered) of a real that it subjectively localizes in the guise of misrecognition."¹⁰⁵ And "Ideology stages figures of

¹⁰¹ Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, p.122

¹⁰² Alain Badiou, 'Avant-gardes' in *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p.131

¹⁰³ Badiou, 'Avant-gardes', p.131

¹⁰⁴ Badiou, 'Avant-gardes', p.132

¹⁰⁵ Badiou, 'The passion for the real and the montage of semblance' in *The Century*, p.49

representation that mask the primordial violence of social relations.”¹⁰⁶ The entire system of representation found in the realist novel is in service to this masking, constructed so as to conceal that which it purports to unveil. What Alan Burns, and other avant-garde practitioners sought - Badiou highlights in particular the case of Brecht - is to move beyond this debased realism and towards an art which displays the gap between the artwork and the real, a term which Badiou takes from Lacan, and which Hal Foster also uses for the title essay from his collection *The Return of the Real*. The return Foster speaks of is a Freudian one, related to what he calls ‘traumatic realism’¹⁰⁷. I have spoken at length about the importance of trauma in the work of Alan Burns in a previous chapter, but here Foster uses the notion of traumatic repetition, in the Freudian sense, to designate a particular approach of the neo avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s. Foster’s approach to his subjects is typically dialectical, and in this essay he continues this approach to look at the reception of the work of Warhol and other pop artists, who, Foster argues, were committed to continuing the legacy of realism (but with these artists a realism which, like in the work of Brecht, complicates and destabilises, and opens up the gap that Badiou identifies between the artwork and the real). According to Foster there are two approaches to reading Warhol’s work, a *simulacral* reading, which he associates with poststructuralist critics, which emphasises the lack of depth, and ‘pure surface’ of the Warholian work. In contrast, the *referential* reading, taken by critics and historians who highlight the continuing themes of violence and tragedy that emerge in Warhol (of particular interest with regard to Alan Burns are Warhol’s pictures of the Kennedys) to show him as an artist who critiqued commodity culture, and so was politically engaged. Although these two approaches seem opposed, Foster attempts to locate a position in which they can both be correct, and it’s this approach that he designates as traumatic realism, arguing that Warhol’s “Death in America” images, for example are “referential *and* simulacral, connected *and* disconnected, affective *and* affectless, critical *and* complacent.”¹⁰⁸ The dialectical simultaneity of Warhol’s images evinces a traumatic element which can be seen in the repetition of photographs that Warhol paints over. Foster sees this as a “mimetic defence”¹⁰⁹ against shock (the shock of what Foster calls “capitalist spectacle”¹¹⁰). This defence can become critique. By mimicking the spectacle one can, as Foster suggests, “expose it; that is, you might reveal its automism, even its autism, through your own excessive example.”¹¹¹ There is a similarity between Foster’s idea of a traumatic realism which doubles and repeats and seeks to get inside the capitalist spectacle, and the idea of the cut-up, whose

¹⁰⁶ Badiou, ‘The passion for the real and the montage of semblance’, p.48

¹⁰⁷ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.130

¹⁰⁸ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.130

¹⁰⁹ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.131

¹¹⁰ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.142

¹¹¹ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.131

aim is to destabilise established codes and create new associations by taking existing pieces of writing and reconfiguring them. But the cut-up also contains the simultaneity that Foster diagnoses in Warhol's work, the sense of being affective and affectless, of the painful presence and the uncanny absence of the author, that lends it its deep ambiguity and difficulty of interpretation. As Steven Shaviro informs us, "Burroughs later pessimistically worries that cut-ups have only limited efficacy since they still assume, and still serve, the viral replication of the dominant language."¹¹² Foster is more optimistic about the prospects for this transgression from the inside, and it is in that optimism that he is able to distinguish the avant-garde of the 1960s from the classical avant-garde:

[...] *to rethink transgression not as a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde outside the symbolic order but as a fracture traced by a strategic avant-garde within the order.* In this view the goal of the avant-garde is not to break with this order absolutely (this old dream is dispelled), but to expose it in crisis, to register its points not only of *breakdown* but of *breakthrough*, the new possibilities that such a crisis might open up.¹¹³

Alan Burns' novel *Celebrations* takes seriously this distinction between the heroic and the strategic, both in form and content. Published after *Europe After the Rain* but before *Babel*, its focus on the industrial accident and on the figure of the corporation owner, Williams, can be read in the dialectical terms that Foster suggests, both implicated in the systems and language of power by reflecting them back at the reader, and attempting to rupture those systems by cutting up that language. The novel's characters are ciphers, described in ways which are often contradictory, most clearly in the description of Williams at the beginning of the novel which first has: "He turned the wheel slowly, his temperature and the machine's were taken, his serious brown eyes apart, reading the faintest movement of the quivering needle."¹¹⁴ Which is then followed a few lines later by: "His buttons still glinted in a neat row, his eyes very blue, there was no point in measuring them, the ruptured middle ear caused tears to run down the cheeks, crystals on wheels."¹¹⁵ This deliberate contradiction emphasises the elision in the description between Williams and the machine, which is a large component of these early passages. In being machinic, Williams is made to be a component in the industrial system that Burns portrays, and by so brazenly assigning him these contradictory details, he is made less human in the eyes of the reader. But, without ever losing this sense of

¹¹² Steven Shaviro, *Connected, or What It Means to Live in the Network Society*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p.68

¹¹³ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.157

¹¹⁴ Burns, *Celebrations*, p.5

¹¹⁵ Burns, *Celebrations*, p.5-6

Williams as part of a machine, the novel also, in places quite tenderly, explores themes of ageing, the loss of purpose and the loss of the function of the body:

In bed, the perfect place of ambush, between restless neighbours who tempted him into uncomplicated suicide, Williams acknowledged flickered visions of expert self-slaughter. He considered the problem. He lived in exile, in the bowels of another creature. He had food. He could not eat, he did not need to eat. He had no means. There was no development, nothing startling in his life. [...] He had weight, which protected him from being dislodged. He was bathed in soup. He breathed by habit. He possessed a mouth, the centre of alarm, close to the spine and the stomach, the mouth moved, fingers across the lips, steady, tired at last, the fascination of the thin strands of pain still held him, relaxed, compelled to give in and wrap his arms around his body.¹¹⁶

The achievement of *Celebrations* is to have created a text which simultaneously humanises and dehumanises the capitalist, Williams. But, crucially, to follow Foster's notion of traumatic realism, *Celebrations* does both of these things - humanises and dehumanises (and shows that the two are inextricable) - in an excessive way, as a response to the actions of capital. The only viable response to the traumatic effects of those actions is to fully immerse yourself in the contradictions of the system and to reveal, through an excessive representation and repetition, their implications. In *Celebrations* this manifests itself in Williams' machinic humanity and human automism.

I would like to continue now to look at Foster's work in relation to *Celebrations* by turning to his essay 'Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?' Foster sees the neo-avant garde, of which I would argue Alan Burns is a part, as somehow fully comprehending the project of the classical avant-garde fully for the first time. Foster takes issue with Peter Bürger, arguing that Bürger's book does not explore the full implications of its own arguments with regard to the historicity of art, but particularly with regard to the art of the neo-avant-garde, which leads to him dismissing it as a mere failed repetition of previous forms and ideas. Foster also aims to extend and complicate Bürger's ideas about the integration of art into the praxis of life, writing that, "For the most acute avant-garde artists, such as Duchamp, the aim is neither an abstract negation of art nor a romantic reconciliation with life but a perpetual testing of the conventions of both. Thus, rather than false, circular and otherwise affirmative, avant-garde practice at its best is contradictory, mobile and otherwise

¹¹⁶ Burns, *Celebrations*, p.94

diabolical.”¹¹⁷ Again it is possible to see Foster’s dialectical method working to mediate between the oppositions that Bürger sets up, in order to theorise a more fluid and dynamic interaction between art and life, rather than the fixed nodes of Bürger’s account. And again, as in his account of traumatic realism, the avant-garde often best critiques power from within, by incorporating part of the language or structure of power. Writing about dada in Zurich and Berlin, Foster writes that “both these attacks on art were waged, necessarily, in relation to its languages, institutions and structures of meaning, expectation and reception. It is in this *rhetorical* relation that avant-garde rupture and revolution are located.”¹¹⁸ Alan Burns in *Celebrations* offers the reader exactly this complex relation between art and life. Unlike with *Europe After the Rain*, the source material which Burns draws on for the novel has not been made explicit, but Burns does employ the specialist language of law, economics, business and manufacturing throughout the book, and in doing so enacts the kind of excessive identification that Foster talks about. It is possible to see this in a financial report which Williams’ son, Michael, gives to the company. He says:

‘We might now turn to the next item. I am pleased to be able to inform you, gentlemen, that the turnover for the first four months of the current financial year has increased by practically the total increase in turnover for the whole of the last year. We shall repeat our interim dividend at 7 1/2 percent and promise a second interim payment before the end of March. It is not practicable at this stage to forecast the amount, but coupled with the fall in profit from £1.06 millions to £816’000 in the first half of the current year the prospect is not inspiring. The Company has problems, sales at home have fallen, the outlook is uncertain in spite of recent improvement. Exceptional rain has affected production, but the backlog should be made up in the latter part of the year. Sales and profits from July to December should exceed those for the first half of the year, suggesting a total before tax of over £1.6 millions against last year’s total of £2.1 millions.’ Michael was loudly cheered when he concluded: ‘If it is said we have to pay the price for efficiency in organisation then I say we have paid that price and we are not going to pay more. We have suffered enough.’ Michael added that the new plan sounded ‘marvellous and very intricate, but we need to know the facts, not merely an idea without details.’¹¹⁹

Nothing is clear in this passage, whether the company is doing badly or doing well, or, somehow, both simultaneously, the first part of the year being better than the entire last year, despite the fall in

¹¹⁷ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.16

¹¹⁸ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.16

¹¹⁹ Burns, *Celebrations*, p.42

profits. The second half of the year should be better, despite the backlog to be made up, and despite the forecast being worse than the previous year. Nor is it clear what is meant by the price paid for efficiency, or what the new plan Michael talks about is, or how it might be implemented. The meeting concludes with a discussion about the state of the chairs in the boardroom, seemingly with nothing of substance having been resolved. What Burns shows with this speech is that the particular discourse of the meeting allows Michael to obfuscate while appearing to speak with frankness and clarity. The use of figures and of particular pieces of financial terminology allow him to present a picture which is contradictory and nonsensical, but at the same time is well received by those present (with the exception of Williams, who rejoinders with a speech which is even less tethered to reality). Only through this excessive identification with the language of finance and of business could Burns show the manipulative power of that language. *Celebrations* has been described as a series of rituals¹²⁰, and marriages, funerals, trials and parties are all depicted in ritualistic terms, often with those officiating - judges, priests etc. - performing their parts with exactly that kind of excessive identification with their role. The meeting is also a kind of ritual, in which a particular grammar is enacted, and certain words are said, but without the requirement for meaningful content, as if the purpose of the meeting is something other than the content of what is said, a series of motifs and positions that aim to replicate and consolidate power. Michael's over-identification with his role leads to this parodic speech which, precisely in the way that it cleaves closely to the real language of business, is able to critique that language. The meeting becomes, then, a metaphor for the contradictory and obfuscatory language of progress in business which permeates the novel. I will now turn to a discussion of metaphor in Burns' work, and in the avant-garde more generally.

For Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Metaphor is never an innocent figure of speech,"¹²¹ because the use of metaphor is always an anthropomorphising usage, it inevitably places the human into the realm of objects, robs them of their essential distance from the human and seeks to infuse them with meaning. As Brian Wicker puts it, the use of metaphor suggests "a dangerous yearning for reassurance that the world I inhabit is conformable to my designs upon it, that it has the meaning I want it to have."¹²² Robbe-Grillet's fiction is replete with austere descriptions of objects, written, as

¹²⁰ See, for example, Charles Sugnet's essay 'Burns' Aleatoric *Celebrations*, Smashing Hegemony at the Sentence Level', p.194

¹²¹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Snapshots and Towards a New Novel*, trans. Barbara Wright, (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p.80

¹²² Brian Wicker, *The Story-Shaped World, Fiction and Metaphysics: Some Variations on a Theme* (Notre Dame,: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p.2

Roland Barthes puts it, “to expel man from them.”¹²³ Barthes, in the same essay suggests that Robbe-Grillet is “seeking [...] the expression of a negativity,”¹²⁴ and this negativity, expressed in the form of the novel confers upon Robbe-Grillet a realisation of a “responsibility of form,”¹²⁵. That is, the idea of the eschewing of a metaphorical speech which is not innocent and which seeks to impose meaning, is an idea which, if followed to its conclusion, bestows certain formal constraints on the writer. In his novel, *Jealousy*, it’s possible to see the effect of this responsibility of form:

On all sides of the garden, as far as the borders of the plantation, stretches the green mass of the banana trees.

On the right and the left, their proximity is too great, combined with the veranda’s relative lack of elevation, to permit an observer stationed there to distinguish the arrangement of the trees; while further down the valley the quincunx can be made out at first glance. In certain very recently replanted sectors - those where the reddish earth is just beginning to yield supremacy to foliage - it is easy enough to follow the regular perspective of the four intersecting lanes along which the young trunks are aligned.¹²⁶

Robbe-Grillet discovers, or is reduced to, an accumulation of detail which creates meaning in his novels. The implications of his thinking on metaphor are that the narrator becomes merely a conduit, recording the environment she moves through like a camera, without comment or reflection. The form that emerges in Robbe-Grillet’s fiction is one that emphasises the gulf between the self and the other, and between individual objects, the external world can be described in minute anatomical detail, can be quantified and dissected, but is ultimately unknowable. The radical potential of this emptying-out of the fictional space, a project which Barthes calls anti-humanist, is for objects and environments to create meanings on their own terms, outside of the anthropomorphising human imagination.

There is a resemblance between the way in which Robbe-Grillet uses an accumulation of detail to describe an environment, and Alan Burns’ descriptions, particularly in *Europe After the Rain*, where lengthy, detailed, perhaps even self-defeating passages relate situations and events. In the novel, Burns too largely abandons the use of metaphor in favour of blankly narrated passages:

¹²³ Roland Barthes, ‘There is no Robbe-Grillet School’ in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2000), p.94

¹²⁴ Barthes, ‘There is no Robbe-Grillet School’, p.91

¹²⁵ Barthes, ‘There is no Robbe-Grillet School’, p.92

¹²⁶ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p.89-90

The upper windows had nested snipers, the walls around them had been smashed by shells. The hotel was empty, half-built, it had electricity but no carpets, no glass to the windows. The few undamaged houses were used as barracks, more than five thousand troops garrisoned the town, but they were kept apart, and were often difficult to find.¹²⁷

The narration is matter-of-fact, unsentimental and without ornamentation. Despite the violence that it references, there is no moralising, but also no retreat from the scene. In both Burns and Robbe-Grillet, there is a blankness to the narration that comes from the avoidance of metaphor, as though a scientific, journalistic, or even academic discourse has been adopted. I will return to these passages and the manner of their narration, and in particular Barthes' notion of the responsibility of form, after a discussion of the way in which metaphor is conceptualised by other writers theorising the avant-garde.

In the work of Ortega y Gasset, metaphor is conceived of in entirely different terms from Robbe-Grillet. Gasset, writing in the 1920s, was one of the first to discuss in theoretical terms the implications of the avant-garde. For Gasset, what characterises the progressive art of the period is a tendency towards what he calls dehumanisation. In theoretical terms, his ideals resemble those of Robbe-Grillet, "The young set has declared taboo any infiltration of human contents into art."¹²⁸ That is, the art which Ortega describes seeks to remove the social and psychological. In this way, Ortega, theorises a move toward abstraction. However, in direct contrast to Robbe-Grillet's conception of metaphor, Ortega sees metaphor as "the most radical instrument of dehumanisation,"¹²⁹ as a means of escape from the real and a move from the human to the non-human, liberating language from its regular function and allowing it to "masquerade as something else,"¹³⁰

How is it possible to account for these two conceptions of the use of metaphor which are entirely at odds with each other? Both writers are aiming to theorise a means of producing art whose aim is, at least in part, to circumvent the human, and both arrive at very different conclusions regarding the use and function of metaphor. A survey of theoretical literature on metaphor shows that Robbe-Grillet's view is the more unusual, and the more radical. For many writers, metaphor is not just a function of language, but also a description of the way in which language itself works - as a process

¹²⁷ Burns, *Europe After the Rain*, p.47

¹²⁸ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanisation of Art and Notes on the Novel*, trans. Helene Weyl, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p.26

¹²⁹ Ortega, *The Dehumanisation of Art*, p.35

¹³⁰ Ortega, *The Dehumanisation of Art*, p.33

of substitution and resemblance. Paul Ricoeur, following the work of Roman Jakobson, takes this view in his book *The Rule of Metaphor*, which elucidates a system in which metaphor plays a key part in the functioning of language. Ricoeur calls metaphor “a displacement and an extension of the meaning of words,”¹³¹ but also reminds the reader of metaphor’s roots in classical rhetoric, as a figure of speech which is used for persuasion, one which was condemned by Plato as sophistry. “Every condemnation of metaphor as sophism,” he writes, “shares in the condemnation of sophistry itself.”¹³² This is Robbe-Grillet’s condemnation, that the use of metaphor sacrifices the truth about the relation between humans and objects in favour of what Ricoeur terms, “‘saying it well,’”¹³³ a literary pyrotechnics that conceals the manipulation it engages in. However, Ricoeur also points to a duality of function in metaphor identified by Aristotle, as well as being a rhetorical figure, it is also a poetic one. In the poetic realm, metaphor aids the mimetic project of poetry, whose aim, according to Ricoeur, “is to compose an essential representation of human actions.”¹³⁴ Understanding this dual function, to aid persuasion and to aid representation is fundamental to an understanding of metaphor for Ricoeur, and the distinction between the two functions is for him “more radical than any distinction between poetry and prose.”¹³⁵

Ricoeur, later in the study, goes on to examine more closely this poetic function. He writes that, “In service to the poetic function, metaphor is that strategy of discourse by which language divests itself of its function of direct description in order to reach the mythic level where its function of discovery is set free.”¹³⁶ And that, “We can presume to speak of metaphorical truth in order to designate the ‘realistic’ intention that belongs to the redescriptive power of poetic language.”¹³⁷ Taken together, these statements constitute a way into thinking about the function of metaphor in avant-garde or experimental texts. The notion of language being ‘set free’, liberated from its regular function, recalls Ortega’s endorsement of metaphor, but this is compromised by Ricoeur’s anchoring of the function of metaphor to what he calls ‘metaphorical truth’ which is tied to ‘realistic intention’. Taken together, what Ricoeur identifies is a dialectical activity of metaphor, which he diagnoses as a tension: metaphor is both a constituent part of mimesis, but also has the ability to create and to represent change and movement, as Ricoeur writes: “To present men ‘*as acting*’ and all things ‘*as an act*’ - such could well be the *ontological* function of metaphorical

¹³¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), p.1

¹³² Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p.10

¹³³ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p.10

¹³⁴ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p.12

¹³⁵ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p.12

¹³⁶ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p.292

¹³⁷ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p.292

discourse.”¹³⁸ In experimental texts, this tension is exaggerated as the notion of realistic, human-centred narratives is problematized. In Alan Burns’ work, this tension can be felt in the way in which Burns both seeks to reproduce, or redscribe the world in terms that extend and enlarge the project of realism - his incorporation of found texts, his lengthy, detailed descriptions, but also his use of non-sequitur, difficult to parse language and jarring metaphors.

In *Dreamerika!*, Jackie Onassis’ “face alone was worth \$3,000,000.”¹³⁹ Of John F Kennedy, Burns writes that “Jack was powered by quartz. He had been in existence for only a short time but had grown steadily. He was a piece of the mechanism of the world. He attended to the split second. He could say exactly when.”¹⁴⁰ Both of them are described in terms which remove their personal agency and render them as components of a larger system; in Onassis’ case a system of financial value and exchange, while Kennedy is, or perceives himself to be, a well wrought mechanical element, essential to the functioning of a world which can be understood in simple, mechanical terms - each piece in its place, working in relation to the others around it. Beyond that, I would like to now examine Burns’ metaphor of Kennedy as the component of a watch in terms of Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor, in particular the tension he identifies in its function.

The description of Kennedy as ‘powered by quartz’, occurs just as he is beginning his term as president. Just prior to this, while he is campaigning, another description of Kennedy is offered. “Jack dressed in white in the park,” it reads, “the marshmallow extended through the hotel lobby. The candidate seemed sweet, with a note of pleasure in his voice.”¹⁴¹ The connotations are clear - the marshmallow is saccharine, shaped to be consumed, sweet, light, bland, attractive. It has a malleable quality, can be reshaped and manipulated. The description comes at a point where Burns is referring to Kennedy’s appeal to female voters, “Among his loveliest electorate he could claim girls with a special twist of sex across the heart,”¹⁴² Burns writes, and there does seem to be something gendered in the way in which Kennedy is presented. Kennedy’s appeal to women softens him. Burns seems to be suggesting that there is something about this appeal which is infantilising, rendering the would-be president bland and faceless. To take this analysis further, I will consider Max Black’s work on metaphor. Black sees metaphors as consisting of two subjects, a primary and a secondary, and he argues that “the secondary subject is to be regarded as a system rather than an

¹³⁸ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p.48

¹³⁹ Burns, *Dreamerika!*, p.112

¹⁴⁰ Burns, *Dreamerika!*, p.22

¹⁴¹ Burns, *Dreamerika!*, p.19

¹⁴² Burns, *Dreamerika!*, p.19

individual thing.”¹⁴³ When a metaphor is constructed, according to Black, it creates an interaction between the primary and secondary subjects in which the reader is obliged to see each in terms of the other, so that both subjects are changed by the action of the metaphor. “A metaphorical state,” he writes, “[is] a verbal action essentially demanding *uptake*, a creative response from a competent reader.”¹⁴⁴ So a metaphor creates a new perspective while simultaneously seeking to somehow represent an already existing reality.

By invoking the image of a marshmallow, Burns is aiming to both say something about Kennedy, but also to extend the understanding of the reader, to create a new image of the president, an extreme and dehumanising image with decidedly feminine connotations. It is also an image of commercial availability and readiness for consumption. As such, the metaphor shows Kennedy to be a convergence of a set of qualities that might be described as ‘cute’, a designation which Sianne Ngai writes about in her essay, ‘The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde’. Ngai describes the confluence of high art and advertising that emerges in the post Second World War period in which “corporate advocates of the industrialisation of modernist aesthetics sought to develop a new commodity aesthetic in the rapidly expanding fields of design and advertising.”¹⁴⁵ Ngai writes that “while the avant-garde is conventionally imagined as sharp and pointy, as hard - or cutting-edge, cute objects have no edge to speak of, usually being soft, round and deeply associated with the infantile and the feminine.”¹⁴⁶ It is clear that these latter ‘infantile and feminine’ descriptions could apply to the marshmallow, and Ngai goes on to reference Adorno’s discussion in *Aesthetic Theory* of art and the edible, which “brings art into an uncomfortable proximity to “cuisine and pornography.””¹⁴⁷ Given that Burns’ marshmallow metaphor occurs as part of a discussion of JFK’s appeal to women, there is a clear intermingling of sex and food in his portrayal, but one in which Kennedy is reconstituted as cute, effeminate, pliable and edible.

Ngai, however, does not simply see the cute object as malleable. For her, the qualities of the cute object “call forth specific affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency.”¹⁴⁸ And it is here that the image of the marshmallow takes on more sinister connotations. Ngai goes on to say that “the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer’s sadistic desires for mastery and

¹⁴³ Max Black, ‘More About Metaphor’ in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.27

¹⁴⁴ Max Black, ‘More About Metaphor’, p.28

¹⁴⁵ Sianne Ngai, ‘The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde’ in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Summer 2005), p.812

¹⁴⁶ Ngai, ‘The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde’, p.814

¹⁴⁷ Ngai, ‘The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde’, p.814

¹⁴⁸ Ngai, ‘The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde’, p.816

control as much as his or her desire to cuddle.”¹⁴⁹ For Ngai, the helplessness of the cute object allows a kind of violence to be exerted upon it. By conceiving of John F Kennedy as a marshmallow, Burns not only prefigures the violence that Kennedy will suffer later in his life, but also shows the underlying violence that comes with becoming a public political figure - Kennedy becomes the object of various desires and manipulations (of various kinds) by submitting himself to the mass media. It is in this way that the two metaphors that Burns uses about Kennedy - the marshmallow and the component of a watch - metaphors which at first glance seem opposed to each other, are in fact related. The violence which Kennedy suffers is presented in *Dreamerika!* as merely an extension of the media spectacle which he has become part of, a spectacle in which the celebrity takes the position of the ‘cute’ object that Ngai identifies.

Jacques Derrida, in his essay ‘White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy’, uses the term ‘*usure*’ to describe the way in which metaphor functions. The term in French has economic connotations of usury, and, as translator Alan Bass explains in a footnote, “metaphor *promises more than it gives*.”¹⁵⁰ This sense of the economic in the use of metaphor is also found in Burns’ conception of Kennedy as the component in a watch, or machine. “He was a piece of the mechanism of the world,”¹⁵¹ Burns writes, as though Kennedy were integrated into a global system which requires his presence to function properly. The metaphor has those hard and sharp qualities that Ngai associates with the commonplace view of the avant-garde, with connotations of industry, and well-wrought mechanical systems. Immediately after the metaphor, Burns describes Kennedy in terms which again suggest his malleability: “He grew more cumbersome, increased in size. He wore jewels so large they were suspended by a ribbon around his neck. The jewels would be torn from his body, the attack on his person was inevitable.”¹⁵² Here the presence of visible signifiers of increased wealth, the jewels that adorn Kennedy and weigh him down, change his physical shape, cause him to grow and to become ‘cumbersome’, but they also prefigure again the violence that Kennedy will shortly suffer. There are economic elements to these metaphors, both Kennedy as a component in a system of global exchange and also the jewellery that Burns adorns him with, which bares witness to his wealth and power, but they are bound up in the inevitability of Kennedy’s violent death, which hangs heavily over Burns’ depiction of his presidency. The metaphors he uses point to an exhaustion, as though there were something within Kennedy himself, some

¹⁴⁹ Ngai, ‘The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde’, p.816

¹⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), p.209

¹⁵¹ Burns, *Dreamerika!*, p.22

¹⁵² Burns, *Dreamerika!* p.22

characteristic, which leads him inexorably toward his own assassination. In Derrida's essay, metaphor itself is a process of exhaustion, with language becoming contaminated:

[...] beneath the metaphor which simultaneously hides and is hidden, the "original figure" of the coin which has been worn away, effaced and polished in the circulation of the philosophical concept. Should one not always have to speak of the *ef-facement* of an original figure, if it did not by itself efface itself?¹⁵³

Derrida likens metaphor to usury for precisely this reason: metaphor promises more than it gives because it contaminates meaning at the same time as creating meaning. The economic relation that Derrida identifies, the potential that metaphor has for creation and destruction, plays into theories of the avant-garde which see tactics of its practitioners as being engaged in precisely that process in terms of its relationship to tradition and convention. For Burns, the economic function of the metaphor allows him to reconfigure the image of Kennedy using jarring imagery and the juxtaposition of two contrasting metaphors - Kennedy as the marshmallow and Kennedy as the well-wrought component of a system. These metaphors engage in a process of effacement, simultaneously adding to the reader's conception of Kennedy and doing damage to it.

In her discussion of the anthropomorphism that is a constituent part of the construction of the cute object, Ngai identifies the tension between metaphor's ability to create and to efface. "If things can be personified," she writes, "persons can be made things."¹⁵⁴ Ngai sees in this tension something reminiscent of Marx's theory of reification in the way in which there is interchangeability between the object and the person. And while the anthropomorphism that animates the linking of the person to the thing - the same anthropomorphism that Alain Robbe-Grillet objected to - projects human characteristics onto the object, at the same time, as Ricoeur also suggests, the qualities of that object are projected back onto the subject of the metaphor. So in the case of Burns' use of metaphor in relation to Kennedy, by likening him to those objects, Kennedy is dehumanised, becomes an object, a commodity. Burns uses these metaphors, which suggest reification, to show the way in which Kennedy occupies a distinct position, both commodity and worker. He himself, his image, is the product which is presented to the world, but he is no less alienated from it than any other worker

¹⁵³ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p.211

¹⁵⁴ Ngai, 'The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde' p.833

producing any other product. Kennedy's labour is removed from him in what Lukács calls "a process of abstraction,"¹⁵⁵ and he is presented to the world as pure spectacle.

It seems fitting to invoke the Debordian notion of the spectacle at this point. Many critics writing about the avant-garde, most notably Peter Bürger, but also later critics such as Andreas Huyssen and Mikkel Bolt, have written about the way in which even the radical gestures of post-war avant-garde artists are co-opted and neutralised by the society they seek to critique. As Jesper Olsson puts it:

The hegemonic culture industry (or, let us be pre-emptive, *the spectacle*) absorbs every attempt at construing an outside from which to deliver such a critique of society, and those instruments that were once available for avant-garde de-familiarisation of bourgeois complacency, such as technology, have become a naturalised part of everyday life.¹⁵⁶

The ability of avant-garde techniques to offer an alternative is compromised, and avant-garde artworks struggle to avoid being subsumed and compromised. Debord writes that:

[...] every concept, as it takes its place on one side or the other, has no foundation apart from its transformation into its opposite: reality erupts within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and underpinning of society as it exists.¹⁵⁷

The transformation that Debord refers to, from one thing into its opposite, can at once be applied to the troublesome situation of the avant-garde at the time Alan Burns was writing, but also to the transformation of John F. Kennedy through the metaphors that Burns uses. What this shows is that Burns was concerned with the way in which his formal choices interacted with the way in which he presented his subject matter. But it also shows Burns' awareness of the conditions under which he was working, the precarious political position of the avant-garde in the 1960s. I will discuss this subject - the specific politics of Burns' writing - in the following chapter.

¹⁵⁵ Georg Lukacs, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc05.htm>), accessed 17/11/14

¹⁵⁶ Jesper Olsson, 'From Beyond the Grave: The Life and Death of the Avant-Garde', *Nordic Journal Of Aesthetics* 22, no. 40/41 (November 2011), p.156

¹⁵⁷ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p.14

Chapter Four: Politics, Ideology and Activism

This chapter is concerned with the central role of politics, ideology and activism in Alan Burns' work. Throughout his career, Burns remained committed to left wing causes, and was politically active as well as producing novels which reflected both explicitly *and* implicitly, those political concerns. In the previous chapter on Burns' position with the avant-garde and his use of experimental devices in his fiction, I considered a quotation from Charles Sugnet, which calls Burns "Uncompromisingly political and uncompromisingly avant-garde."¹ This chapter will again closely investigate Sugnet's claim, doing so with a particular focus on the political. As Sugnet suggests, the political and the avant-garde are interwoven in Burns' work and it is difficult to clearly separate the two issues, but in this chapter I will attempt to delineate between the two in his work for the purposes of analysis, isolating the political and ideological. However, Burns' political concerns inevitably find expression through his literary style, and so any discussion of politics will inevitably also be a discussion of aesthetics.

The idea of Burns as uncompromising in his fiction, as Sugnet suggests, is a provocative one, but it also places Burns on a somewhat lofty pedestal above the messy and difficult ideological negotiations and sacrifices that are part of being politically active. In fact, much of Burns' fiction depicts these types of negotiations, and his novel *The Angry Brigade* best exemplifies his concern with the way in which an ideologically 'pure' position, outside of the State, outside of official political channels, outside of society, cannot be maintained and inevitably becomes compromised.

The politics expressed in Burns' fiction, then, are contingent and situational, although informed in a general sense by a Marxist, Socialist and anarchist perspective. In interviews Burns frequently expresses his commitment to radical, even revolutionary, left wing politics, and, particularly in early interviews, is optimistic about the ability of this kind of politics to transform society. However, as I will discuss in detail below, this optimism is not borne out in Burns' novels, where the political subject is prevented from acting by systems of control and power which are frequently depicted as all encompassing. In this way, the novels reflect the political theory of the period in which they were written, and mirroring and elaborating theories of power offered by thinkers such as Althusser, Foucault and Marcuse. A certain pessimism also shapes the way in which Burns deals with the role of political activism and the development of a political conscience, both of which

¹ Charles Sugnet, 'Burns' Aleatoric *Celebrations: Smashing Hegemony at the Sentence Level*', p.193

often occur as the result of the experience of trauma. I will discuss below the ways in which Burns shows the difficulties associated with activism, and the how his texts reflect and develop on activist writings and theories of the time.

Burns' politics moulds his use of form, and in particular, to return to Charles Sugnet's observation, the relationship between radical politics and radical experimental forms of writing. As discussed in the previous chapter, Sugnet appears to suggest a simple, seamless relationship between the political and the avant-garde, but again, this chapter will problematize that relationship. In particular, I will theorise Burns' move away from a fragmented, experimental style towards a more conventional, realist narrative. Throughout his career, Burns sought an appropriate form to express his politics, but that politics was a product of a particular time and a particular situation. I will suggest that the move to relatively conventional fiction represents a coming down from the high point of late sixties radicalism, a response to the failure of radical insurrectionist politics, exemplified by the events of May '68 in France and the failure of other radical movements elsewhere in the world, particularly the Angry Brigade in the UK, to effect large scale political changes. In Burns' work, the response to these failures bears all the hallmarks of trauma. It is as though the failure of radical politics is also the failure of radical artistic forms, a notion which finds expression not just in Burns' work, and necessitates a return to older, more established techniques. In particular I will examine Burns' claim that his change in style represented his desire to write in the 'voice of the people', and the ideological functions of such a claim, particularly from a writer whose background is conventionally middle class.

Finally the chapter will examine a particular facet of Burns' fiction which encompasses all of the above themes, namely: theories of power and control, the role of political activism, the interaction of politics and narrative style, and the trauma of the failure of radical politics. I argue that just as Burns experienced trauma during the Second World War, which repeatedly found expression in his fiction, he experienced a similarly profound trauma at the beginning of the 1970s with the deaths of Ann Quin and B.S. Johnson, as well as the failure of the radical politics of the late 60s. This second period of trauma instantiates a change in Burns' fiction, his move toward more conventional, commercial writing, and coincides with his move into academia, a professionalising and institutionalising of his role as author which affected his writing. The chapter will conclude by positioning Burns as a political writer who is ultimately pessimistic about the prospects of political activism and political writing, a writer who views such an endeavour as ultimately being unable to resist being compromised.

Political activism is a key concern in Burns' novels, and his characters frequently seek ways to behave in a politically meaningful or committed fashion, but are almost always frustrated in that quest. Activism in Burns' early work exists mainly in the arena of the individual. Burns exhibits in his fiction a scepticism towards organisations, and towards bureaucracy, regarding any attempt at formal organisation, the imposition of rules and structure, as being antithetical to the purity of the politics of the individual. In this way, he is deeply cynical about the possibility of political change because of the inherent corruption of the organisation, and the powerlessness and insignificance of the individual. Burns is interested in characters who desire but are unable to achieve political change, and their frustration and impotence reveals a broader political point about the inescapability of late capitalist ideology. Characters and organisations are unable to think beyond the constraints of the society in which they are embedded, even as they push against its margins. Burns portrays this on *both* a theoretical and ideological level, *and* on that of everyday experience. In Burns' work, the encounter with a landlord is as imbued with as much ideological significance as the activist gesture or the political rally. This applies particularly for those characters in Burns' work who are poor, or lower class, but also applies to his most powerful characters, extending as far as American presidents and army generals. A central component of Burns' novels, therefore, is the sense that one cannot extricate oneself from ideology, no matter what social position you occupy. As Marcuse notes in *One-Dimensional Man*: "Mass production and mass distribution claim the *entire* individual, and industrial psychology has long ceased to be confined to the factory" [emphasis in original].² Ideology is pervasive, and yet it does not 'belong' to, nor is it exclusively shaped by, any one social group or organisation.

The most straightforward account of activism occurs in Burns' first novel, *Buster*. Dan Graveson begins the novel as a young child, moves through various institutions - the family, school, the army, university, work, all of which qualify as examples of Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatus - which work to shape him as a political subject, as Althusser remarks, ISAs "function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic."³ Dan repeatedly resists. His early acts of resistance are individualistic and self-destructive, tied in to his sense of himself as different to his peers. But also, largely thanks to the influence of his older brother, Dan has an awareness of a wider left wing discourse that he sees himself as being part of, and this complicates those individualistic actions. A particular piece of activism stands out in the

² Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, (London: Routledge, 2007), p.12

³ Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>), accessed 10/10/15

early part of the novel. Dan is made a prefect, but refuses to administer a caning to a younger boy for some minor infraction. Burns incorporates a certain ambivalence in presenting Dan's decision, evoking conflicting desires:

The traditional punishment was a caning by the Duty Prefect. Dan wanted to thrash him. He was beautiful and Dan wanted to hurt and bruise him. He let the cane touch the boy's skin.

'Get to bed. You're lucky this time.'

Dan was reprimanded. He said he could not support capital punishment, no he meant corporal punishment. The dignity of man, Tom Paine, scientific humanism, principles. His Prefect's tie, red with a gold stripe, was formally taken away from him at a special ceremony in the Prefect's Common Room.⁴

Dan's resistance to administering the punishment, somewhat garbled though his justification is, is presented as the result of principle rather than resulting from his underlying desire. Indeed, Dan sublimates his initial desire to hurt the boy into those vaguely defined, humanistic principles. Sublimation, in Freud's view, is the deflection of the libidinal instinct from an object of private desire to something public and acceptable. As Marcuse notes, "sublimation involves *desexualization*" [emphasis on original]⁵ Dan desire to hurt the boy is intermingled with the boy's beauty, but in refusing to carry out the caning, Dan is able to both sublimate his desire for the boy into a public declaration of his principles which serves to mark him out from his peers, and to act as a form of rebellion against the authority of his school, and the violence it uses to maintain that authority. It is a rebellion against an education system which performs the role of reproducing social hierarchies. The imbrication of desire, violence (in particular a violence which is suggested but not acted upon on the part of the individual pitted against the violence of the institution) and activism or rebellion is typical of Burns, and typically convoluted. Further complicating matters is the fact that this scene recalls an earlier moment in the novel where Dan's father is asked by his mother to punish Dan, but declines to at the last possible moment, when "the prickles of the hairbrush touched his bottom."⁶ I have already discussed this scene in a previous chapter, so I will not dwell on its implications here, except to suggest that the similarity of the two scenes suggests the deferral of violence on the part of the father inculcates both the desire that Dan feels and his inability to carry out the punishment. That is, Dan is libidinising a moment which reveals the

⁴ Burns, *Buster*, pp.78-79

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p.83

⁶ Burns, *Buster*, p.64

inherent power structure of the family and its role in shaping people into acceptable subjects who sublimate their desires. The father's refusal to carry out the mother's request for punishment shows his power over her, and the deferral of the violence in fact displays a far greater, and more traumatic, underlying systemic violence, that of control and power. As Marcuse says in *Eros and Civilization*: "The biological drive becomes a cultural drive."⁷ This patriarchal power is used to reproduce the conditions of society in its children and maintain the social order, as many theorists have argued. Wilhelm Reich, for example, argues:

Ever since the beginning of the private ownership of the means of production, the first and most important organ for the reproduction of the social order has been the patriarchal family, which lays in its children the character groundwork for the later influencing by the authoritarian order.⁸

The authoritarian character of the father is suddenly foisted onto Dan at the moment he is to administer the punishment to the boy at school. In depicting such an obvious repetition of the scene with his father, Burns shows the way in which the school replicates the ideological work of the family, in particular by implicating Dan into its system of violence and control. His refusal to carry out the punishment can therefore be read in several ways, and Burns' gnomic narrative style in this section creates an openness to the scene, highlighting its complexity and ambiguity. The refusal is both a repetition and libidinising of the scene with his father but also an abdication of power, a gesture against the ideology of the school.

In Burns' novels, ideology never functions to straightforwardly constitute the subject, but works in a diffuse way, contains contradictions and spaces for resistance within it. If ideology functions in this way, then the subject will be, "divided and self-alienated"⁹, as Simone Bignall suggests. Dan's veering between apathy and activism in *Buster*, his conflicting feelings of desire to change his circumstances, and a broader desire to alter the political reality of his society are intermingled with feelings of intense frustration and helplessness, which engender boredom and lack of motivation. Boredom, Bignall argues, halts "the process of self-determination"¹⁰, but boredom can also engender a desire for action, as she goes on to suggest, invoking Heidegger: "Boredom is not simply disabling and disruptive, but it is also understood as the putative ground for the emergence

⁷ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation*, p.212

⁸ Wilhelm Reich, *Character Analysis*, trans. Vincent R. Carfagno (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), pp.xxiii - xxiv

⁹ Simone Bignall, 'Desire, Apathy, Activism' in *Deleuze Studies* Vol. 4, Supplement 1, (2010), p.10

¹⁰ Bignall, 'Desire, Apathy, Activism', p.9

of a reflexive selfhood.”¹¹ The desire for change and the frustration of that desire are imbricated in Bignall’s conception; action, and in particular political action, emerges from negativity. While Bignall, drawing on a variety of philosophical accounts of negativity and action (including Simon Critchley, Badiou, Heidegger and Levinas), has concerns about the way in which negativity is linked with motivation, in Burns’ work the two seem inevitably intertwined. *Buster* is exemplary in this regard. Graveson’s political consciousness emerges at the moment of his experience of trauma, as I have argued in a previous chapter. In his work on trauma and the political, Simon Critchley draws on Levinas’ account of trauma, which positions the traumatic as being a major constitutive component of the experience of the subject. The distance between the self and the other is traumatic:

The ethical subject is defined by the approval of a traumatic heteronomous demand at its heart. But, importantly, the subject is also divided by this demand, it is constitutively split between itself and a demand that it cannot meet, but which is that by virtue of which it becomes a subject. The ethical subject is a split subject.¹²

The attempt to meet the ‘demand’ that Critchley identifies, “Becomes,” as Bignall puts it, “the ground for ethical and political action.”¹³ It is the distance between Dan and the world around him that spurs him towards political action. But, any action that he takes only serves to emphasise that distance and the negativity that inspired it. Burns shows this repeatedly in the novel. Dan’s attempts to discuss politics with his fellow army officers - ““Then tell me, who profits from the war? Korea? China? The answer may show who started it.””¹⁴ - do not convert anybody to his cause, in fact it becomes clear that the officers are making fun of him, laughing at his principled talk. But despite this, Dan is physically and humiliatingly punished by the officers for speaking out:

They were behind the cookhouse among smelly piles of rubbish and open dustbins. They stopped and held him. Two of them levered up the cast iron cover to the grease pit. Stink came up. They shoved him in. He managed to hold his body above the slime, there was only the smell. Then a hand at the back of his neck pushed his face into the grease, held it there.¹⁵

¹¹ Bignall, ‘Desire, Apathy, Activism’, p.9

¹² Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, (London: Verso, 2007), pp.62-63

¹³ Bignall, ‘Desire, Apathy, Activism,’ p. 10

¹⁴ Burns, *Buster*, p.99

¹⁵ Burns, *Buster*, p.101

The attitude of the officers is revealing. Dan's views are both not to be taken seriously, to be mocked, and yet are taken seriously enough for the officers to punish him in this way, which is clandestine and outside of official channels. In showing this, Burns displays something about the functioning of power and its attitude to the kind of dissent that Dan's views represent. Whether or not the officers perceive Dan's attitude as a genuine threat to them, they feel the need to censure him.

Burns' *The Angry Brigade*, published in 1973, deliberately and provocatively obscures questions of authorship and authenticity. The novel purports to be a series of transcribed interviews with members of the activist group, which describe their ideology, their initial community activism which comprises squatting in abandoned buildings, providing food and advice for the underprivileged of the areas they are living in, as well as their victories in managing to open privately owned space to the public. It goes on to show the group's attempts at larger scale activism, their difficulties in organisation, and their subsequent move towards violent confrontation with the State. A preface to the novel is signed "AB"¹⁶, which, of course, as Zulfikar Ghose notes in his piece on the book¹⁷, could stand for either Alan Burns, Angry Brigade, or some combination of the two. Either way, the book presents itself as an authentic document of the real historical activist group, with the preface underscoring this by explaining the provenance of the material:

I interviewed six people [...]. Those who talked with me allowed me to take notes and make tape recordings only on condition that I concealed the identities of those involved. I therefore adopted the method of the 'collective autobiography', telling the story in the words of the participants, but without 'naming names'. The collective nature of the book is appropriate to a movement whose members remain anonymous for ideological as well as legal reasons.¹⁸

Burns' insists upon the authentic provenance of his material, an authenticity which, ironically, is underscored by the necessary anonymity of the participants he claims to have interviewed (a fact which also allows Burns to keep the identity of those participants secret). For the reader of this preface, at least, it seems fair to assume that this is a credible, and true account of the activities of the Angry Brigade, as told by those involved, and that Burns' role is merely to act as an editor and

¹⁶ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.3

¹⁷ See Zulfikar Ghose, 'Right You Go, Left With Burns' in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 17 Issue 2 (Summer 1997), p.200

¹⁸ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.2

intermediary between the activist and the reading public. However, there are indications in the novel itself, as well as in subsequent interviews with Burns, which show that the relationship between the events described in the novel and the activities of the real Angry Brigade is far more complicated. Zulfikar Ghose points to the relative uniformity of voices in the novel despite the differing backgrounds and genders of its protagonists. For Ghose though, the force of the novel's preface somehow allows that uniformity to get past the reader. He writes:

Instead, what the technique of the author's having become an editor has succeeded in doing has been to create in the reader's mind an undoubting belief in the reality of the characters and is consequently making the reader hear individual voices when in fact there is only one voice, a fairly cultivated one at that, in spite of the attempt to maintain a working-class intonation, that of Alan Burns.¹⁹

Ghose's argument here seems perverse given that he himself has noticed the very thing that he claims will elude readers, and though I do not go as far as he does in his suggestion of homogeneity in the novel's voices (as I argue elsewhere, the novel argues forcefully for the way in which the group is divided along gender lines, and this is reflected in the language that its protagonists use; and Burns does go some way, though perhaps less successfully, in attempting to differentiate between the class backgrounds of his purported interviewees), there does remain an issue with regard to the way in which, perhaps as a result of Burns' editing process, some of the idiosyncrasies of individual speech have been flattened out. What this suggests is that, at the very least, Burns is not merely recording and transmitting his material, but is intervening somehow in its presentation.

Ghose's argument oscillates between seeing *The Angry Brigade* as belonging to the tradition of novels which elegantly proclaim the authenticity of their material through the use of frame narratives, the conceit of found documents or accounts related to the author, etc (he points in particular to Defoe, Laclos and Thomas Berger), and seeing the novel as being "written in a self-consciously new form,"²⁰ in which Burns can present the truth of the activist movement while simultaneously exempting himself from its consequences. As Ghose writes, the technique "relieve[s] the author [...] of a personal responsibility to his text."²¹ If this appears contradictory, that the author of *The Angry Brigade* cannot both have constructed a persuasive fabrication and also be absolved from responsibility for his material because he didn't say or write it himself, then this

¹⁹ Ghose, 'Right You Go, Left With Burns', p.203

²⁰ Ghose, 'Right You Go, Left With Burns', p.200

²¹ Ghose, 'Right You Go, Left With Burns', p.203

may be less to do with a weakness in Ghose's argument and more with the complex conceit at the heart of the novel's construction. In fact, Ghose is correct on both counts, *The Angry Brigade* is both a cleverly put together ruse, purporting to emerge from an activist community it has little or nothing to do with, *and* it is a series of transcribed sections of interviews which offer insight into precisely the kind of ideological and organisational issues faced by the historical Angry Brigade. To show the way in which this works it is necessary to offer both a reading of certain parts of the novel and an account of the position of the Angry Brigade and their relation to left-wing politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

To begin with, *The Angry Brigade* itself offers a clear indication of its relationship to historical events. Towards the end of the novel, group member Dave is imprisoned, and Burns gives over seven pages of the novel to Dave counting off the days of his sentence. In doing so, Burns presents the reader with a section of the novel which casts doubt on the idea of *The Angry Brigade* as a novel of transcribed speech. Instead, Burns displays, in concrete terms, the passage of time, as mundane, repetitious and uneventful; this is all that is said about Dave's time in prison. Here the presence of Burns as author, rather than mere intermediary between the reader and his interviewees, is made clear, and the novel suddenly becomes concerned with issues that recall Burns' earlier avant-garde work: the space on the page, duration, the way in which the reader interacts with a section of text that resists being read in a conventional way, and may in fact not be there to be 'read' at all, but rather to simply take up space in the novel, and in doing so stand in for the period of time that Dave spends in jail. In addition, the time in which Dave is in prison, which reviewer Dan Visel suggests is most likely to take place from April 1973 - September 1978²² take the timeline of the novel far beyond its 1973 publication date, not only making the subsequent sections of the novel undeniably fiction (as I discuss elsewhere, Dave emerges from prison to find that Britain is in a state resembling civil war), but casting doubt about the veracity of those preceding as well.

Burns further undercuts the notion of the authenticity of *The Angry Brigade* in his interview with David Madden:

DM: The preface also says that you met and interviewed two groups, but I recall your telling me years ago that this was the product of your imagination? Which is it, or is there a blend of these methods?

²² See Dan Visel, "Alan Burns, *The Angry Brigade*," <http://www.bibme.org/citation-guide/chicago/website/> (accessed 5/10/16)

AB: [...] While most of the material came from “friends,” [...] I did talk to one of two genuine extreme anarcho-left guys and groups, and used those tapes more directly, though much cutting and shaping was still needed. I recall the name of one of those groups, but even now, so many years later, think it would be wrong to name them.²³

Burns goes on to say that “it was a matter of building a character out of multiple fragments, “seeing and hearing” the person [...] (because no one of my many interviewees turned out to “be” any one of my six characters - each was a collage of fragments.”²⁴ While these remarks definitively answer the question of the documentary ‘truth’ of the novel, they also suggest that, in his notion of a composite character built up from fragments of recorded speech, that Burns is aiming for a typically complex politics in the novel. A politics which can apply both to the specific situation of the Angry Brigade, but which can also encompass a much broader and more aggregate sense of the political situation of the time. As such, while Burns’ focus initially appears to be on a group, the Angry Brigade, which operated at the extreme of left-wing culture at the time, the novel in fact represents a much broader spectrum of issues. These issues can be considered as part of the “New Left”, and although the historical Angry Brigade were outliers of that movement, Burns uses their political opinions, their activism and their organisational ideologies as a means of showing the issues that were facing left wing activists at the time.

Where the historical Angry Brigade fit into the broader pictures of the Left in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s is a complex question. Certainly the group went further in its use of violence and direct confrontation with the State than other explicitly radical left-wing political organisations of the time. However, the group should also be seen in the context of the rise in global political violence, with the Angry Brigade’s views and tactics having similarities to the Weather Underground Organisation and affiliated groups in the USA, the Baader-Meinhof Gang in Germany, Italy’s Red Brigades and other activist groups that used violence as a component of their political ideology. It should be noted that these groups themselves represent an extreme version of the range of political views of their various countries. The New Left was comprised of a range of political, theoretical and organisational positions, and the situation in Britain during the period that the Angry Brigade were active was of a large number of groups and a wide spectrum of ideologies. What Burns is seeking to represent in *The Angry Brigade* is a flavour of the way in which these ideologies engage with and enter into conflict with each other and, in the case of the group he is representing, coalesce around a particular idea of direct confrontation with the State. What form

²³ Madden, ‘An Interview with Alan Burns’, p.134

²⁴ Madden, ‘An Interview with Alan Burns’, p.135

confrontation ought to take was a key question for the New Left, and one that gives rise to many of the issues that Burns addresses in the novel: how to organise, issues of leadership, decision-making and guidance, who should be permitted to take part, and in particular where violence is concerned, what the target ought to be and how to address concerns about safety.

The Angry Brigade engages in a high-wire act, claiming authenticity while simultaneously disavowing that claim. In doing so Burns makes a case for the historical Angry Brigade as both the logical conclusion to the New Left's strategies and concerns and an aberration from those concerns. *The Angry Brigade* addresses the specific issues relating to political activism, and in particular the use of violence. The novel depicts a group of radical, left wing activists living together and attempting to bring about revolution. The two main problems that the characters in the novel face are firstly, how to organise, and secondly, the most appropriate actions to take to raise consciousness or foster political change. The first of these problems feeds into the second; the issue of how groups discuss things, make decisions and apportion work is a key concern in *The Angry Brigade*. Different ideas about organisation foment disputes, and ultimately, I would argue, it is the inability of the characters to find an acceptable form of organisation that splits the group up and stymies much of the enthusiasm and political fervour of its individuals. Burns presents the malaise that afflicted Dan Graveson in *Buster* - his inability to find an appropriate group or organisation to suit his desire for political action and his subsequent loss of that desire - in broader and more structural terms, afflicting a large group of young activists. The reasons for this can be traced to the inherent difficulties with organisation itself, and in particular to the difficulties of organising within structureless or non-hierarchical groups, which the activists presented in *The Angry Brigade* purport to be. Ivor, one of the group, explains his conception of how the group organises itself and makes decisions:

In many ways it was my show, though I wasn't the boss. We were extraordinarily democratic, working everything out together without formalities, though the interminable discussions made it difficult to take clear-cut decisions. One of the ways in which we were exemplary was our structure-without-a-hierarchy. It required superb organisation to be not disorganised but 'not organised'. We had a 'Chairman-of-the-day' who arbitrated all disputes, and the position was allotted to each comrade in turn.²⁵

²⁵ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.39

The contradictions in Ivor's speech are immediately apparent, in fact his whole description veers between oppositional positions: himself as leader and as not-leader, the group as structured and unstructured, and, most perversely, the rigorous organisation needed for the group to be the particular kind of 'not organised' that Ivor identifies, without being clear as to what exactly that means or how it manifests itself in their day to day activities. In fact, the real message of this speech, and of the organisation that the Angry Brigade of the novel engages in, is quite the opposite of its purported meaning. The ideology of the structureless group: leaderless, spontaneous and democratic, actually underpins and conceals the ideology of the ruling class, with an emphasis on strong leadership, cultural privilege and control of the means of production. Burns makes this clear with the next part of Ivor's speech: "As a spontaneous structure it sounds ideal, but it only worked because somebody - me - was doing the donkey work. I provided the essential continuity: my house, my study, my telephone. It was an immense phone bill and as far as I know it was paid, though I couldn't say how."²⁶ Ivor's claim to openness conceals a desire for control. Accordingly, despite its purported structurelessness, the way the group functions does not break from social norms and stereotypes: the men separate themselves to make the important decisions, and the women of the group are left to do domestic and secretarial work. Tellingly, this division of labour is presented as natural, as though the work was parcelled out fairly and according to ability. Jean presents this contradiction most starkly:

[...] we made an effort- with whatever power there was - to share it round. So our group wasn't so structured, [...]. You should be able to go out and stick up posters or do a job with everybody else, it doesn't matter whether you're a co-ordinator or a chick, you know?²⁷

Even here, Jean's dichotomy of the official sounding 'co-ordinator', and the casual, even dismissive 'chick' reveals the ideology that lies behind this sharing of power. She goes on to say:

The group combined the energies of the people living in it. At first because I was the girl I did most of the typing and cooking and things like that. It was for something to do.²⁸

Jean makes it clear that gender norms continue to assert themselves within this radical activist group, and that as a woman she is relegated to the more menial tasks. This compromises the radical potential of the group, and is an example of a common theme in Burns' work, that of the idealism of

²⁶ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, pp.39-40

²⁷ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.35

²⁸ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, pp.35-36

activist feeling being sullied by the historical, political and organisational contexts in which it takes place. The strength of feeling that Jean displays is stymied by an organisational culture which cannot perceive her as an equal. The failure of the group to break out of the strictures of gender norms represents a paucity of critical thinking and a naivety that is representative of the broader failures of the group. For Burns, activism always ends this way, either in co-option by the broader political and State system, control by surveillance, arrest and violence, or in the dismal fizzling out of the will to continue with any activism (which is accompanied by an attendant move away from collectivism and towards individualism). In an earlier chapter, I identified the radical politicising potential of the traumatic event, which, in the violence that it reveals, spurs the victim on to question the structures that enabled that violence and to want to act against them. It's possible to say also that just as trauma engenders a politicisation, it also paves the way for the nullification of that feeling, yet another redoubling and repetition of the original trauma, as the victim comes to realise the pervasiveness and depth of the violence they first encountered and are overwhelmed by it. In the case of the Angry Brigade, this fizzling out can be traced back, in part, to the group's organisation and structure.

The group's lack of structure enables the dominant ideology to reassert itself and enables an elite to take control of its direction. This trajectory, of a supposed lack of structure concealing a dominant structure, is the argument of Jo Freeman's essay 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness'. Freeman suggests that there is no such thing as a structureless group, and that all groups inevitably tend towards a structure, hence that the locus of power within a group will often be found in 'hidden' networks of friendship, shared values and orientation that operate outside of the usual communication channels of the main group. Freeman's work emerges from the feminist movement in the early 1970s, and reflects the organisational concerns of those groups. In particular, Freeman sees unstructured groups, which she identifies as the most common form of organisation in the women's movement at the time, as preventing, precisely because of their mode of organisation, real action taking place. "Unstructured groups," she writes, "may be very effective in getting women to talk about their lives; they aren't very good for getting things done. Unless their mode of operation changes, groups flounder at the point where people tire of 'just talking' and want to do something more."²⁹ Freeman's solution to these problems, which drew some criticism from within the anarchist and feminist movements³⁰, is to emphasise the need for more rigidly defined hierarchies

²⁹ Jo Freeman, 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' (<http://struggle.ws/pdfs/tyranny.pdf>), accessed 1/3/15

³⁰ See, for example, Howard J. Ehrlich's *Revisiting Anarchy, Again*, which argues that while many of Freeman's calls for flexible leadership and shared decision making are consistent with anarchist principles, her emphasis on large organisation as the solution ignored the potential of smaller guerrilla actions. It also

and regulations, and to connect smaller networks up to broader and more accountable top-down power structures at the national level. In Freeman's view, there is no such thing as an unstructured group, only a concealment of the real structure that lies beneath and, by virtue of the purported openness, can act without being held accountable. The article makes clear that this perpetuates the power of those already powerful:

[...] the idea [of structurelessness] becomes a smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others. This hegemony can easily be established because the idea of 'structurelessness' does not prevent the formation of informal structures, but only formal ones.³¹

Freeman's work intersects with many of the concerns of activist writers of the time, but her diagnosis of the issues of organisation fits particularly well with the concerns that Burns depicts in *The Angry Brigade*. Suzanne, another of the characters in the novel, recalls the way in which the group organised communal living. The group begins with some formal organisation:

At first each person had his own room, and though we ate together, the work was done on a rota system and we each gave so much a week towards heating and food. I thought this was bad because it was so organised, as if we each had our own bedsit. [...] I hated the idea of noticeboards and rota. I decided we must break down this separateness.³²

Suzanne objects to collecting the money from people because it makes her feel like a landlord. She puts forward the idea of communal money which, after some resistance, the group accepts (although how this is different in practice to Suzanne collecting money from people for food and amenities is not elaborated on). This is immediately followed by a passage where she discusses how the group's manifesto is produced:

I remember Ivor and Dave locking themselves in their little room all day composing their manifesto. [...] They locked the door, there was a great deal of secrecy about it, [...]. When

cemented some stereotypes about anarchists as chaotic and lacking a coherent theory or set of principles. From a different perspective, Cathy Levine's essay 'The Tyranny of Tyranny', (<http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/cathy-levine-the-tyranny-of-tyranny>), published shortly after Freeman's essay, comes from within the women's movement and reiterates the need for continuing consciousness raising (which Freeman argues against as the kind of talking that does not lead to action). Levine argues for a dynamic organisational style that reacts "against bureaucracy because it deprives us of control."

³¹ Freeman, 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness'

³² Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.59

they finished they were ankle deep in paper [...], a man's world, they wouldn't let any woman in. Like two generals plotting a campaign.³³

The movement from talking about communal money to talking about these two male members of the group sequestering themselves in a male-only space, so as to be able to write the official manifesto of the group, is imperceptible, as though this rigid hierarchy emerged naturally from the breaking down of the hierarchies of the work rota and collecting money. As though the inevitable consequences of a removal of structure is the cementing of power for an elite, exactly as Freeman suggests. Burns' *bricolage* technique in the novel, the juxtaposition of fragments of recorded interviews, a style which Michela Canepari-Labib aptly describes as "hetero-textuality"³⁴, repeatedly emphasises the connection between structurelessness and the continuing perpetuation of societal norms and stereotypes, particularly in the area of gender. With this technique, Burns dramatises the central questions about organisation and activism that perpetually recur in the post-war period, from the emergence of the New Left, and particularly in the post May '68 context. Whatever it conceals or enables, structurelessness is an ideology that emerges from a desire to break down older, hierarchical methods of organisation so as to avoid the stultifying bureaucracy and authoritarianism of the old left, and what many saw as its collusion with repressive ideologies. As Stuart Christie puts it in his introduction to Gordon Carr's book on the Angry Brigade:

[...] the general bankruptcy of the Old Left (as typified by the capitulation of Nye Bevan first to German re-armament and then to the UK bomb and that of union bureaucracies to planned capitalism).³⁵

In order to distance themselves from the politics of the old left, groups at the radical fringe sought new methods of organisation that would avoid the individualism and hierarchy of the old left. This feeling is reflected in what Dave says early on in *The Angry Brigade*:

The thing about us was that we were not the biggest group in London but we were the most effective, without doubt, we knew it, though we could do a fucking sight better on almost every level. In other groups what tended to happen was, the hierarchy had a meeting and passed down word to the rest. I thought that was really shitty, I tried to cut that right out. We

³³ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, pp.59-60

³⁴ Michela Canepari-Labib, *Word-Worlds: Language, Identity and Reality in the Work of Christine Brooke-Rose*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), p.53

³⁵ Stuart Christie, 'Introduction' in *The Angry Brigade: A History of Britain's First Urban Guerrilla Group*, Gordon Carr (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), p.iv

had closed meetings when we had something reasonably heavy to rap about, but even then anyone we knew and trusted was able to come.³⁶

Dave specifically links the openness of the group, and their lack of hierarchy, to their political efficacy, in contrast with other, larger and better established, groups. And yet, Dave admits that this openness has limits, and the need to have some closed sessions for more serious discussions he links to concerns about infiltration by police or by other hostile individuals or groups. Dave calls this “paranoia”³⁷, a feeling that pervades the novel, increasing as the actions of the group become more extreme and violent, eventually contributing to its breakdown. This paranoia performs several functions in the novel, and these can be linked to the political and ideological context of the early 1970s, and particularly in relation to the breakdown of the New Left. The first function is the paranoia of infiltration, mentioned specifically by Dave, who identifies several instances: “A whole lot of strange people tried to join us. One beautiful chick in a yellow dress was so obviously a plant.”³⁸ Dave’s concerns map directly onto increased surveillance and repression of political groups in the UK and worldwide. Christie diagnoses a breakdown of consensus and a changing of attitudes towards authority, away from deference and towards a more questioning, antagonistic stance (which he links in part to increased university attendance): “[...] the value structure of industrial society had changed and new expectations had revolutionised political life.”³⁹ The response to this from governments, particularly to the use of violence by revolutionary groups, was to increase surveillance and attempt infiltration. Stuart Hall’s *Policing the Crisis* deals with this political moment, and Hall suggests that, in fact, the actions of the Angry Brigade, in their isolation and extremism, contributed to a narrative in which the State could justify its interventions:

Unwittingly [the Angry Brigade] cemented in public consciousness the inextricable link, the consequential chain, between the politics of the alternative society and the violent threat to the state. It made the possible appear inevitable. It gave the forces of law and order precisely the pretext they needed to come down on the libertarian network like a ton of bricks. [...] The ‘Angry Brigade’ thus unwittingly provided a critical turning-point in the drift into a ‘law-and-order’ society.⁴⁰

³⁶ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.33

³⁷ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.33

³⁸ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.33

³⁹ Christie, ‘Introduction’, p.vii

⁴⁰ Stuart Hall, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.292

Next I shall briefly examine Burns' approach to the law, and lawyers, and suggest that this approach reveals his political convictions. Having trained and worked as a lawyer before becoming a writer, Burns seems to have developed a great deal of antipathy for the profession, presenting lawyers in his novels in a variety of negative ways, but always as beholden to a moribund tradition, and as a buttress to the function of power. Burns presents the lawyers in his novels as beholden to a system of arcane codes and signifiers - of dress, of manner and of speech - and these serve to enhance the image of lawyers as a cabal serving the interests of power, and acting as a barrier to that power, preventing people from accessing it directly. This suggests a conception of the law itself as a system in which the interests of the ruling class are served, while maintaining a facade of objectivity, under the rubric of 'justice'. This can be seen most starkly in *Celebrations*, where Michael is acquitted of his brother's murder.

However, there is a deeper critique of the law suggested by Burns' depiction of law and the actions of lawyers, a critique which questions both the necessity of law for an ordered society and the independence of law from systems of power. This type of critique is summed up in Magali Sarfatti Larson's article, 'Lawyers in the Liberal State', in which she argues:

Neither the Enlightenment's critique of law nor the radical unmasking by Marxism challenged the assumption that the essence of power is both normative and bounded by norms that "reside" somewhere outside of what they regulate. Legalistic thought obviously could not question the basic assumption of "power-as-law". This, I think, is the most general and deepest sense in which the role of lawyers is inescapably conservative: even when they are inspired by revolutionary principles, their state-constituent function lays down stable and defensible foundations for hegemonic power, whose justice need go no further than the law.⁴¹

For Larson, any revolutionary principle is antithetical to the law, they cannot coexist together. There is a telling moment in *The Angry Brigade* in which group member Dave, recognising the potential for legal difficulties as the group's actions increasingly contravene legal norms, realises the necessity for the group to have legal representation:

Quasi-legal was the phrase we had laid on use, that we were a quasi-legal organisation. [...] When we got our first squat together Ivor came round to us and said, 'Do you want a

⁴¹ Magali Sarfatti Larson, 'Lawyers in the Liberal State' in *Lawyers in Society: Comparative Theories*, ed. Richard L. Abel and Philip Lewis, (Washington: Beard Books, 2005), p.446

solicitor?’ I was pretty green then and probably still am, but I said, ‘Yes, I guess we’re going to need one,’ and I went to meet the guy. We got into rapping about politics and social environments and I found out he was a real radical lawyer.⁴²

While this is a moment of maturity for the group, it is also a moment in which their radicalism is tempered, and in which they move closer to the establishment that they are protesting against. That is, they recognise the authority of the law. It is a moment which represents the falling away of some of the radical openness and revolutionary belief (as well as, perhaps, the naivety) of the group. It also represents the hardening and systematising of the group’s status, emphasised in the appropriately vague notion of them as ‘quasi-legal’. Their concern with this status displays the power of the law; by recognising their need for legal representation it is as if the group have already acknowledged the limits of their revolutionary potential.

And, as if to underscore Larson’s point about the way in which lawyers are unable to conceive of an ‘outside’ of the authority of the law, later in the novel, after Dave has been imprisoned, Jean goes to a radical lawyer (it is not made clear if it is the same lawyer that Dave visited earlier), and her experience displays many of the issues that are typical of encounters with lawyers in Burns’ fiction. The lawyer is authoritarian and dismissive, deliberately ignoring Jean when she first arrives and then sizing her up in a way that only serves to emphasise his power:

I could see him looking at me all the time as a sort of object, putting a value on me. how much time was I worth? how much influence did I have? If he prolonged the discussion would he get something out of me?⁴³

To return now to Stuart Hall’s observations about the way in which the actions of the historical Angry Brigade, we begin to see the paranoia of co-option, that idea that however well-targeted their actions, the Angry Brigade’s activism can be turned against them and be used as an excuse for increased repression. The novel reflects these concerns with the deepening ambivalence that the characters feel towards the violent actions they are undertaking. Barry, who despite viewing the violence of the group in quasi-mystical terms, bound up in a quest for personal change and enlightenment, describes the results of the group’s bombing of the Post Office Tower⁴⁴:

⁴² Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.32

⁴³ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.133

⁴⁴ In the novel’s account, a woman is accidentally killed as a result of the bombing: “It was bad luck that that bomb blew some little waitress to smithereens.” Barry says, (Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.162). In reality,

The papers caught on to it and they said, Hey, wild revolutionaries throwing bombs all over the place, they must be stopped because they kill innocent people. Then they passed new laws to make the country more repressive than ever.⁴⁵

In Barry's view this is evidence that the group's actions did not go far enough. "The thing is, if we were going to be violent," he says, "we should have been absolutely violent. There was no point going out and killing half a dozen people. We should have gone to the ultimate extreme or not been violent at all."⁴⁶ What lies behind this belief is a conviction that change is possible through violent confrontation with the State; it is only a question of scale that prevents the Angry Brigade's actions from being successful. For Barry, a divine, revolutionary, absolute violence is a way out of paranoia, particularly the paranoia of co-option. But this kind of thought remains, in the view of Julia Kristeva, trapped in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic:

[...] the rebel who attacks political power. He transforms the dialectic of law-and-desire into a war waged between *Power and Resentment*. His paranoia, however, means that he still remains within the limits of the old master-slave couple.⁴⁷

Kristeva's essay was first published in 1977, according to Peter Starr the year that marked "the end of the French intelligentsia's long process of disengagement from the ideals of Marxism-Leninism."⁴⁸ That is, a time when intellectuals began to turn away from the political and theoretical energies of May '68. The pessimism of Kristeva's remarks should therefore be read in this context, since for her the violence against the State of the rebel or dissident does not offer a way out of repression and does not have the potential to transform society, rather it merely perpetuates the already existing relations. Kristeva's evocation of the master-slave dialectic exacerbates this sense of violence against the State perversely strengthening the State's ability to control, as though its through this violence that the State comes to know itself better, and can exert control more effectively. Provocatively, Kristeva sees writing, and in particular experimental writing, as a way to

The Angry Brigade's bombs were only ever intended to cause property damage, although one woman was injured in the bombing of conservative minister John Davies' house (see Gordon Carr, *The Angry Brigade*, p.145), and there is little evidence in their communiqués or testimonies of the extremism of Barry's views.

⁴⁵ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.162

⁴⁶ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.162

⁴⁷ Julia Kristeva, 'A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident' in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.295

⁴⁸ Peter Starr, *Logistics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May '68*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p.4

subvert the relationship between the individual and power. *The Angry Brigade* follows *Dreamerika!* and marks a turning away from the experimental by Burns, towards a simpler and more direct style, which he felt, would more effectively convey his political message. In his interview with Charles Sugnet, Burns is asked about the reason for his move “towards a surface that appears simpler.”⁴⁹

You say I moved away, I think I have more of a sense that I was moved away. [...] I had fragmented myself out of existence, [...] I had to do something else. Secondly, I had driven myself into a certain corner in relation to the readers who were interested enough in my work to buy the books. There were not enough of them! That’s the negative aspect, the place I was pushed out of. As to where I went, I was influenced by a speech made by Heinrich Böll on receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature. He took a strong political line, saying there was no point in writing for the few, one had to find a language that was accessible, close to “the language of the people.” In *The Angry Brigade* I tried to do something of that kind.⁵⁰

There are three key components of Burns’ change from the fragmentary, avant-garde style of his works up to *Dreamerika!* to the vernacular style of *The Angry Brigade* that he identifies in this interview. Firstly, a sense that he had exhausted the possibilities of that fragmentary style, secondly, the desire to find an accessible language of the people and, finally, an economic concern, the desire to sell more books. What emerges from these feelings is the ‘documentary’ novel, which replaces the avant-garde style as Burns’ chosen form for expressing his politics. In his interview with Peter Firchow, published in 1973, Burns articulates his political feelings explicitly:

I’m in something of a political turmoil at the moment. I’m very hesitant about making political generalisations [...]. But my ideas are tending these days very much in the direction of the libertarian or anarchist state with a small “a,” which is to say not the doctrinaire anarchist [...]. When I am asked therefore what kind of *state* I would write for, the answer is none. But if you ask me what kind of society would I write for, then I could only envisage the kind of stateless society that the anarchists envisage [...].⁵¹

Subsequently Firchow asks Burns about the kind of literature that this stateless society would have, and Burns begins his answer by expressing a feeling which was relatively commonplace among the

⁴⁹ Burns and Sugnet, *The Imagination on Trial*, p.164

⁵⁰ Burns and Sugnet, *The Imagination on Trial*, p.164

⁵¹ Firchow, *The Writer’s Place*, p.56

so-called libertarian communists and anarchists of revolutionary groups such as The Angry Brigade:

I think what we are heading for is a historical break of the same importance and the same fundamental nature as that between, say, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.⁵²

This break will bring about a society “without the contradictions and tensions that arise from class divisions.”⁵³ The belief that such a definitive break is not just possible, but inevitable, was shared by many in the activist community. Despite the failure of May ’68 to produce a truly revolutionary moment, many felt that global revolution was imminent, pointing to worldwide protest movements, student movements, the growth of feminism, the emergence of the civil rights movement and third world revolutions. In addition, a key component of this activism was the sense of internationalism, that a coherent ideology ran through these disparate movements which could unite them. Jeremy Varon, who groups all these ideologies under the banner of the New Left, describes the “consciously *internationalist*”⁵⁴ thinking, where activists “saw themselves waging a revolution which would overthrow both the U.S.-led imperialism of the West and the ossified, bureaucratic communism of the East.”⁵⁵ The political violence of The Angry Brigade is predicated upon this kind of thinking, that small-scale violent actions, largely directed at property, are steps towards that radical, revolutionary break.

The prevailing theory of the time saw an extension, both of the power of the state and of Capital to control and discipline. But simultaneously, the possibilities for challenging these disciplinary regimes also moves beyond previous conceptions of the proletariat as the locus of revolutionary potential and into multiple spheres, particularly in the realm of everyday life. In both of these theoretical accounts: the insidious extension of power and its doubling in the extension of the horizon of revolution, it’s possible to see an elision of the political and the everyday.

The imagined transformation of The Angry Brigade into a paramilitary organisation engaged in guerrilla warfare offers a version of events in which revolutionary violence expands into direct confrontation with the State. As though the rhetorical force of the actions and communiqués of the Brigade did inculcate a revolutionary consciousness. And yet, *The Angry Brigade* closes without

⁵² Firchow, *The Writer’s Place*, p.57

⁵³ Firchow, *The Writer’s Place*, p.57

⁵⁴ Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p.1

⁵⁵ Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, p.1

resolution, either victory or defeat, either for the State or the revolutionaries, as though Burns cannot bring himself to imagine the post-revolution situation, and can only conceive of an escalation of violence. Dave, one of the Brigade's former leaders is press-ganged into rejoining after being released from prison, and finds that the revolutionary consciousness that has been implanted in the membership is a hierarchical, militaristic one, with a uniformity of language and attitude. Revolutionary consciousness in the latter part of the novel is also a proto-totalitarian system of organisation, with a strong authoritarian leadership (located, perhaps somewhat implausibly, in the figure of Ivor, the member of the Brigade who escaped imprisonment by revealing information about his friends). Burns highlights the difference between this version of the Brigade and its earlier incarnation in Dave's account:

I make my own revolution, in my own way, in my own time, in my own town. I educate, agitate, organise. But when I go back to London I start spouting their revolution and the little part I played until I'm on the train home.⁵⁶

Dave is coerced into staying with the group with threats against himself and his family, but inwardly he resists. The novel shows the contrast between the early iterations of these kinds of activist groups, which focus on community work and protest and the way in which their increasing violence changes the way the group is structured and risks alienating members. The strong hierarchy and military discipline of the Brigade in the final chapter of the novel also shows the extent to which groups inevitably come to resemble the structure and organisation of the institutions they oppose as they become larger and more violent. Peter Starr calls this "the logic of specular doubling"⁵⁷, the way in which the norms and practices of the enemy are repeated in the revolutionary group. Alongside this, Starr identifies a "logic of recuperation"⁵⁸ in which the actions of the group are co-opted by and reintegrated with State power. Here Starr's thinking resembles Stuart Hall's analysis of the real Angry Brigade's actions. Starr sees these two 'logics' as interrelated, comprising an ideological constellation that circumscribes thinking within revolutionary activism and also in the analysis of the failure of those revolutions, in particular the events of May '68 in Paris. Starr suggests that these analyses are predicated upon a modern conceptualisation of revolution which sees it as a total rupturing of society, and fails to take into account its essentially cyclical nature, the idea of revolution as a return as well as a break.

⁵⁶ Burns, *The Angry Brigade*, p.185

⁵⁷ Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt*, p.2

⁵⁸ Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt*, p.3

[...] the modern conception of revolution as a radical departure from the customs and laws of the past [...] has been haunted by the ghost of revolution in its pre-modern sense, as an abortively cyclical return to a point of departure in already institutionalised norms and structures.⁵⁹

The ways in which revolutionary groups cycle back towards the norms that Starr identifies is in part a function of their institutionalisation.

B.S. Johnson's *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, published in 1973, also deals with the kind of revolutionary violence that Burns' novel does. Johnson, however, reconstitutes the revolutionary *groupuscule*, or cell, into the sole figure of the eponymous protagonist, Malry who performs a series of increasingly violent actions against the State and its institutions, in recompense for the violence that Malry feels has been done to him by those institutions. In presenting a lone protagonist, Johnson removes the thorny problems of group organisation and the micro-politics that take up so much space in 'The Angry Brigade', instead opting for a narrative which focuses on violence as a personal issue, expressed in the double-entry form of bookkeeping:

I could express it in Double-Entry terms, Debit receiver, Credit giver, the Second Golden Rule, Debit Christie Malry for the offence received, Credit Office Block for the offence given. How settle that account?⁶⁰

Carol Watts sees pathos in Johnson's individualising of this violence, "[...] but one that importantly has social correlatives for all its turning inwards."⁶¹ That is, Watts identifies a broader political project that interweaves with the intensely personal, and even individualistic aspects of the novel. The violence of the novel, Watts suggests, suffers from the same specular doubling that Peter Starr identifies:

[The novel] occupies its distinctive 'trip' like the twist of a Mobius strip, knowing that the very terms of its negativity are borrowed from the reason - economic, instrumental, devastating - it is attempting to escape. This is a terroristic double bind, which the narrative detonates with a grim humour. Violence produces violence [...].⁶²

⁵⁹ Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt*, p.2

⁶⁰ B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, (London: Picador, 2013), p.24

⁶¹ Carol Watts, 'The Mind Has Fuses' Detonating B.S. Johnson' in *Re-Reading B.S. Johnson*, ed. Philip Tew and Glyn White, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.80

⁶² Carol Watts, 'The Mind has Fuses' Detonating B.S. Johnson', p.89

In both *The Angry Brigade* and *Christie Malry*, this violence escalates far beyond the real Angry Brigade's actions. Johnson's character kills twenty thousand people, and is planning bomb parliament when he suddenly dies; Burns presents a newly militarised Brigade in direct and open confrontation with the forces of the State. In doing so, both authors allow themselves to think seriously about the implications of the revolutionary situation, and in particular about the violence that is necessary for it. And in both accounts there is ambivalence about, even a reluctance to imagine the violence, however revolutionary, as anything other than an escalation. Neither writer goes as far as presenting the completed revolution or the new society it inculcates.

Despite Burns' desire to move more into the mainstream, *The Angry Brigade*, luridly packaged⁶³ by his new publishers (the book was released jointly by Quartet and Allison and Busby in the USA and UK) did not review well, and nor were its sales particularly impressive. A review by Ivan Gibbons in *Fortnight Magazine*, for example, states that:

The six chapters of the book trace the political development of the group itself and the personal political development of its members. There are few surprises. The situations described [...] are so obviously staged and their outcome so predictable that one wonders if Alan Burns is serious or just stringing together all the clichés of the revolutionary left.⁶⁴

I mention these facts only to relate the context in which this change in Burns' work occurs. Whatever Burns' political convictions, or economic concerns, about his writing, he remained a marginal figure after the publication of *The Angry Brigade*, perhaps even more marginal than he had been previously.

What are the political implications of Burns' abandoning of his avant-garde style and the move to a more direct, vernacular style which aims to directly replicate speech? To begin with, a caveat: the way *The Angry Brigade* is put together, its structure and its content, do not represent the radical break from his previous fiction that the more readable prose might suggest. And yet this does feel like a very different kind of text, one whose politics are more direct and on the surface, but which does not deny the complexity of the position of the radical activists it represents. Political fiction written in this way aims to raise consciousness, the work itself is not an end product, but rather a component in a process that moves toward revolutionary consciousness. Cornelius Cardew, a

⁶³ The A-format (i.e. small size, usually associated with pulp or genre writers) paperback, published by Quartet transforms the 'I' of 'Brigade' into a lit stick of dynamite, and the Allison and Busby hardback edition makes the letters of the title out of cut up newspaper headline letters, as in a ransom note.

⁶⁴ Ivan Gibbons, 'Angry People' in *Fortnight*, No. 85 (Jun 21, 1974), p.15

composer who made a similar move away from the avant-garde, around the same time as Burns, articulates the precariousness of the political artist:

Because of the law of copyright (which is supposed to give authors and composers control over the exploitation of their works) on the one hand and the idealist image many an artist has of himself as a ‘creator’ on the other, there is a tendency to imagine that the composer or writer is a ‘free producer’, that his product belongs to him to do with as he sees fit. In fact, a book or a composition is not an end-product, not in itself a useful commodity. The end-product of an artist’s work, the ‘useful commodity’ in the production of which he plays a role, is ideological influence. The production of ideological influence is highly socialised [...].⁶⁵

Cardew, who studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen in the 1950s (and subsequently thoroughly rejected Stockhausen’s methodology and politics), is now best remembered for avant-garde compositions, in particular the novel-length graphic score ‘Treatise’ and ‘The Great Learning’, a work which drew on Ezra Pound’s translations of Confucius, as well as for being a member of free improvisation group AMM. In the late 1960s, Cardew formed the Scratch Orchestra, a loose configuration of musicians who performed new avant-garde works outside of the established, bourgeois, classical music circuit. The experiences of the Orchestra of performing in rural village halls and industrial cities, as well as to ethnic minority audiences, raised questions about the disjunction in the group’s theory and their practices, as well as about the elitism of the music they were performing. As John Tilbury, a member, puts it:

Bourgeois idealism in the Scratch Orchestra, represented by anarchists and liberals, is characterised by simple accumulation of activities, fragmentation and separation of ideas, and above all, by a pathological disunity between theory and practice.⁶⁶

As can be detected in the quotes from Tilbury and Cardew, their ideology was classically Marxist at the time, and Cardew looked to Maoism to provide a solution to this disparity between the group’s theory and their practice. Like Cardew, Alan Burns never entirely abandoned his experimental practices, he remained committed to a collage style, but shifted from using multiple, disparate sources of material, to a much more concentrated and narrow approach. In both *The Angry Brigade* and *The Day Daddy Died*, Burns uses transcribed interviews to provide him with material from

⁶⁵ Cornelius Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*, (London: Latimer New Editions, 1974), p.5

⁶⁶ John Tilbury, quoted in Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*, p.28

which to construct his narrative. This strategy demonstrates the importance for Burns of a vernacular style in his later novels, taken literally from life. Although, without the original transcripts, it is not possible to know to what extent Burns edited and deviated from what was said in these interviews, his commitment to replicating the patterns of everyday speech is evident, the construction of such using a plain and direct style is quite distinct from his earlier work. But what does it really mean to speak in the language of the people? And if that question has a political inflection, as it does in the Nobel Prize acceptance speech of Heinrich Böll, which Burns explicitly cites as an influence on his decision to change his writing style, then what kind of politics does this use of vernacular and of directly transcribed speech imply? In *The Day Daddy Died*, the answer to these questions seems to be for Burns to use a narrative which is largely direct (i.e. that attempts to resist offering a range of interpretive possibilities) and straightforward (i.e. that is relatively easy to understand, does not use complicated vocabulary or recondite terminology), with short paragraphs that present the events of the novel in plain, unadorned language. For example:

They each had to do a certain amount of work each day but it was not too much. They were not pressured. There was no piece-work, they were not paid by results. Norah thought the place would be good for the boys. They'd been so wild. She sensed them being guided and trained, their minds canalized.⁶⁷

Though the content of this paragraph is far simpler to understand than much of Burns' previous work, there are nonetheless complex things going on with the narration that the straightforward style attempts to occlude or conceal. To begin with, the novel is narrated, as in the above passage, in close third person, which already implies a conscious distancing on Burns' part from the material as transcribed (which it must be presumed was narrated in the first person), a decision which suggests an uneasiness or ambivalence about using the language of the people. The novel also makes use of free indirect discourse, as in the phrase 'they'd been so wild', which can either be read as the narrator offering comment on Norah's children, or the integrating of Norah's thoughts with the narrative voice. There are political implications - in particular to do with the idea of the language of the people - in employing such a narrative style. Despite the proximity to a character that free indirect discourse implies, there is nonetheless a distance, and an ambiguity to the narration which contains an intermingling of voices and modes of narration. Such intermingling compromises the directness of the novel and compromises any claim to speak directly in the language of the people. This compromising is made abundantly clear in moments in which a

⁶⁷ Burns, *The Day Daddy Died*, p.102

distinctly literary voice emerges, for example, a smile is described in the narrative as “stupid, clever, educated, pleasant, true, appropriate, strange, conscious, wandering.”⁶⁸ Descriptions such as this are reminiscent of Burns’ earlier, experimental novels and his attempts to render the density, ambiguity and even the contradictory nature of an event, incorporating multiple perspectives and interpretive possibilities. The description is not likely to come from a transcription of real speech. What becomes clear in reading *The Day Daddy Died*, is that Burns is not willing to cross the threshold and have the novel told entirely in Norah’s voice, in first person. His reluctance to have the novel fully embody this voice, despite his stated political aims, may suggest a discomfort with the direct appropriation of this voice, whose class, social status and gender are different from his own. It may also suggest a discomfort with the use of the first person voice itself and the claims that that mode of narration can make toward unmediated representation and accurate rendering of a character’s voice and psychology. It should be noted here that *The Angry Brigade* does contain first person narrative sections, but the structure of that book and its ‘documentary novel’ apparatus imply an editorial presence, and its multiple perspectives compromise the singularity of any one version of events.

In *The Day Daddy Died*, Burns narrates the story of Norah which repeatedly returns to two major themes: the oppression of women by men, and the oppression of the working class (in particular working class women) by the State and its institutions. Burns is concerned with the way in which these two kinds of oppression intermingle and relate to each other. On several occasions, Norah is obliged to ask for help of various kinds - financial, medical, bureaucratic - from her family doctor, the same doctor who attended her father’s death, and who represents in the novel power in its various guises. In this character, Burns displays a mixture of the apparently benign with the threatening and exploitative, suggesting that these ideological functions work together systematically to oppress. Dr Peck provides a curious link to Norah’s dead father by claiming to be able to contact him “in the spirit world.”⁶⁹ As such, his advice and instructions to Norah commingle the authority of the father with that of the doctor. Peck frequently encourages Norah to get drunk, and the two have an affair which lasts for several years. Peck fathers one of Norah’s children, though he largely refuses to acknowledge him. Peck is also responsible for sending Norah and her children to the factory/labour camp which takes up much of the latter part of the novel, and he is therefore the locus for the intermingling of class oppression and sexual oppression. Peck sets out the status of the camp in terms that are alarming in their ideological baldness:

⁶⁸ Burns, *The Day Daddy Died*, p.32

⁶⁹ Burns, *The Day Daddy Died*, p.40

We run a kind of sanatorium-cum-work-camp there. There's treatment for those who need it, but we find the best medicine is work. We have revived the old slogan, JOY THROUGH WORK.⁷⁰

I will return to the camp and its status as a specifically Thatcherite institution momentarily, but to conclude the discussion of Dr Peck, what Burns wishes to show in his representation of the doctor in relation to Norah is the way in which the subject - in particular the political subject - is constituted. This has implications for the way in which he represents Norah in the novel, in particular his choice of close third person and free indirect discourse. The question of the subject has been taken up by several theorists in a specifically 'post-Marxist' context, which argues, as Chantal Mouffe puts it, "A person's subjectivity is not constructed only on the basis of his or her position in the relations of production."⁷¹ Mouffe, whose articulations of issues around the constitution of the subject take into account contemporary feminist thought, suggest a social formation that is the product of multiple discourses which interrelate in complex formations. Mouffe argues that:

It is only when we discard the view of the subject as an agent both rational and transparent to itself, and discard as well the supposed unity and homogeneity of the ensemble of its positions, that we are in the position to theorise the multiplicity of relations of subordination.⁷²

Burns' use of free indirect discourse, with its ambiguity and lack of fixity, represents this complexity of the subject. Paul Ricoeur, in *Time and Narrative*, gives a definition of free indirect discourse that aptly describes the way in which it is used by Alan Burns: "[...] difficulties [...] arise in texts in which no boundary remains to separate the narrator's discourse from that of the characters."⁷³ The curious distance that this narrative technique sometimes leads to, in which access to a narrative moment which appears to reveal something intimate, as when Norah thinks, or

⁷⁰ Burns, *The Day Daddy Died*, p.100

⁷¹ Chantal Mouffe, 'Hegemony and the New Political Subject', in *Hegemony, Radical Democracy and the Political*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p.46

⁷² Mouffe, 'Feminism, Citizenship, Democratic Politics', in *Hegemony, Radical Democracy and the Political*, p.134

⁷³ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 2*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.90

appears to think, “they’d been so wild,”⁷⁴ as quoted above, it also reveals the depth of the reader’s alienation from the character, the unknowability of the rest of their thoughts. Burns uses this gap or lack to emphasise the multiplicity of discourses that construct Norah’s subjectivity.

Much has been written on the subject of free indirect discourse and its narrative implications. Monica Fludernik, for example, highlights in particular the way in which it allows writers to move imperceptibly between modes of speech, “smoothly turning from the external situation to internalised perceptions of it.”⁷⁵ The ability that free indirect discourse has to capture the outside and the inside of a character performs an important political function for Burns, a dialectical fusion albeit an incomplete one of perception, eventfulness and certain ideological implications.

[...] the narrator is always effectively present in free indirect speech, even if only through the syntax and the structure and design of a story; [...]. Above all, perhaps as the agency that brings multiple and complex events into relationship with one another.⁷⁶

Randall Stevenson, in his discussion of free indirect discourse, highlights the way in which it allows the reader to see a character as not having a fixed and secure identity. Free indirect discourse, “destabilises the ego, dissolving any easy, secure sense of identity in the voice of author or character.”⁷⁷ Free indirect discourse therefore allows Burns to show his characters as unstable, the product of multiple discourses.

The figure of Dr Peck emphasises this construction in the way that he moves through various nodes of power and hegemony, a confluence of the libidinal and the repressive forms of ideology Marcuse writes:

The father restrained in the family and in his individual biological authority, is resurrected, far more powerful, in the administration which preserves the life of society, and in the laws which preserve the administration. These final and most sublime incarnations of the father cannot be overcome ‘symbolically’.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Burns, *The Day Daddy Died*, p.102

⁷⁵ Monika Fludernik, *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness*, (London, Routledge, 1993), p.73

⁷⁶ Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and its functioning in the nineteenth-century European Novel*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), p137

⁷⁷ Randall Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p33

⁷⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation*, p.91

Peck represents a literal rebirth of the father, unconfined by the constraints of the family, and in the way that he moves through a variety of discourses, the multiplicity of relations that Mouffe identifies, he articulates and represents a specifically Thatcherite ideology. *The Day Daddy Died* was published in 1981, though it is based on an earlier short story⁷⁹, and its view of the way in which various institutions, in particular the way that work, the welfare state and housing combine to form a specific ideological function. In the novel, Norah lives in a variety of cities and places, takes various jobs, largely in the service industry, but these circumstances inevitably coalesce to create an unstable, precarious environment for Norah and her children. Her peripatetic existence is predicated upon this instability, and Burns continually shows the way in which Norah's inability to find long term employment or accommodation, as well as financial stability, is a specific and deliberate consequence of the ideology of the Conservative government of the time, and of a post-Fordist working environment more broadly. As an example of how this functions in the novel - though it is one among many that could be chosen, and I should emphasise that part of the novel's purpose is to show the relentless repetition of incidents, rather than any one which is decisive - here is Norah, having taken up a job as a hairdresser:

Then "the hairdressing thing" fell through. The banks would not touch the shop, the owner was in so much debt, he didn't own a thing! Norah got Pete to buy her a scooter and she tried to work a private round, but she could not make it pay. [...] Going round to one house at a time and taking two hours for a shampoo and set would not bring in a living wage. She went to one woman, Elaine [...] and coloured and permed her hair, it was cut, conditioned and washed, and then she would not pay. She said she had no money in the house.

After working hard for ten weeks she knew she could not go on. She was disillusioned. She said to Pete, "I'm sick to death of it."

She could not see a future of any kind.⁸⁰

Burns shows how Norah is powerless against larger forces that are insurmountable, well beyond her control. Her work is devalued, it doesn't matter how much time she spends doing it she cannot make enough money. What Burns also shows are the way in which informal networks of landlords,

⁷⁹ 'Wonderland', written by Burns for the *Beyond the Words* anthology

⁸⁰ Burns, *The Day Daddy Died*, pp.58-59

small business owners and word of mouth exchanges fit into a larger ideological nexus that is largely outside of most theoretical models but is crucial to an understanding of Norah's situation. These networks come together to create a perverse logic that compels Norah to work increasingly hard in an increasingly precarious situation. The novel frequently presents the breakdowns of these informal networks - a landlord unwilling to extend credit, the ending of an ad-hoc work arrangement - as decisive, forcing Norah to move cities, to find cheaper and less stable accommodation and to lose whatever support systems she had in place, a downward spiral which eventually leads to her homelessness and her younger children being taken into care by the Local Authority in Manchester. What is emphasised at that moment is the perception by the Local Authority that Norah is personally to blame for her predicament, that the structural inequalities - mapped out in detail in the novel - that led to her situation were hers to overcome alone. This is the individualist ideology of neoliberalism, and of Thatcherism, in which the individual is made to be responsible for their own situation. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe diagnose this as "a displacement of the frontier of the social,"⁸¹ a specifically political project in which it is possible to see "a series of different subject positions which were accepted as *legitimate differences* in the hegemonic formation corresponding to the Welfare State are expelled from the field of social positivity and are construed as negativity - the parasites on social security (Mrs Thatcher's 'scroungers')." ⁸² Reconstituting people like Norah in this way, as scroungers, with connotations of them being part of the 'undeserving poor', those who haven't worked hard enough, casting them outside of society, and then constructing that outsider status as somehow a choice, or at least a consequence of choices made by the individual, creates an adversarial relationship with the State which can be used to justify increased measures of hegemonic control. It is precisely this control which Norah, after a period of relative stability in Manchester, but once again destitute, finds herself, at the behest of Dr Peck, in the 'sanatorium-cum-work-camp', which Burns uses to unveil the ideological project of Thatcherism.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that power "compris[es] a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets."⁸³ As D.A. Miller suggests in *The Novel and the Police* such a multiplicity of function of power and discipline operates in particular on a micro scale. "[...] its modalities are humble," Miller writes, "its procedures minor. It is most characteristically exercised on "little things."⁸⁴ Miller's gloss on Foucault's theory is extended in

⁸¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, (London: Verso, 2014), p.160

⁸² Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p.160

⁸³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991), p.215

⁸⁴ D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p.17

the book to encompass the novel itself (in particular the realist novel of the 19th century), which enacts disciplinary power through its strategies of representation, which Miller likens to the Foucauldian panopticon:

[...] this panoptic vision constitutes its own immunity from being seen in turn. For it intrinsically deprives us of the outside position from which it might be “placed.” [...] We are always situated inside the narrator’s viewpoint, and even to speak of a “narrator” at all is to misunderstand a technique that, never identified with a *person*, institutes a faceless and multilateral regard.⁸⁵

As such, in contrast to many other theorists, regarding free indirect discourse, Miller suggests that the technique ironically contributes to the disciplinary power of the “master-voice of monologism.”⁸⁶ By “respeaking a character’s thoughts or speeches, the narration simultaneously subverts their authority and secures its own.”⁸⁷ *The Day Daddy Died* is recast as an instance of “detection”⁸⁸, alongside other disciplinary institutions (the family, the school, the workplace etc.), which appropriates and subsumes the details of its characters’ lives. In Miller’s view this is a form of control, though an insidious one, which he suggests in “the possibility of a radical *entanglement* between the nature of the novel and the practice of the police.”⁸⁹ The implications of these thoughts for a writer like Alan Burns are several. On the one hand it’s possible to suggest that the experimental novels that Burns produced are part of a strategy whose aim is to break out of the entanglement that Miller theorises and, by producing radically new forms of the novel, to also produce a radical new politics of the novel.

However, it is also possible to suggest that Burns’ move towards novelistic realism re-immerses him into this debate, particularly in the context of his subject matter and his explicit desire to produce a legible form which can inform and politicise a general reader. It seems likely that Burns’ ‘turn’ away from the experimental can be theorised, as might Cornelius Cardew’s similar detour only in the particular context of the waning of the optimism of the 1960s counterculture. Foucault argues that:

⁸⁵ Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, p.24

⁸⁶ Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, p.25

⁸⁷ Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, p.25

⁸⁸ Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, p.28

⁸⁹ Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, p.2 NB. in Miller’s conception ‘the police’ stands in for a Foucauldian notion of discipline, see, for example p.viii of *The Novel and the Police*.

[...] the disciplinary form at its most extreme, the model in which are concentrated all the coercive technologies of behaviour. In it were to be found ‘cloister, prison, school, regiment’⁹⁰

All of Burns’ camps are Foucauldian in this way, they are all carceral in this specifically Foucauldian sense, combining multiple disciplinary functions and exerting control upon the subject. The intent is to produce “bodies that are docile and capable.”⁹¹ The key political point in Burns’ work, with regard to his representation of carceral institutions is that they merely show more ostentatiously the function of discipline in society. Just as in *Europe After the Rain* where the violence of wartime is only an escalation or intensification, not an aberration from the violence that exists in and shapes the relations of everyday life, the discipline of the camp extends, but does not differ from, the discipline of the family, the school, the workplace. The movement that Foucault identifies of disciplinary technologies of the penal institution spreading outwards into society is identifiable in Burns’ novels, and manifests itself in his portrayal of a range of institutions of which the camp is just one example.

[...] in penal justice, the prison transformed the punitive procedure into a penitentiary technique; the carceral archipelago transported this technique from the penal institution to the entire social body.⁹²

Burns emphasises in his depictions the dual functions that Foucault highlights, “surveillance and punishment,”⁹³ surveillance which is diffuse in its functioning.

Despite the explicit political content and impetus of much of the experimental British novelist’s work in the 1960s and 1970s, no writer attempted to depict either the revolutionary moment, or a post-revolutionary situation. The closest any writer of the period came, was Christine Brooke-Rose’s novel *Out*, of 1964, which depicts an entirely reformed global political situation following an ecological/environmental disaster, in which, with the African continent now the only inhabitable land on Earth, racial dominance is reversed, and those with black skin control society, while those with white are largely relegated to menial jobs. It’s possible to read the novel in a variety of ways, and though various critics see Brooke-Rose as an apolitical writer, it’s hard not to see an implicit

⁹⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.293

⁹¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.294

⁹² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.298

⁹³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.299

politics in the reversal of racial power, perhaps even a nascent *tier-mondisme*, as well as a proto-environmentalist impetus in the post-catastrophe scenario, which hints at a concern about the effects of nuclear war. Perhaps these are somewhat anachronistic readings, which speak more to twenty-first century political concerns, but I offer them as a demonstration of the complexities and implicit political energies of the novel.

What is of key concern, though, when considering *Out* in the context of Alan Burns' work, is the way in which the revolutionary change in society is presented. Both Burns and B.S. Johnson reach the point of escalated violence and fall back by killing off principal characters involved in that violence - Malry's sudden death from cancer and the strong hint that Ivor and Suzanne die in an explosion - and by ending their novels. The revolution itself is never reached. In contrast, Christine Brooke-Rose begins her novel at a point after the revolutionary event has occurred. In all of these novels, *The Angry Brigade*, *Christie Malry* and *Out*, revolution is deferred, is not depicted. With regard to Brooke-Rose, there are two key points to consider in her conception of the revolutionary event that transforms society. Firstly, as with Burns and Johnson, this event eludes representation; if it happens at all it happens outside of the frame of the novel. In *Out*, global society is transformed by an external force, euphemistically referred to as "the displacement".⁹⁴ That is, global society is transformed, not by the actions of the people, not by a political movement, but by a force which, though it may be man-made (the novel only hints at the cause of the displacement), exists outside of daily political struggle. Secondly, the result of this upheaval is not a transformation of the power relations in society, but rather their reconstitution or reversal. The world depicted in *Out* is bureaucratic, the lives of the light-skinned former Europeans and Americans are heavily regulated, and the power and wealth of the now dominant black Africans engenders behaviours and systems of control that resemble those of the West before the displacement. The light skinned survivors and refugees are pathologised, medicated, limits are placed on their access to institutions and their employment options are severely limited. Here one might be tempted to read a subtle critique of the anti-colonialist revolutions taking place in Africa, and elsewhere in the developing world, in the 1960s. The crucial point, though, is that though those who hold power in this society changes, very little else does. It seems as though, despite Burns' feeling that a decisive change in society was imminent, neither he, nor his contemporaries writing experimental literature during this period, could, or were willing to, offer a representation of what this transformed society would look like. Why might this be?

⁹⁴ Christine Brooke-Rose, *Out* in *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus*, (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2006), p.34

In *Buster*, the Communists that Dan Graveson agitates on behalf of suggest capitulation rather than conflict when he is reprimanded by the army, after speaking out against the army's organisational system. The Peace With China Committee, which Dan also joins, hoping to be able to effect change, is hopelessly bland and bureaucratic, as well as drearily poor and working class for Graveson's tastes. In *Europe After the Rain*, the two sides of the conflict are shown to be, as the novel progresses, almost indistinguishable from each other and intertwined at every level, so that the political landscape of the novel is incoherent, the only real powers that remain are violence and money. In *Celebrations*, though the workers are sometimes described in dynamic terms, and though they perform occasional acts of protest and sabotage, they remain homogenous, undifferentiated. Any revolutionary energy they possess is relegated to the margins. The factory is not a site for focussed agitation, but rather a locus of surveillance and control. *Babel's* collage text can be read as a representation of the function of power, the collusion of the military-industrial complex (a term coined in the early 1960s by Dwight D. Eisenhower in his Farewell Address to the Nation), the media, the school, the workplace, oppression of women, religion, the family, the police, war, sex and culture, to produce the pliant and docile political subject. Repeatedly, the novel depicts abuses of power that go unremarked and unpunished, suggesting that, rather than being aberrations, these are part of the everyday functioning of power. *Palach* shows the indifference with which the revolutionary gesture is received, and the way in which it is subsumed and ultimately nullified by its incorporation into other discourses, particularly that of the media. *The Angry Brigade* shows the revolutionary energies of the group stymied by infighting and inability to organise effectively, as well as the inability to sidestep the 'logics' that Peter Starr identifies: specular doubling and structural repetition. *The Day Daddy Died* shows the powerlessness of the working class, and particularly of women. It shows the way in which the neoliberal situation of precarity precludes involvement in any kind of political organisation, no matter how small-scale. Norah is largely preoccupied in the novel with survival, finding money and caring for her children. Finally, *Revolutions of the Night*, the last novel that Burns published, shows revolution as something which happens elsewhere, beyond the frame of the novel. These are not novels which are politically optimistic, and they do not point towards a successful revolutionary enterprise, rather they repeatedly see any revolutionary energy stymied and curtailed by the forces of discipline and control. In the early 1970s, Burns' convictions may have pointed him towards thinking that radical change in society was both inevitable and happening soon, this optimism is never reflected in his novels. It's possible to read this political pessimism in other writers of the period. For example, of BS Johnson, Joseph Darlington suggests that:

Commitment is replaced by fatalism, but within that fatalism there is a certain freedom: if a novel can no longer have any effect upon people's actions and beliefs, then previous conceptions of fit subject matter are perhaps rendered irrelevant.⁹⁵

Here, Darlington suggests that Johnson's move from an "old labour"⁹⁶ political position to a more radical one stems from the failure of protest against the Industrial Relations Act of 1971:

Many of Johnson's notions about society and class, and aspects of his own sense of self crystallised in the burst of directly anti-Establishment political activity around the 1971 Industrial Relations Act. This can be seen as a moment of radicalisation so emotionally potent that the failure to stop the Act, and the setbacks to organised labour that failure brought in its wake, involved great disappointment, disillusionment, prompting the fatalist notion that in spite of every effort the forces of opposition were bound to lose.⁹⁷

This fatalism recalls Alain Badiou:

What I call politics is something that can be discerned only in a few, fairly brief sequences, often quickly overturned, crushed or diluted by the return to business as usual.⁹⁸

Badiou's notion of the political as being ephemeral, visible only briefly, has application elsewhere in Burns' fiction. The scene of revolutionary protest in *Revolutions of the Night*, which the protagonists accidentally become embroiled, leading to the arrest and imprisonment of one of them, Harry, which is the cause of much of the later action of the novel, eventually causing siblings Harry and Hazel to flee the country, crossing the border into exile. The end of the novel, which depicts this exile, is reminiscent, in its landscape and its action, of the closing chapter of *Europe After the Rain*, a point emphasised by the description of the Max Ernest painting of the same name, which makes up the final chapter of *Revolutions of the Night*.

⁹⁵ Joseph Darlington, 'Cell of One: B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry* and the Angry Brigade', in *B.S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Julia Jordan and Martin Ryle, (Basingstoke: Palsgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.93

⁹⁶ Darlington, 'Cell of One: B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry* and the Angry Brigade', p.91

⁹⁷ Darlington, 'Cell of One: B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry* and the Angry Brigade', p.95

⁹⁸ Alain Badiou, quoted in Daniel Bensaid, 'Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event' in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward, (London: Continuum, 2004), p.102

The novel is replete with references to other works, and makes explicit the aleatoric, collage construction that Burns employs in his writing. Aleatoric, a piece of terminology which suggests openness and the deliberate inclusion of chance elements in the creative process, gains particular traction with regard to musical composition in the 1950s and 60s, where it is applied to composers incorporating ‘concrète’ elements into their work, as well as to early experiments in electronic music. The term has also been used with regard to novels of the same period. Sebastian Jenner, for example, in his essay, ‘B.S. Johnson and the Aleatoric Novel’ links this compositional process to the writing, reading and structure of B.S. Johnson’s ‘book in a box’, *The Unfortunates*, and to Marc Sapporta’s ‘book in a box’ *Composition No. 1*, by coining the term, “aleatoric novel”.⁹⁹ Jenner argues that the randomly shuffled sections of those novels replicates, in the process of reading them, the paradoxical interaction of order and chaos that exists in memory and experience. The way in which these novels are constructed permits a degree of chaos, but retains what Jenner, again linking to music, calls “compositional integrity,”¹⁰⁰:

These signatures remain responsive to change, both internally, and in the sense of the contextual possibilities that arise from their prospective narrative relationship with other moments. There is nonetheless a traceable logic to them, and thereby a tangible compromise between chance and order, interlinked within a display of episodic memory.¹⁰¹

Jenner’s emphasis is on the way in which the aleatoric method seeks to replicate the chaos of life while still retaining formal coherence. Though Alan Burns does not employ the ‘book in a box’ device in any of his work, he nonetheless uses many of the strategies that Jenner identifies as components of the aleatoric method, particularly the long “kaleidoscopic sentences”¹⁰² in which clauses are stacked on top of one another in a sentence, almost to the point where meaning is negated. What Jenner does not point to is the inclusion of ‘found material’ as part of the aleatoric process. Johnson employs this device in his novels in various places: the children’s essays in *Albert Angelo*, the real match report reproduced on the inside cover of *The Unfortunates* and the passages of historical material in *See The Old Lady Decently*, but it is used far more frequently by Alan Burns, and in a way which aligns him more closely with the techniques and concerns of

⁹⁹ Sebastian Jenner, ‘B.S. Johnson and the Aleatoric Novel’ in *B.S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant-Garde*, ed. Julia Jordan and Martin Ryle, (Basingstoke: Palsgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.73

¹⁰⁰ Jenner, ‘B.S. Johnson and the Aleatoric Novel’, p.73

¹⁰¹ Jenner, ‘B.S. Johnson and the Aleatoric Novel’, p.75

¹⁰² Jenner, ‘B.S. Johnson and the Aleatoric Novel,’ p.80

character of the piece by placing it in the context of a protest and, in the absurd spectacle of the protesters, forced to keep moving by police, walking in circles, mirroring the cyclical movement of the phasing in Reich's piece. It's also worth pointing out that the way in which Burns transposes what is a mechanical process of two speakers playing slightly out of time onto a group of anonymous protests, renders them yet more anonymous, machinic even. But, more importantly, it is possible to see in this scene a direct link between an explicitly political work of contemporary composition, and Burns' own fictional technique. By incorporating Reich's piece into his novel, Burns replicates Reich's own strategies.

This scene of protest, which comes near to the conclusion of the final novel that Burns published, is emblematic of the political in his fiction generally. Obligated to walk in circles, corralled and arrested by the police, the protesters' actions and speech are incorporated into a system of control. What is more, the scene shows the ambiguity in the way that protest and activism function in Burns' novels, and the pessimism of his politics. The words the protesters chant are part of a string of quotation, neither theirs, nor Burns', nor Reich's; but rather than signifying the apocalypse, as the 'rain' did for the preacher that Reich recorded, in *Revolutions of the Night*, it is a symbol of an imagined future which can only remain in the realm of the imaginary. Whether the rain the protesters call for is apocalyptic or cleansing, what Burns' emphasises in their cyclical, controlled movements, is that this is a rain that will not fall. Just as the Europe of *Europe After the Rain* is not rendered significantly different by the outbreak, or conclusion, of war, the same power relations persist, Burns in his novels continually defers the possibility of revolutionary change.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to show Alan Burns' work as complex, diverse, and emerging from a range of political, historical and aesthetic concerns. However, despite the breadth of his work, both in terms of the types of characters and situations that he writes about, and the manner in which he chooses to present those characters and situations, some themes recur with such frequency that they suggested the structure for this thesis and the way in which its chapters are organised.

Broadly expressed, I would argue that these themes are: firstly, the traumatic, which emerges from Burns' biographical experience; secondly, his concern regarding representation, which leads to his various stylistic and experimental devices, as well as his turn away from the experimental; and thirdly, his concern with radical left wing politics and activism. In addition, a meta-concern, to do with the reception of Burns' work, and in particular the way in which it has been marginalised and ignored, both by academia and the publishing industry, is immediately apparent when looking at Burns' work. Therefore, this thesis has had two principal aims: to discuss in detail those major themes, and to attempt to argue for Burns' importance as a novelist, as well as to account for the reasons behind Burns' marginalisation. This conclusion will deal mainly with the latter of those two aims, but before I turn to that, I will offer some remarks on the way in which I have dealt with Burns' work in the preceding chapters.

This is the first full-length study of Alan Burns' life and writing, and while I am grateful to scholars who have written about Burns before the completion of this thesis, in particular to the articles in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* which dealt with Burns, and to the few authors who have written academic articles on Burns, or discussed him in their books, I felt it necessary to devote the first chapter of the thesis to a thorough discussion of Burns' biography and his works. The subsequent chapters, on trauma, the avant-garde and the political, each focus on a separate strand of Burns' work, and, as such, they reinforce a somewhat artificial division between these themes. I felt it was necessary, from a practical point of view, to divide these themes into chapters, and discuss them in relative isolation, but what I would like to emphasise in this conclusion is the way in which these themes merge with each other, and are inextricable from each other. Burns' experience of the traumatic seems to me decisive in the way in which he sees the world, and as such shapes the way in which he represents the world. That is, the experience of trauma has direct implications for Burns' style. The collage approach, which characterises the way in which all of Burns' novels

(whether part of his experimental period or not) are put together, the way in which the novels emerge from an accumulation of fragments and disparate sources, is directly related to the way in which trauma informs a particular way of perceiving the world, characterised precisely by delay and fragmentation, but also by the density of experience of the moment of trauma, which produces a surfeit of emotion. As Adrian Parr puts it, with reference to Freud's work on trauma:

The intensity of emotions that a trauma produces has to find a means of escape, otherwise these begin to mutate and a symptom manifests itself. Symptoms are therefore the physical result of intensive emotional disturbances that have found no means of release. Elsewhere [Freud] describes this deferred effect as *Nachträglichkeit*: the original emotions and affects of the traumatic experience are not discharged and as they are deferred emotionally colored psychic energy becomes increasingly more exaggerated and eventually symptoms appear [...].¹

For a writer like Alan Burns, the experience of trauma was a decisive factor in the aesthetic decisions he made and in the way in which he approached the issue of representation. Similarly, the experience of trauma is imbricated with the experience of the political in Burns' work. For Burns, to experience trauma is to experience the violence of the State, particularly the violence that Slavoj Žižek calls "objective"², that which is usually obscured, part of the way in which everyday reality is structured and maintained. In the traumatic moment, objective violence is momentarily revealed, and, for Burns, this inculcates an awareness of the subject's position and the implicit politics of that position. That is, the experience of trauma in Burns work is inextricable with an experience of the political.

In addition, Burns work responds to the rapid political and societal changes that were occurring while he was writing. The surfeit of information, the variety of media, the splintering of political groups and interests and the rise of a multifarious counterculture all contribute to a density and fragmentation of the way in which contemporary life is experienced, and Burns' fiction seeks not just to depict that experience, but to replicate it, to produce in the reader the disorientating affect of being in the world. The political and the historical therefore also inform Burns' approach to fiction and his desire to deploy a vast accumulation of voices, discourses and points of view in his work. At the height of his experimental phase, in the novel *Babel*, this reaches a critical point in which the

¹ Adrian Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture Desire, Singular Memory and the Politics of Trauma*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) p.18

² Žižek, *Violence*, p.2

weight and density of the competing plurality of perspectives threatens to break down meaning and language itself, and erodes any sense of traditional notions of character or story. But this density also makes the work unpredictable and exciting to read, and what distances Burns from his contemporaries – in *Babel* particularly, but throughout his published work – is the sense that the narrative focus can shift incredibly rapidly in terms of character, location, time, scale and event. Burns' work is deserving of detailed critical attention precisely because of the way in which his work reflects the fragmentation of experience.

The interweaving and interdependency of the traumatic and the political and the way in which they are implicated in Burns' aesthetics has inevitably impacted upon my approach to those subjects in their respective chapters. Despite the necessary separation of the material in this thesis into distinct chapters, a discussion of any one of those themes necessarily involves a discussion of the other two, as can be seen continually in those chapters. It is impossible to talk about the political, or the traumatic in Burns' work without also talking about the aesthetic choices and representational strategies that he engages in. The imbrication of these topics in his work leads to a particular experience of reading, especially when reading his work in an academic context, and even more especially when reading several of his works simultaneously or sequentially. What emerges in that reading is a sometimes exhausting pessimism, even a nihilism, about politics. As I have emphasised throughout this thesis, Burns sees the individual political subject as hopelessly compromised and constrained by the forces that surround it. The institutions that the subject moves through have sufficient ideological clout to nullify protest, and sufficient strategic nous to be able to incorporate and thereby compromise the strategies of radical politics that are used against it. The violence of the State and its institutions is inexhaustible, Burns' work suggests, and the psychological cost of fighting them is extremely high. Of those institutions, Burns in particular highlights the role of the family in forming the political subject, as I have shown, and also, in a way that perhaps goes further than any of his contemporaries, he recasts the other institutions of the State: the school, the army, the workplace, the legal system etc., as resembling the Concentration Camp, such is the ideological force of those institutions.

There is a neat formulation with Slavoj Žižek uses, which turns Adorno's famous quotation about the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz on its head: "Adorno's famous saying, it seems, needs correction: it is not poetry that is impossible after Auschwitz, but rather *prose*. Realistic prose fails, where the poetic evocation of the unbearable atmosphere of a camp succeeds."³ This idea of the

³ Žižek, *Violence*, pp.4-5

failure of prose to encapsulate the traumatic and the political implications of the Camp gets to the heart of Burns' fictional project. If all the institutions of the State resemble Camps, then the ideological strategies and the resonances of realist prose are redundant, insufficient and unable to represent the world as it really is. Instead, as Burns practised, a writing which is based on the fragment, the multitude, on cacophony, aleatory and on chaos, is far better suited to his contemporary situation. And this kind of writing necessarily emphasises the overlap of everything, and the interrelatedness of the political, the traumatic, the aesthetic.

If these strategies of Burns', and the implicit aesthetics and politics that lies behind them are appropriate to his situation, and do account for the political and historical changes that were occurring while Burns was writing, how then can we account for his being subsequently so marginalised? So left out of accounts of his period? When mentioned at all, mentioned as a member of a list, that is, an also-ran, a footnote? Why is it that, in her article on Burns, as I quoted in my first chapter, Jeanette Baxter suggests that: "It may be no accident that the writing of Alan Burns has fallen off the literary map."⁴ I would like to conclude, in answering these questions, with two matters, which can be read as complementary or contradictory: the first argues that Burns' work anticipates and many of the issues of representation that are now commonplace, and so his marginalisation is an effect of this anticipation: like the work of innovators and avant-garde practitioners in electronic music or structural film⁵, or even, it is possible to say, the pioneers of any genre or set of techniques or conventions, so thoroughly have the insights and developments of those innovators been incorporated into their various fields, that they themselves seem curiously archaic and of their time, and are seldom read, listened to, or viewed. The second matter concerns the difficulty of Burns' work, which Baxter alludes to in her article, and which is almost always mentioned in the few summaries of and references to Burns' work that exist. I will address this second matter first, and then return to the second as a coda to this conclusion.

Of Burns' difficulty, it is hard to deny that his texts are challenging, formally complex and often hard to read. However, difficulty alone is not sufficient to lead to the kind of neglect that his work has faced. One can point to a wide range of authors writing at the same time as Burns whose work is similarly abstruse, who remain canonical, or at least part of a broader academic discussion about the writing of the period: the French *nouveau roman* writers; in America, writers such as Robert

⁴ Baxter, 'Accident and Apocalypse in Alan Burns' *Europe After the Rain*, p.64

⁵ Here one might consider, for example, John Whitney's work on Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, in which the formal techniques of experimental filmmaking are used in the credit sequence of the film to foreshadow its themes. One might also consider, more broadly, the innovations of modern classical and electronic composers in

Coover, William Burroughs, Raymond Federman, Ishmael Reed; and even in Britain B.S. Johnson, Wilson Harris, Ann Quin and Christine Brooke-Rose's works have received far more scholarly attention than Burns, and have been reprinted and reassessed by contemporary audiences. All of these authors presented a challenge to realist fiction in various ways, and all of them produced texts whose difficulty was, at least in part, a product of that challenge. It seems to me, then, that there must be something particular about the difficulty of Burns' work which sets it apart from those other writers, or there must be something particular about the historical, political and social situation of Burns' work that sets it apart from those other writers, or some combination of the two.

Of course, it is very difficult to theorise a lack, an absence. One of the difficulties in writing this thesis, particularly in the early stages of my research, was finding out what other people thought about Burns' work. In the absence of material and opinion on his texts, it is tempting to turn to speculation or conjecture, to concoct 'what if' scenarios. One such scenario sees the very radicalness of Burns' project, both aesthetically and politically as lying behind its neglect, a scenario that sees its exemption from academic discourse as a positive: proof of the work's continuing radical potential and an indictment of academic conservatism. Ultimately though, such a narrative, though seductive, lacks rigour. However, it does point to a more reasonable account of Burns' marginalisation which argues that the way in which Burns has been left out of critical discourse largely stems from the specific ways in which he went further than his contemporaries in the aesthetic and political decisions he made in his writing. As I have suggested in a previous chapter, particularly in early interviews, Burns expresses a fairly widely held view that radical political change was possible, even inevitable, and some of this optimism and determinism does seep into his novels, particularly *The Angry Brigade's* discussions of dismantling State power. Burns also suggests that writing itself, including his fiction, might be able to help to foster this change. However, what becomes clear in reading his novels is that Burns is unable to conceive of this change becoming a reality, he cannot depict the revolutionary situation and in fact his work is dedicated to showing the ways in which revolutionary energy is inevitably compromised and coerced.

But it is not sufficient to say that it is the negativity and pessimism of Burns' work that has led to his neglect. As with difficulty, there are canonical writers whose politics are ultimately nihilistic that are read and taught and written about regularly: one might consider the work of existentialist writers such as Camus and Celine here, but also the work of Thomas Pynchon, whose work, like Burns', posits that the encroachment of Capital into every sphere of political activism is inescapable. Ultimately, then, I would argue that it is the combination of the complexity and density

of Burns' work and the political pessimism, that accounts for one factor in the neglect of his work, and one which applies specifically to Burns. More broadly, as I have argued in chapter one of this thesis, the debates about realism and experimentation, and about the legacy of modernism, that occurred during the time Burns was writing, and went on to be a significant component of subsequent academic debates in the 1980s and beyond, often positioned Burns, and his peers who wrote avant-garde works, as on the losing side of history. This view, championed by a wide range of critics, is exemplified in the work of Andrzej Gasiorek who argues that realism re-emerges as the dominant force in literature, and is the only plausible response to the political situation after World War Two.

This view of realism, however broadly defined the term is, runs contrary to the strategies of the avant-garde writers of the 1960s and 70s. And perhaps one of the main reasons for Burns' critical neglect, for the lack of academic writing that engages deeply with his work (as opposed to conjuring his name as part of a list of writers to be dismissed, as Gasiorek and other critics do), is down to the vehemence with which he rejects the realist position during the experimental phase of his career, perhaps a greater vehemence than any of his British contemporaries. But it may also be a product of the incoherence of Burns' career, despite the thematic and methodological continuities that I have outlined. The 'break' in Burns' approach, his move away from the experimental, towards a more straightforward, directly political, novel, makes his career difficult to categorise, and to historicise.

Burns' work anticipates a number of our current political and social realities. His interest in the celebrity and his use of real, living, people in his novels⁶ has a great deal of resonance and application today. Burns' work anticipates reality television's interested in a slightly skewed, augmented, version of 'realism' and its use of real people to construct narratives. The surfeit of information and stimuli that we experience when engaging with contemporary media, particularly on the internet, where it's possible to move rapidly between media, subject matter, and to experience information simultaneously, is not only predicted by Burns, but his work attempts to convey the experience of that simultaneity. This plenitude of information seems so commonplace now as to be unnoticeable; the insights of Burns' fiction have become part of our everyday

⁶ Though some sources (see, for example: Aaron Shulman's recent interview with Coover for *Believer Magazine* (http://www.believermag.com/issues/201508/?read=interview_coover), accessed 8/11/15, which suggests that Robert Coover was the first to depict real living people in *The Public Burning* (1997), this novel appears much later than Burns' *Babel* (1968) and *Dreamerika!* (1972), (as well as work by JG Ballard). Coover's use of still-living people in *The Public Burning* is discussed in detail in Thomas LeClair, 'Robert Coover, *The Public Burning*, and the Art of Excess' in *Critique* 23.3 (Spring 1982)

experience. And while theorists such as Alvin Toffler wrote about the potential effects of “information overload”⁷, as he called it, few novelists have tackled the subject with as much prescience as Burns. Beyond that, Burns saw the political implications of this abundance of information, and the way in which it is linked to systems of surveillance and control. By replicating some of those strategies, Burns sought a *détournement*, sought to use the tools of power against power. Burns’ insight, one which separates him from a writer like William Burroughs, for whom the cut-up is a means of revealing the underlying currents of power, is that the cut-up, the fragment, is itself a strategy employed by the State. Information overload is not merely a consequence of changes in technology and developments in media, but is also a calculated political device.

Finally, I would like to offer a few remarks on why Burns should be considered an important novelist, worthy of more attention and scholarship. What I have described as the “density” of Burns’ prose – both the way in which it accumulates detail, incorporates multiple narrative perspectives, and shifts rapidly at the sentence level and, at a structural level, creates a sense of coherence through recurring themes and motifs – creates a singular, at times disorientating, reading experience. Burns’ body of work deserves more critical and academic attention than it has received. Burns’ novels and other works, at their best, challenge assumptions about what the novel is capable of, and show the limits of literary realism. Burns’, who once claimed that it was the ‘realism’ part of surrealism that was the most important, sought a sense of the more-real-than-realism in his writing, a concreteness of experience which could detail minutely the multiplicity of experiences, the fragmentation and the lines of power and ideology that are contained in a single moment. In this sense he is aligned with the major lineaments of the avant-garde in the twentieth century, and is a vital node in its history in Britain.

With Burns, as with all experimental, political, writers, the importance of his work is not negated by the lack of critical attention that he received. In fact, in many ways, and as previously discussed, Burns was part of the mainstream (as lawyer, as academic, and as member of an elite and educated class), and in spite of all of this, he still chose to use his position to further a radical political discourse and in so doing, developed a mode of writing that has been adopted widely in experimental prose. The vertiginous, diabolical vignettes of *Babel*, the rapid-fire exoskeletal images of celebrity, murder, and pop culture that appear in *Dreamerika!*, and the dissection of misogyny and class in *The Day that Daddy Died*, not only represent the intense anxieties of midcentury Anglophone culture, but also feel fresh, relevant, and timely to a contemporary reader, predicting current discourses around intersectionality, rape culture, celebrity, and late stage capitalism, as well as appealing to our post-Internet concentration spans, and obsession with rapid-fire visual

⁷ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, (New York: Random House, 1971), p.183

data. Burns' work was prescient at the time of writing, and now, as once-obscure leftist political philosophies such as intersectionality have become part of mainstream culture, his work has never been more relevant or accessible.

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