

‘Afterwards always came after before’: Post-Catastrophic Space-Time in the Plays of Graves and MacNeice

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Writing of the Campaign for Real Time in his novel *Life, the Universe and Everything*, Douglas Adams effects a deft encapsulation-cum-satirisation of both the homogenising effects of globalisation and the lamentations of those who observe with consternation the rise of the ‘filthy modern tide’:

So a lot of history is now gone for ever. The Campaign for Real Timers claim that just as easy travel eroded the differences between one country and another, and between one world and another, so time travel is now eroding the differences between one age and another. ‘The past,’ they say, ‘is now truly like a foreign country. They do things exactly the same there.’¹

Had Adams’s character Slartibartfast been a thirties poet, he might well have been Dick Tompion. In Robert Graves’s *But It Still Goes On* (1930),² Dick, a poet of ‘the so-called younger generation’ (p. 145), is asked by his friend and hapless admirer David for an example of the changes wrought by an unspecified global catastrophe that underpins the play. Having first established only that the catastrophe might best be described as ‘the moment when the last straw broke the back of reality, when the one unnecessary person too many was born’ (p. 154), he answers David thus:

Well, take Time for instance. In pre-catastrophic days afterwards always came after before. Now it doesn’t, necessarily, at all. Things are over before they happen, out

of fashion before they are in. That's killed all sense of anticipation and climax. As for Space, that's finished, too. You can go round the world from city to city now, always stopping at the same hotel. (pp. 155–56)

As satire, Dick's railing against modernity is somewhat heavy-handed, and is as lacking in originality as it is in flair. Indeed, it is but one relatively harmless example of an ongoing would-be satirical polemic that quickly degenerates into something far nastier. As an example of what I will be proposing as a phenomenology of the post-catastrophic, however, it is suggestive of a new model of spatio-temporal recurrence with the potential for application in diverse areas of study, from varying genres of speculative fiction to trauma narratives.³

Crucially, I would also suggest that post-catastrophic space-time as outlined below is an approach which is of particular interest to Gravesians, in that it lends itself to the reading of postwar literatures in phenomenological terms other than those belonging to the post-traumatic. More significantly still, this gives us the opportunity to read Graves in conjunction with writers who have traditionally been excluded from a discourse which privileges the post-traumatic and indeed the first of the World Wars. In suggesting that Graves and MacNeice are part of an ongoing tradition of post-catastrophic writing, specifically within the subgenre of the postwar post-catastrophic, we are able to bring into dialogue writers who might not otherwise be considered alongside one another. With regard to *But It Still Goes On* and the radio plays of Louis MacNeice, chiefly among them his WWII-inspired *Prisoner's Progress* (1954), a close reading in the light of a post-catastrophic theory of space-time gives us a means of bringing works which are something of a niche interest for Gravesians and MacNeiceans alike to the forefront of a new critical approach which has the potential for much wider literary application.

Breaking the back of reality: defining the post-catastrophic

In order to arrive at a definition of post-catastrophic space-time, it is first necessary to establish the ways in which it is related to and yet remains distinct from a post-traumatic phenomenology of spatio-temporality. According to Cathy Caruth's reading of Freud, the post-traumatic experience is one of compromised temporal integrity. The defence-mechanism of consciousness, which ordinarily would place a stimulus within an ordered experience of time, is breached. Thus '[w]hat causes trauma [. . .] is a shock that appears to work very much like a threat to the body's spatial integrity, but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time'. The nightmarish repetition of trauma, as a consequence of 'the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly', is therefore a recurring moment of breakage:

It is not [. . .] the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind one moment too late. The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known. And it is this lack of direct experience that, paradoxically, becomes the basis of the repetition.⁴

The phenomenon I am calling post-catastrophic space-time, whilst compatible with trauma narratives, differs from post-traumatic space-time in several important respects. Firstly, I am distinguishing the catastrophic as a piece of specific terminology from the catastrophic as an evocative but arbitrary choice of adjective; the catastrophic as a phenomenon in its own right as opposed to the catastrophic as an aspect of trauma. In Caruth's definition of post-traumatic stress disorder, she speaks of 'an

overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena'.⁵ While her use of the word 'catastrophic' is by no means a misuse, there is evidence to suggest that it is at least a non-specific use, in that she also speaks of 'the unavoidable reality of horrific events', 'external violence', and 'destructiveness', as well as the umbrella term 'catastrophic experience' (p. 58). These are synonyms, not concrete terminologies. The kernel of Caruth's argument in her reading of Freud is that 'the painful repetition of the flashback can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event *that has not been given psychic meaning in any way*' (my emphasis) (p. 59). The sudden and the catastrophic are, therefore, two words which, for Caruth, are appropriate to her sense of the traumatic event as something which is both intrusive, in the way in which it forces itself upon the psyche without preparation, and violent, by virtue of that intrusiveness. The catastrophic as a term specific to the way in which I intend to use it is, fundamentally, an overturning, as the etymology of the word attests. It is an overturning, moreover, which has in both its English definition and in literary applications of its Greek root the sense of a subversion of the orders and systems by which we live our lives. The catastrophic I am therefore defining as significant and disruptive change in the parameters of human experience.⁶

Secondly, it follows that, given that the traumatic event and the catastrophic event can be described as an intrusion and an overturning respectively, the ways in which they disrupt the human experience of linear time are similarly distinct from one another. The traumatic event constitutes a breakage in the psyche's ability to process linear time, giving rise to post-traumatic recurrence that occurs in order to give the traumatic event psychic meaning – a reclaiming of a missed experience. The catastrophic, however, overturns the structures within which we experience reality, with the result that post-catastrophic recurrence

is experienced across the whole of that reality, both before and after the event. To illustrate this further, I will be borrowing from Paul Ricoeur his use of the term ‘always already’, which he uses to describe the way in which symbolic mediation is a prerequisite of the narration of human action:

If, in fact, human action can be narrated, it is because it is always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms. It is always already symbolically mediated.⁷

Ricoeur goes on to accept a definition of the symbolic that is ‘not in the mind, not a psychological operation destined to guide action, but a meaning incorporated into action and decipherable from it by other actors in the social interplay’ (p. 57). I, too, intend to accept this definition, in that the symbolism of the signs, rules, and norms constituting the framework within which reality is understood is not innate. However, I wish explicitly to extend symbolism-as-structure to the subjective plane as well as the objective plane – both the objectively codified ‘conventions, beliefs, and institutions that make up the symbolic framework of a culture’, and the subjective perception of the same (p. 57). The catastrophic event, I would argue from this, is that which overturns the always-already of a symbolic system, replacing it with a new, altered, or transformed system that becomes the new always-already. Not only is the catastrophic event the genie that cannot be put back in the bottle, but it is also the genie that has always-already been released.

I would go on to suggest that post-catastrophic recurrence is therefore a pantemporal phenomenon, in that an overturning of the always-already by which we are able to mediate the human experience of reality has repercussions in the past as well as the future. Thus there is a conflict between the linear time in which the event is experienced – whether the realisation of having had that experience comes slowly or as a moment of epiphany – and the non-linear time in which the event recurs. Because the

catastrophic event alters the way in which both the future *and* past are experienced, there is therefore an effect whereby one's entire experience of reality becomes symptomatic of the event having occurred. Sense of continuity is no longer linear, but radiates outwards from a point in linear time, which, by the very fact that the past, present, and future function as a series of symptomatic shockwaves, seems to occur across the whole of time and space. What is more, it is a model of spatio-temporal recurrence which, by virtue of its pantemporal nature in conflict with the linear time in which it occurs, is characterised by two overwhelming anxieties: about the homogenisation of experience and about the possibility of points of origin.

To understand this, we must further ground the post-catastrophic in narrative theory, specifically Ricoeur's reading of Augustine's *Confessions*. According to the Augustinian model, we experience time not as past, present, and future, but as a threefold present, which is located in the self:

[T]here are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things to come. In the soul there are three aspects of time, and I do not see them anywhere else. The present concerning the past is the memory, the present concerning the present is immediate awareness, the present concerning the future is expectation.⁸

Moreover, just as it is in the soul that these three aspects of time exist, it is in the mind that the passage of time is measured.

The impression which passing events make upon you abides when they are gone. That present consciousness is what I am measuring, not the stream of past events which have caused it. When I measure periods of time, that is what I am actually measuring. Therefore, either this is what time is, or time is not what I am measuring. (p. 242)

Thus it is suggested that the narrative act is that which constitutes the human experience of time as mediated through language.

When a true narrative of the past is related, the memory produces not the actual events which have passed away but words conceived from images of them, which they fixed in the mind like imprints as they passed through the senses. (p. 234)

For Ricoeur, one of the most significant aspects of the threefold present is that the spatiality inherent in Augustine's reasoning is one created by 'an action that shortens expectation and extends memory', to the effect that we are 'no longer misled by the representation of two places, one of which is filled up as the other is emptied'.⁹ Rather the threefold activity of the mind, which expects/attends/remembers, is responsible for the *distentio* of the soul, which creates spatialities of memory – the present of things past – and expectation – the present of things yet to come. Thus our experience of linear spatio-temporality is created through the impression of sign images by the mind upon the self or soul, which is extended through the threefold activity of memory, attention, and expectation. However, if the always-already – which is the pre-existing framework within which we experience time as threefold present – is overturned by means of the catastrophic, then it occurs and recurs not only in the present as present, but also in the present as memory and expectation. Given that we are only able to experience the past through the action of the mind upon passive sign-images which are always already symbolically mediated, post-catastrophic recurrence is pantemporal insofar as the always-already dictates the parameters within which the temporal space of memory is created. Thus we might hypothesise that there is inherent in the post-catastrophic an anxiety as to points of origin in that, to the post-catastrophic subject, the catastrophic event has always already happened. In continuation of this hypothesis, the fact that the catastrophic

occurs across the whole subjective experience of spatio-temporality is highly suggestive of a similar anxiety as to the homogenisation of the experience of linear time, which, in the wake of the catastrophic event, can be perceived to have been reduced to a series of symptomatic shockwaves.

With this theoretical framework in mind, I intend to argue that these twin anxieties, the possibility of origin and the homogenisation of spatio-temporal experience, are characteristic of the postwar post-catastrophic, and that the plays of Graves and MacNeice referred to ought to be considered as prime examples of this subgenre. Indeed, as authors who, in these plays, have in common a preoccupation with exploring these anxieties, their focus on war is less as a cause of post-traumatic recurrence than on war as a symptom of the kind of spatio-temporal recurrence characteristic of the post-catastrophic. Though their experiences of war are very different, not least because MacNeice's adult wartime experience was of WWII rather than WWI and in a non-soldiering capacity, a consideration of these two authors together enables us to explore the ways in which a theory of post-catastrophic space-time allows us to view them as being a part of the same literary phenomenon. (Though MacNeice never saw active service as a member of the British Army, he did witness at first hand both the Spanish Civil War and the London Blitz.) Indeed, a comparison of *But It Still Goes On* with Louis MacNeice's *Prisoner's Progress* (1954) suggests that the post-catastrophic ought not to be seen as an extension of the post-traumatic but as a distinct phenomenon in these dramas. As I intend to show through a close reading of the plays, both Graves and MacNeice have frequent recourse to a model of space-time wherein potentially traumatic events are seen as symptoms of the post-catastrophic, as déjà-vu-laced punctuations in the lives of protagonists who appear to be grappling with the possibility of an event that subverted the orders and systems by which their lives had previously been lived.

There since always: Graves, MacNeice, and post-catastrophic space-time

In *But It Still Goes On*, Dick Tompion, a poet and the son of a commercially successful writer, instigates what he calls ‘an interesting and instructive round-game for any number of players’ by putting a loaded ex-army revolver into circulation among the other characters of the play. Having shot a pair of gardening shears out of his father’s hand from the window of his father’s study by way of illustrating ‘the bottom [having] dropped out of things’ – the unnamed catastrophe – Dick convinces him that the shot was in fact fired by a jealous rival poet, Richard Pritchard, and has the revolver sent in the post to his father, making him believe that the sender is this same poet. When Dick is asked by his friend and hapless admirer David whether the resulting ‘romping elimination of the unfit’ is to be ‘farce or tragedy’, Dick replies that the distinction ‘isn’t relevant any longer’, and that ‘if [he] *must* have a label, [to] call it a Post-Catastrophic Comedy’ (pp. 109-114).

What is striking about Dick’s use of the revolver to illustrate the way in which the catastrophe and its aftermath occurred is that, initially, it bears all the hallmarks of post-traumatic space-time.

DICK. [...] The crash was so terrific that nobody heard it – but it sent everyone mad all the same.

DAVID. And the War was part of the madness, I suppose?

DICK. Yes. First there was a shocked pause – two years; then . . . Wait a second, I’ll show you.

[...]

DICK. [...] There was this sudden unexpected terrific crash. . . . And what did people do? What you’ve just done. Paused for a moment and then went mad. (p. 109)

Here we have an event that happens too quickly to be given psychic meaning followed by ‘a counter-noise to the noise the

bottom made dropping out of things' (p. 109). However, though there is undoubtedly a traumatic aspect of Dick's global catastrophe, three things become clear as the play goes on: firstly, the initial trauma is not war trauma; secondly, just as WWI is both a symptom and cause of the post-traumatic, so too can the crash Dick describes be experienced both as a traumatic event and a catastrophic event; thirdly, if the crash can have both traumatic and catastrophic consequences, then the war can be symptomatic of both post-traumatic and post-catastrophic recurrence. Indeed, it becomes apparent in the play that the post-catastrophic and the post-traumatic come frequently into conflict, insofar as they represent two conceptual spatio-temporalities occupying the same co-ordinates in place-time.

As an item with a direct association with Dick's wartime experience, the Webley revolver is something of a *memento mori*. This not only in the conventional sense of death being the ultimate inevitability, but also in the sense that death is within one's own control: 'This thing reminds me not only that death must eventually come, but that I can fix whatever date suits me' (p. 110).

The last time the Webley was used to this effect, however, was in Dick's botched suicide attempt in the trenches, which was the fourth and final time he used it in this context 'apart from rat-shooting':

Once to kill a pack-mule, wounded in the belly – guts hanging out – once in that raid near Bouchavesnes to plug a German – it took the top of his head off – once at Bullecourt – you weren't with us then – on a man of my own company – 91 Evans his name was – when he wouldn't get out of the trench to attack. And once on myself the same night when I came back alone and found 91 Evans' corpse grinning at me with a bloody mouth, the only other man in the trench. A shell burst just as I pulled the trigger and it spoilt my aim. The bullet glanced off. Here's the scar (p. 110).

This is a powerful passage and a significant one in terms of the post-catastrophic. The revolver for Dick does not represent the missed experience of the post-traumatic, but is symptomatic of the overturning whereby he comes to believe that the ‘proper person’ is being replaced with ‘population’ (p. 154). A dying pack-mule, a German soldier, 91 Evans, and Dick Tompion himself are reduced to the status of surplus population through the repeated action of pulling the trigger. Moreover, it is not the revolver but the bursting shell that causes Dick to miss the experience of having survived – of having had his ability to control his fate taken from him. Dick’s attempt to make the homogenised act of destruction significant through ending his own life is instead symptomatic of his post-catastrophic awareness that ‘[i]t’s finished; except that it still goes on’ (p. 108).

This conflict of post-traumatic and post-catastrophic reverberates throughout *But It Still Goes On* in a series of tragi-farcical human relationships which have in common a fascination with points of origin and the possibility of their being extended backwards or forwards in time. Take for example the discourse on homosexuality which occurs between Charlotte and David and its consequences. To contextualise this discourse, a brief outline of who is in love with whom is necessary. David is in love with his best friend, Dick, but marries Dick’s sister, Dorothy, a naïve doctor who is genuinely in love with David. Charlotte is in exactly the same predicament – in love with her best friend, Dorothy – but attempts to persuade Dorothy’s brother, Dick, to marry her. Dick refuses, despite being genuinely in love with Charlotte, realising that Charlotte cannot force herself to be physically attracted to him and imploring her to be ‘content to remain as God made you’ (p. 138). Charlotte then marries Dick’s father, Cecil Tompion, out of spite. She becomes pregnant, and subsequently throws herself over the bannisters after leaving behind incriminating love-letters to Dick, insinuating, falsely, that he is in fact the father of her child. Charlotte survives the fall just long enough to give birth.

Earlier in the play, Charlotte and David, crippled with a self-destructive homophobia, discuss their sexualities in terms of continuities and events. This disturbing scene culminates in a decidedly sinister resolve to experiment with heteronormativity.

CHARLOTTE. You said just now 'it's the way one's born.'
Do you believe that?

DAVID. I meant that it's no crime – just a misfortune. You do agree, Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE. What *I* mean is, do you think that it's something one's born with or something that happens to one, say, at school? Something that can be got over?

DAVID. Well, of course, *that's* the important question. Probably there are two types. The congenital and the acquired. That's what's usually said. But I don't know.

CHARLOTTE. We neither of us look congenitals, do we?
[*They laugh.*] (p. 123).

This leads to Charlotte recounting an experience with an older girl named Bridget at school for which she was expelled, leading David to speculate that it might have been a traumatic event.

DAVID. So that's the story. And I suppose since that shock you've stayed temperamentally where it hit you. Arrested emotional development?

CHARLOTTE. Maybe it's that. Maybe it isn't. That's what I'm anxious to know (p. 124).

Indeed, the shellshocked David is a character whose belief that his sexuality is something which has happened to him rather than something he was born with leads him to suggest that Charlotte's sexuality is symptomatic of her having received a shock she was not able to process. Charlotte, however, appears to be aware that there is a conflict between the post-traumatic and the post-catastrophic in that, while her willingness to experiment to the

point of self-destruction is based in part on an assumption that she can ‘get over’ her sexuality, she does entertain the possibility that her expulsion from school and the realisation of her sexuality are separate phenomena. While her expulsion is indeed a traumatic event, it is indicated that the realisation of her sexuality is an overturning rather than an intrusion, and as such is inherently neither a positive nor a negative experience. This is suggested by the way in which she recounts this series of events.

Well, the notes got more and more – of course, absolutely what’s called *innocent* – but more and more extravagant. She used to begin hers ‘My darling little wife,’ and I began mine, ‘My darling husband.’ Silly! (p. 124).

Here we see that the always-already within such words as ‘wife’ and husband’ exist has been overturned. Though the gender dimension of marital relationships is preserved and the language of those relationships has remained unaltered, there has been an overturning in that Charlotte and her schoolgirl crush now operate within subjective parameters whereby there is no longer a conflation of gender and sex; only the cyphers of social relations remain. Charlotte’s subsequent actions are symptomatic of a troubled and quasi-incestuous obsession with the idea of when an event can be said to occur and how far backwards or forwards its effects can be felt, which is prevalent throughout *But It Still Goes On*. She seems unable to decide whether the event of her having been expelled from school for writing love-letters to another girl was an overturning of the always-already, or whether it was itself symptomatic of an earlier overturning. Just as Dick begins to see life as a series of repetitions populated with ‘unnecessary’ people, where past, present, and future are a homogenous mass and one place is much the same as another, so Charlotte’s actions are those of one who sees the world in terms of sameness, every moment a repetition of a catastrophe whose origin is contested. Once she has determined to experiment with heteronormativity and interrogate

the question of whether or not her sexuality has an origin, a brother becomes a substitute for a sister and a father for a son. Distinctions are obliterated, as is, eventually, the figure of the father-progenitor when he commits suicide at the end of the play, having made a pass at Charlotte's sister as she lay dying.

These features of post-catastrophic space-time are markedly present in certain of the radio plays of Louis MacNeice.

Prisoner's Progress is a parable play which 'exists on two planes' and takes place in a prisoner-of-war camp in a World-War-II-based scenario where '[t]he Greys are on our side, the Browns are the enemy'.¹⁰ In the play, a Grey prisoner called Waters arrives in the camp and finds himself caught up in an escape attempt over a literal and metaphorical mountain. When he asks the name of it, he is told 'Oh, everyone calls it the mountain. If you wanted to escape from here, that's what you'd have to get over' (p. 159). His chief complaint when he comes to speak to the Chaplain, moreover, is of a sense of profound *déjà-vu*.

You see, this camp, this whole inane insane muddle of bits and pieces, this make-believe work and make-believe play and make-believe quarrels and intrigues and friendships, this averagely odd and oddly average community, misers and morons and scapegoats and scavengers, snow-blind, sand-happy, punch-drunk, thought-shy with enemy's wire and our own red tape all round us, with the snoopers and the searchlights and the rollcalls – oh well, what do you expect. [. . .] Padre, I've been here before. [. . .] I've been here long, long, before – almost before I can remember. And what's more, I've never really left here. That mountain up there, it's always been between me and the sun. (pp. 160–61)

The mountain in *Prisoner's Progress* is an ingeniously radiocentric bit of semiotisation. It is both a literal and non-literal sign-vehicle, standing simultaneously for the objective mountain and the subjective thing they call the mountain, and with no clear

distinction as to which of the two planes on which the play exists is being referred to, due to the non-visual nature of radio. Space, with a little help from the specificity of the medium, is collapsed. As with *But It Still Goes On*, war – in this case WWII – is not narrowly viewed as a cause of post-catastrophic anxieties but as a symptom of an earlier upheaval or series of upheavals, which seem to defy the nature of linear chronology in that they appear to have originated beyond themselves and at every point in space-time.

Ostensibly, the cause of Waters's angst is the fact that he is illegitimate, and that the first time he met his father, his father made a pass at his wife, leaving him with a decidedly misogynistic outlook, a hastily-embarked-upon military career, and a litany of 'if onlies' (p. 159):

If only they hadn't moved us to that sector.
If only I hadn't gone up for a commission.
If only I hadn't joined up in the first place.
If only I hadn't married Vera.
If only I hadn't met my father.
If only he hadn't met my mother.
If only . . . if only . . . if only. (p. 160)

The similarities between this passage and *But It Still Goes On* are striking, not only because each 'if only' is a recurrence of the catastrophic, but because Waters's sense of the same is bound up with quasi-incestuous anxieties and questions of legitimacy and origin. Indeed, the eventual escape over the mountain is effected via the compound which holds the female Grey prisoners, which they access via a Neolithic tomb. Here MacNeice references an absent body which would, if found, have been 'in the foetal position. You know, like in the womb', thus signposting his association of womb with tomb for his listening audience (p. 177). The uneasy conflation of birth and death, of an escape into and from life, is symptomatic of the sameness that is a result of the post-catastrophic. Waters holds his conception, his marriage, his

being cuckolded, his wartime experience, and his imprisonment to be on a par, in that they each occupy the same imaginative space of the 'if only', the crucial moment at which the order of things is changed forever.

This sameness of time and space is accentuated by MacNeice's manipulation of the listener's objective faculty of hearing at the point when, delirious and hunted, Waters and Alison, a female Grey prisoner with whom he falls unexpectedly in love, and with whom he makes his final attempt at escape, begin to have auditory hallucinations on the mountain. Time and space seem to collapse in on one another and to exist simultaneously in one space of auditory perception. Waters is the first to hear things, believing he can hear an accordion playing, the way it was once played by Catsmeat the cook in the camp:

(Pause; then fade up distant accordion 'Lavender's Blue', then behind)

WATERS Alison? Do you hear anything?

ALISON No. Do you?

WATERS Yes. I hear an accordion.

ALISON What! *(Pause)* You're hearing things, dear. (p. 192)

Though Alison cannot hear it, the audience can, as it is included as a sound effect. Alison, on the other hand, hears a ticking clock, which Waters cannot hear but again the audience can.

(Fade up tick-tock increasing in volume behind)

ALISON Your wrist-watch sounds very loud.

WATERS My wrist-watch doesn't sound at all. It's you who're hearing things now.

(Fade up tick-tock). (p. 193)

These two instances, moreover, occur after two key moments during which Waters and Alison recognise in each other a

similarity in outlook. Alison, it is revealed, lost her baby in an air-raid, and Waters, in a pronouncement which redoubles its significance when compared with Dick Tompion's sense that the world is overpopulated by unnecessary people and that 'proper people' are few and far between, says to Alison that 'I think you *are* another person. Both another and a person' (p. 192). This recognition of Alison as an individual, as a catastrophic centre in her own right rather than a symptom of his own sense of the catastrophic, comes after Alison, doubtful that problems can ever really be said to begin, speculates, 'I think they've been here from always' (p. 193). Time and space are homogenised for both of them, with the objectively real and the subjectively real existing on the same objective plane of broadcasted sound. This, of course, makes the final moments of the play all the more harrowing, in that Waters tries to convince Alison that the sound of dogs on their tail is also in her imagination. Finally, they stand on the col of the mountain and see the other side and, having recognised one another as individuals rather than as repetitions of the sameness which punctuates their lives, decide to embrace both life and death by making a run for it – suicide with 'a joy of life thrown in' (p. 197).

The idea of problems being 'there since always' in combination with having control over one's death and the death of others is central both to *Prisoner's Progress* and *But It Still Goes On*, and is suggestive of the way in which the catastrophic event overturns the always-already of the post-catastrophic subject. In these plays, death is used creatively as a means of escaping the 'always' which characterises post-catastrophic space-time – an 'always' which sees the variety and the uniqueness of the moments which make up a personal timeline reduced to sameness. In *But It Still Goes On*, for instance, Dick describes Charlotte's marriage to his father as 'an unnecessarily disgusting way of committing suicide', and indeed her eventual and grotesquely calculated demise can be seen as an attempt to put an end to the eternal point of catastrophic origin by her intention to do away with one of its manifestations in

the form of her own pregnant body (p. 142). The Webley revolver, meanwhile, is a means not only of fixing the point of one's own death but of bringing about the deaths of those Dick refers to rather chillingly as 'the unnecessaries', thus leaving more room for people who, in Dick's view, count, or could be counted, thereby lessening the anonymity of the homogenous masses (p. 154). In *Prisoner's Progress*, too, the decision made by Waters and Alison to embrace the possibility of death, if it means that they might live, is a means of renouncing the sameness of eternity, setting their sights on the '[c]hance in a thousand', which is their prospect of survival and literally running for it – 'it' being something unique among an unchanging spatio-temporal landscape of 'always' (p. 197). Against the sameness of the post-catastrophic space-time continuum, both Graves and MacNeice place a renewed importance upon actions which break that monotony, thereby rendering existence 'not [. . .] only / A drag from numbered stone to numbered stone'.¹¹ The homicides and experimentations of *But It Still Goes On* are merely a more overtly troubled and, in that the play ends with the catastrophe continuing to manifest itself, more tragic incarnation of that now famously MacNeicean celebration of giddy plurality in the face of a world of lethal automata. In a play-world where acts of creation are swamped by a perception of a life as mere population, Graves's characters bring acts of meaningful destruction to the spatio-temporal collapse that is the post-catastrophic experience, but are ultimately unable to escape from it.

But It Still Goes On is in many ways a problematic play, swinging wildly between tragedy and farce, and providing, amongst other things, a seemingly apologist view of homicide. A reading of the play in the light of post-catastrophic space-time may not and indeed should not explain away these problems entirely, but it certainly goes some way towards hinting at their being part of a wider literary phenomenon of deliberately war-conscious writing which perspectivises war as a symptom of the eternity of the catastrophic. Moreover, de-emphasising military

service as the singular cause of destructive models of spatio-temporal recurrence opens up to a post-catastrophic treatment the writings of many other writers who weren't soldiers; writers like MacNeice, who used the shared public consciousness of there being 'a war on' – or of there having been 'a war on' – to address the ways in which the rhythms of the catastrophic reverberate across the whole of space and time (p. 104). There are genres of the post-catastrophic – this much is clear. Dick Tompion's glib neologism of 'Post-Catastrophic Comedy' may be insufficient to describe the postwar post-catastrophic genre to which both *Prisoner's Progress* and *But It Still Goes On* arguably belong. With further application, however, it may yet form the basis of an area of study in which Graves's play in particular will undoubtedly have a significant place.

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NOTES

¹ Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: The Trilogy of Four* (London: Picador, 2002), p. 494.

² Robert Graves, *But It Still Goes On: A Play in Three Acts* (1930), repr. in *Occupation: Writer* (London: Cassell, 1951).

³ On 17 June 2013 I presented a paper entitled 'Total event collapse: post-catastrophic space-time and its place in speculative fiction' at the third annual CRSF conference held at the University of Liverpool, having given the paper on which this article is based in September 2012 at the Eleventh International Robert Graves Conference in Oxford. Arthur Newman, a postgraduate student at the University of Ulster, also gave a paper at CRSF 2013 based on my theoretical framework, entitled "'An argument in time": *Iron Council* by China Miéville as a post-catastrophic novel'.

⁴ Cathy Caruth, 'Violence and Time: Traumatic Survivals', *Assemblage*, 20 (1993), 24–25.

⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History* (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), pp. 57–58.

⁶ The *OED* defines catastrophe as ‘an event producing a subversion of the order or system of things’ (3a), and derives the English term from the Greek *καταστροφή*, literally *κατα*, ‘over’ + *στροφή*, ‘turning’. Also see Sommerstein’s translation of lines 490–91 of Aeschylus’s *Eumenides* – ‘καταστροφαι νόμων/θεσμίων’ – as ‘the overthrow of ordained laws’; Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, ed. by Alan H. Sommerstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 172.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), I, p. 57.

⁸ St Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 235.

⁹ *Time and Narrative*, I, pp. 19–20.

¹⁰ Louis MacNeice, *Selected Plays*, ed. by Alan Heuser and Peter McDonald (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 151, 155.

¹¹ Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Peter McDonald (London: Faber, 2007), p. 108.