

THE POETRY AND DRAMA OF NORMAN NICHOLSON

with reference to

contemporary English provincial poetry

and the Christian Drama of the 1940s and 1950s.

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PREFACE.

In this study I shall attempt to discuss, as fully as possible, the poetry and plays of the Cumberland writer Norman Nicholson. Though occasional articles on his poetry have been published, and though short chapters on one or two of his plays have appeared in books surveying modern Christian drama, no detailed, full-length study of Nicholson's creative work has so far been made. Such a study, of a writer who, though perhaps minor, has made a contribution to contemporary English literature which can reasonably be described as unique, seems to me overdue.

Nicholson's claim to literary importance rests primarily on his poetry and plays, but in addition to being a poet and dramatist he is also a man of letters. Early ill-health imposed on him the need to earn a living entirely by writing, and he has produced short stories, novels, a number of critical and topographical books, and many articles and reviews.

Almost all Nicholson's work springs from a twofold common source: his religious beliefs and his close involvement with his own geographical area. It is therefore impossible to

consider his poems and plays in isolation, and I shall throughout refer to his secondary writings wherever these shed useful light on the main material of my study. In addition I shall place Nicholson in the context of his region and present such biographical material as will assist an understanding of his development as a creative writer.

The preparation of a study on a living writer has inevitably involved me in the accumulation of debts to many people without whose help my work would have been much the poorer, and it is with a particularly personal pleasure and gratitude that I acknowledge their help here.

My greatest debt is to Norman Nicholson himself, who over a number of years has answered my many questions, welcomed me into his home, and allowed me free access to material which I should not otherwise have been able to examine. His wife, Mrs. Yvonne Nicholson, and his step-mother, Mrs. Rosetta Nicholson, have also put themselves out to make my visits to Millom fruitful and enjoyable.

Without the generous assistance of Brother George Every, S.S.M., who placed at my disposal many of Nicholson's early

manuscripts and letters, my documentation of Nicholson's poetic development would have been woefully incomplete. Mrs. C.B. Schiff (née Bessie Satterthwaite) has also provided me with early manuscript poems and given me her valuable impressions of Nicholson's schooldays and youth. For my introduction to Mrs. Schiff I am indebted to Professor W. Moelwyn Merchant, who has in addition shown much helpful interest in my work. Mrs. Anne Ridler kindly sent me a copy of an unpublished letter to her from T.S. Eliot, in which Eliot expressed his view of Nicholson's work. Mrs. Janet Carleton (Janet Adam Smith) supplied me with her recollections of a visit Nicholson once paid her in the early nineteen-forties, and Miss Pamela Kelly gave information about her productions of Birth by Drowning. Professor William Brasmer, of Denison University, Ohio, sent me many details of his university's productions of A Match for the Devil and Prophecy to the Wind. Miss H.Q. Iredale, of S. Katharine's College, Liverpool, lent me useful material on the history of Millom, and Mr. D.A.M. Pollard, of the same college, allowed me to consult his unpublished London M.A. thesis on the poetry of William Barnes and Thomas Hardy.

During my two years in the Department of English Literature of Liverpool University I have profited from the assistance of Professor Kenneth Muir, who lent me copies of literary magazines now difficult to obtain. My supervisor, Professor Kenneth Allott, has by his scrupulous attention to detail improved my style in many places, and his keen criticism has never failed to point out weaknesses of argument and to eliminate unnecessary verbiage. I am grateful to Mrs. M. Thompson, Departmental Secretary, who typed my manuscript; to Mr. A.N. Ricketts and the staff of the Harold Cohen Library; and to my friend Mr. S. Gordon Redding, who spared much valuable time to prepare the map of Cumberland which appears as Appendix A.

My final thanks go to The Canada Council, whose generous research fellowship made this study possible; to Mr. George Rylands, who has encouraged me throughout my time in England; and to my wife, who has sharpened my critical faculties in frequent discussion and who has given invaluable assistance when my flagging energies made the work of shaping material into an orderly form, particularly in Chapter Five, seem almost impossible.

INTRODUCTION

In August 1967, at a small gathering in London of writers and members of The Royal Society of Literature, Norman Nicholson was awarded the Cholmondeley Prize for Poetry. Making the presentation, William Plomer, one of the judges, referred to Nicholson as a 'regional' poet. It may be helpful to examine the meaning of this term, as it provides a convenient starting-point, a literary perspective in which his work can be seen.

Primarily, what Plomer meant to indicate by 'regional' was the obvious fact that Nicholson is thought of as a Cumberland poet, the product and spokesman of a particular area. The titles of many of his poems are local place-names, much of their subject-matter is local places; one of his books is the standard guide to Cumberland and Westmorland.¹ What Plomer did not mean to imply, and what it would be a great mistake to infer, is that Nicholson's work is merely regional, outside, and of no relevance to, the dominant metropolitan literary tradition. Nicholson himself, in a number of broadcast-talks,

1. Cumberland and Westmorland. 'County Books' series, Robert Hale, 1949.

has faced the slight implicit criticism of the 'regional' label by describing himself, more polemically, as a 'provincial'. By challenging the reader's stock response to this word (defined in the N.E.D. as implying narrowness, and for Dr. Johnson synonymous with 'rude and unpolished') he has sought to show that the man from 'the provinces' (and, by extension, the provincial writer) is more closely in touch with what he himself feels are truths fundamental to human existence: the connection between man and his environment, and, ultimately, between Man and God.¹

It is more to the purpose at this stage, however, to stick to the word 'regional'; its semantic ambiguities are fewer, and involve less need to defend the writer against possible sneers about rusticity and smallness of mind. In literary terms regionalism has been neatly defined as 'the tendency of some writers to set their works in a particular locality, presented in some detail, as affecting the lives and fortunes of the inhabitants'.² This definition,

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1. Vide esp. 'On Being a Provincial'. The Listener, 12 Aug. 1954, pp.248-9.
 2. Dictionary of World Literary Terms. ed. J.T. Shipley, George Allen and Unwin, 1955.

of course, is applied to the regional novel, but it needs little adaptation to apply to the regional poet: if there are not always obvious 'inhabitants' in his poems, there is the poet himself, and at least the region is important in that it affects his life, conditions his subject-matter and his attitude to it, and assumes a certain kind of audience. Phyllis Bentley, in her valuable study, The English Regional Novel,¹ has pointed to another 'regional' trademark: the writer's interest in the ordinary, the day-to-day. All poetry must, if it is to satisfy the highest standards, illuminate and even transfigure the ordinary, but with regional poetry the ordinary is certainly the starting-point. The regional poet writes about what he knows best; if he succeeds, the reader will know it best too, will recognise that his experiences and those of the poet are fundamentally the same, whatever their different locations.

To generalise, historically, about regional poetry would be extremely dangerous; there have been too many individual poets, and the subject itself is complicated by

1. Phyllis Bentley: The English Regional Novel. (P.E.N. Books). George Allen and Unwin, 1941.

a number of factors not strictly literary, but trenching on linguistics, economics, sociology and geography. It would be over-simplifying just to contrast 'regional' and 'metropolitan' traditions in poetry. Wordsworth and Crabbe, for instance, have a foot in both camps. It is perhaps safer to say that in most written regional poetry - as distinct from that kind which belongs more properly in oral tradition - there are two elements whose ratio is different in different poets. One is the use of regional subject-matter aimed at, or bearing in mind, a national audience; the other is the use of regional subject-matter presented mainly for the enjoyment of a local audience. Wordsworth's 'Michael', for example, is very local in its roots: one is conscious of Michael himself as a Cumbrian 'statesman' farmer. But what matters most is the universal aspect of Michael, his strength and suffering in adversity, and the almost Biblical relationship of Michael and his son Luke. The poem is both particular and general, and Wordsworth's wish for a wide response is implied by his unwillingness to use dialect expressions. With Crabbe too, though on a lower level, the same situation obtains; though he wished to depict the realities of rural life

As Truth will paint it, and as Bards will not,¹
and though we are made aware of Peter Grimes as a man in a
particular Suffolk landscape, his poetry accepts the standard
language and demonstrates an Augustan neatness of phrasing.

The difference between the two elements into which I
have roughly divided regional poetry is exemplified in the
poetry of Thomas Hardy and William Barnes. Both were Dorset
men, and both were keenly interested in their region and in
the material - topographical and human - which it offered.
Hardy, however, was clearly aiming at the general reader;
he uses dialect in his poetry very sparingly indeed, and
one feels that his regional subject-matter is a vehicle for
his own reflections on life, humorous, ironic, sad and bitter
by turns. Many of his poems are 'lyrics' pure and simple, or
show more strongly than anything else the personal doubts of
Hardy the intellectual and agnostic. And even in the poems
with 'local' titles it is frequently the dialect of Hardy's
own style that one is most aware of, as this stanza from
'Once at Swanage' illustrates:

1. The Village (1783), Book I, l. 54.

The spray sprang up across the cusps of the moon,
 And its light loomed green
 As a witch-flame's weirdsome sheen
 At the minute of an incantation scene;
 And it greened our gaze - that night at demilune.¹

William Barnes, on the other hand, was less concerned with his own personality than with his desire to act as a mouth-piece for his area and its people. To put it another way, one might say that his feelings, grounded on a serene religious faith, were more simple, more optimistic, than Hardy's, and allowed him to write from inside his local environment. More than half his poems are completely in dialect, and the majority of those in standard English, however universal the emotions they embody, are still rooted in his local area. His use of dialect was only partly a scholar's wish to preserve a mode of speech he admired; it sprang also from his desire to appeal to the kind of people about whom he writes:

If his verses should entertain without
 corrupting the happy mind of the milkmaid
 with her cow, or the dairy-farmer's son in
 the hay-field, promote the innocent cheerfulness

1. 'Once at Swanage', Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy.
 MacMillan, 1952, p.745.

of the family circle on the stone-floor, or teach his rustic brethren to draw pure gratification from the rich by frequently overlooked sources of nature within their own sphere of being, his fondest hopes will be realised.¹

Norman Nicholson's Cumbrian predecessors are Janus-faced, but show more of a leaning towards the local element in their use of dialect. Josiah Relph (1712-43), curate of Sebergham near Carlisle, was capable of Martialesque epigrams which would have done credit to Matthew Prior, but he was also 'the first Cumbrian poet that attempted to write pastorals in the County Dialect'.² Susannah Blamire (1749-97), famous in her time as a writer of 'flawless' lyrics frequently anthologised, could also produce such an essentially 'local-consumption' piece as 'We've hed sec a durdum at Gobbleston parish'.³ John Stagg (1770-1823), known as 'The Blind Bard', used dialect with a Burnsian vehemence in 'A New Year's Epistle',

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1. William Barnes, para. 63 of Dissertation on the Dorset dialect, prefaced to Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect, 2nd Edition, London, 1847.
 2. Thomas Sanderson, in The Poetical Works of Robert Anderson, 2 Vols. Carlisle, 1820. I, lix.
 3. The Songs and Ballads of Cumberland. ed. Sidney Gilpin, (1866), pp.56-7.

and Robert Anderson (1770-1833), 'The Cumbrian Bard' par excellence, celebrated events of local interest in such poems as 'The Bleckell Murry-Neet' and 'Burgh Races'. Yet, like Burns, none of these regional poets confined himself to dialect verse, or even to local subjects; all were aware of a London, or at least of a more sophisticated, audience, and could address themselves to it with varying degrees of elegance, though sometimes with a cutting-edge blunter than when they spoke to their fellow Cumbrians. Anderson's romance 'The Rose of Corby' is certainly bloodless and clumsy compared to his dialect pieces.

Nicholson himself seems to stand roughly halfway between the 'Wordsworth' Cumbrian and the Cumbrian typified by the lesser poets I have mentioned. Perhaps it would be better to say that he has touches of both: he uses the occasional dialect word ('lyle', 'brant', 'giversome'), he writes of local places. It is clear from the warm reception given to Five Rivers in 1944 by Cumberland reviewers,¹ who expressed a patriotic enthusiasm at seeing their county put

1. See review of Five Rivers in the West Cumberland News (Whitehaven), 22 July 1944.

once again on the map of poetry, that he has been able to speak to his fellow-countrymen as well as about them. But he is aware also of the need to speak for them to an outside audience. Phyllis Bentley has pointed out that regionalism could not really know itself as such until the increasing speed of travel made it possible for one region to be contrasted with another.¹ But as the speed of travel accelerated further, and education widened the horizons of more people, purely unselfconscious regionalism became less and less feasible, until now it has turned into something to be consciously defended. And whereas Robert Anderson could publish his poems, by friendly subscription, in Carlisle, the modern Cumbrian poet must, in aiming at London publication, aim also at a national audience.

This, then, is Norman Nicholson's kind of regionalism: a proud awareness of roots, yet an awareness too of the need to make these roots understandable to people from other places, and to people no longer conscious that they come from any special place at all. Only a regional writer

1. Phyllis Bentley, op.cit., p.12.

of very moderate ambitions and gifts could be content nowadays to write merely as a regionalist; publication in The Journal of the Lakeland Dialect Society is not enough. The tension between the poet's local pietas and his recognition of the demands of the outside world is a fruitful one in that he measures himself against severer standards of literary technique and value (national critics praised the freshness and verve of the poems in Five Rivers). But it can also be dangerous, in making him occasionally over-conscious of his regional material and a little over-emphatic in his presentation of it. A phrase like 'the brant fell',¹ may come as naturally to Nicholson as to his predecessors, but the retention of 'brant' for 'steep' in the finished poem is an act of critical choice and almost a self-conscious assertion of origins. A regional writer like Norman Nicholson cannot be simply a member of a community, with a gift for poetry (as earlier regional poets were more able to be); he must also be the spokesman of his community in a larger world. His awareness

1. 'The Raven', Five Rivers, Faber, 1944, p.47.

of this larger world detaches him from his local allegiance and enables him to see it in the context of a wider one, so that a poem like 'The Seven Rocks',¹ though rooted in a particular landscape, reaches allegorically outwards to an identification of the processes of nature with those of all human life.

1. The Pot Geranium, Faber, 1954, pp.69-78.

CHAPTER ONE: Nicholson's Area.

To refuse to call a poet 'regional' when he so obviously is, is to fail to understand part of what he is saying: to insist on the 'universal' aspect of his work at the expense of the local is to show that we have missed something of that which makes him universal.¹

Norman Nicholson's words are a salutary warning not to run too far ahead of the story. George MacBeth, writing in 1959, spoke of the need in his own generation for 'more poets with deep roots in real places'.² Nicholson is eminently such a poet, and it is time to look at the real place in which he is rooted.

Apart from a period of two years in his 'teens, Norman Nicholson has spent the whole of his life in the small town of Millom in Cumberland. It is important to emphasise Cumberland; Nicholson should not be thought of as a 'Lake Poet', even though, as a prose writer, he has taken the whole of Lakeland for his subject, and described its shape in

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1. Norman Nicholson, 'The Provincial Tradition', Times Literary Supplement, 15 Aug. 1958, p.xix.
 2. George MacBeth, The London Magazine, Nov. 1959.

the famous image used in Wordsworth's Guide: 'a number of valleys...diverging from the point, on which we are supposed to stand, like spokes from the nave of a wheel'.¹ Wordsworth did not stay long in his Cumbrian birthplace of Cockermouth, and the lush views from Rydal Mount furnished very different poetic material from what could be seen from Millom. The difference between Wordsworth and Nicholson can be appreciated at its clearest by a comparison of the Duddon Sonnets (1820) - not Wordsworth at his best, admittedly - and Nicholson's poem 'To the River Duddon'.² Wordsworth had seen the river as 'remote from every taint/Of sordid industry'³ - a true enough statement then, but rendered obsolete by the later development of Millom as an iron-mining town:

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1. Wordsworth, Guide to the Lakes, introduced by W.M. Merchant, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1951, p.55. Compare this passage with Nicholson, Portrait of the Lakes, Robert Hale, 1963, p.16. The fact that Wordsworth places the hub of the wheel at Great Gable and Nicholson at Dunmail Raise, does not affect the identical nature of the image.
 2. Five Rivers, Faber, 1944, pp.16-17.
 3. Duddon Sonnets II, E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (eds.), The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Vol. 3, Oxford, 1946.

..I, who've lived for nearly thirty years
 Upon your shore, have seen the slagbanks slant
 Like scree sheers into the sand, and seen the tide
 Purple with ore back up the muddy gullies
 And wiped the sinter dust from the farmyard damsons.

Nicholson is not laughing at Wordsworth for being out of date - which would in itself be silly - but implying the restrictiveness of a view of the Lake District which wished to preserve it from the encroachments of 'sordid industry' in any form. We remember Wordsworth's 'vain battle in the Morning Post in 1844 against the projected Kendal and Windermere Railway',¹ and compare it with the closing in October 1958 of the branch line from Foxfield to Coniston: Nicholson was among the nostalgic passengers on its last train.²

Nicholson's region, poetically, comprises both lakes and mountains on one hand and, on the other, industry, which, in his home town manifestations, is not 'sordid' or a nuisance, but a symbol of man's close relationship with his environment. The view from Millom is in two directions, yet the two directions, in human terms, lead to the same destination:

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1. W.M. Merchant, introduction to Wordsworth, Guide, p.32.
 2. See Portrait of the Lakes (1963), p.129.

...if I lean out of my window, I can see the sky-line of the central fells - Scafell, Scafell Pike, Great End, Harter Fell, Bowfell, Crinkle Crag, Conistone Old Man - an horizon unsurpassed in England. No one, surely, could doubt that this is the true district of the Lakes.

Yet, if I go round to the back of my house, I get another view. For now, closer than the rocks at the front, are the cliffs of a slagbank, and bigger than the trunks of the larches are the chimney-stacks of blast furnaces. And only a little further away are the pit-shafts and spoil-heaps of an iron mine and a cargo-pier jutting out into the estuary. This, many people would say, is not the Lake District at all.

But they would be quite wrong. For these furnaces smelt Lake District ore with Lake District limestone, and the town itself is built of Lake District slate and Lake District flags. The men of the town, to a large extent, come from the same stock as the men of the dales, and they speak the same kind of language. As with the hill-farmer, the shepherd or the quarryman, their life has grown out of the rock.¹

Though Nicholson's philosophical perspective includes the Wordsworthian Lake District, though he, like Wordsworth, is never unaware of the broad foundation provided by 'thirty thousand feet of solid Cumberland',² the specific places dealt with in his poetry are remote from the ordinary tourist's itineraries. In summer the roads to the North

1. Portrait of the Lakes (1963), p.15.

2. 'To the River Duddon', Five Rivers (1944), p.17.

are crowded with trippers; cars and coaches spread out from Kendal towards Ullswater, Ambleside, Langdale, Windermere, Hawkshead, Grasmere and Keswick. This is Wordsworth country, carparked, museumed and tea-shopped. Climbers on Great Gable, Scafell and Coniston Old Man go high enough to look down from the watershed to the Nicholson country beyond, but for most it remains unvisited, behind the mountains, and around the estuaries, which border their summer destinations. The Nicholson country, the area of which, in poetic terms, he is the 'sole proprietor',¹ is West Cumberland and South Cumberland, a sweep of comparatively narrow coastal belt running some forty miles from Whitehaven in the north to where Millom juts into the Duddon estuary. A few poems extend this range to the Furness peninsula and Barrow, whose shipyard gantries can be seen rearing into the haze some seven miles to the south in the trans-estuarine appendage of Lancashire. The remoteness of this area has been basically determined by its geography: the mountains elbow down almost to the Irish Sea, and a narrow 'main' road - it is only now in the process of being

1. William Faulkner's way of describing his title to Yoknapatawpha County. See the map in the end-papers of some editions of his novels.

widened - squeezes into the gap and winds along as best it can, following the most favourable contours and hugging the edge of the fells; the lower ground is too marshy and liable to flood, and at Eskmeals, some seven miles from Millom, there is a side road which all but disappears turning a corner under a bridge and is prone to vanish underwater when the Esk rises. The bus service between Millom and Whitehaven is not very frequent, and the train service even less so, though the railway-line is luckier than the bus and runs straight up the coast: in fact from St. Bees to Seascale the train skirts the shingle, with nothing but the grey sea between it and Ireland. Apart from very tough, first-gear roads over Honister and Hard Knott passes (and it is not long since the latter was only a track), the only exits from the coastal region are the main roads from Millom and Whitehaven. The road out into Lancashire from Millom switchbacks along above the estuary and on the other side labours steeply up over Grizebeck. So the sense of isolation of this area as a whole is easy to understand; certainly one feels a sense of achievement at arriving at last in it.

Geographically remote the region may be, but it possesses

great beauty; not only the elemental beauty of sea-cliffs, green turf edging the shore, the vari-coloured fells rising inland and, near Bootle, seeming to loom just behind the road, but the beauty which is produced by the human associations of the landscape, the sense of a long tradition of life and habitation. The area is a palimpsest of history, a microcosm of human evolution and development. Beneath everything is the stratified prehistory of the rock itself, towering eastwards as Great Gable and Bowfell and thrusting into the western sea as the sandstone of St. Bees Head: 'St. Bees' is one of the earliest poems in Five Rivers and the location of one of the latest, 'The Black Guillemot' (1967). Behind Whitehaven lie the coal measures which have determined the region's modern economy; and at the village of Cleator Moor both coal and iron were once mined from the same pit-shaft. To the south, on a lonely fellside, stands the Swinside stone circle, raised by the megalith builders of over a thousand years B.C. The Romans built a fort on Hard Knott Pass, and down the valley at Ravenglass, close to the terminus of the Ravenglass and Eskdale Light Railway (mentioned in the poem 'Five Rivers'), are the walls remaining

from a Roman bath house, one of the few pleasures of the lonely garrison. In Gosforth churchyard stands one of the most famous Norse crosses in England, and this whole area abounds in Norse place-names: Seascale, Annaside, Holmrook. The very words used to describe features of the landscape are Norse: fell, scree, tarn, beck, pike, force, thwaite - Nicholson's own middle name is Cornthwaite.¹ Egremont has a castle, built of sandstone from nearby St. Bees, set up as part of Cumberland's defences against the Border raids of the middle ages. Whitehaven has a Wren town-plan, and was the last place in England to be raided by the Scots: in 1778 John Paul Jones sailed briefly into the harbour and set fire to some ships there. Eskmeals was used as a site for gunnery practice during the Second World War, and a road runs alongside the wire fence which surrounds the military experimental weapons station there. Further up the coast, at Sellafield, and visible from the inland fellsides, the 'toadstool towers'² of the Calder Hall atomic factory

1. Portrait of the Lakes (1963), pp. 75-6.

2. Norman Nicholson, 'Windscale', New Statesman, 30 Nov. 1957.

bulge whitely upwards and darken the air with their immense ooziings of smoke.

The area, in fact, proclaims the interdependence of nature and man, and is rich in the raw-materials of poetry. The town of Millom, Nicholson's birthplace and home, is more than simply an important focal point of this area. Not only do the roads from the outlying hamlets and farms converge on it, but it acts as the hub of Nicholson's poetic imagination: the church spire visible up the Irish Sea coast, the ironworks dominating the Duddon estuary 'like a huge battle-ship sailing out with all funnels smoking',¹ and the whaleback of Black Combe rising behind the town constant as Cézanne's Mont St. Victoire. Making the necessary adjustments for scope and treatment, Millom is to Nicholson what Oxford, Mississippi is to William Faulkner, what the Five Towns are to Arnold Bennett, what Manosque is to Jean Giono; it is even akin, in his mind, to the Jerusalem of Tasso's 'Gerusalemme Liberata'. Provincial Pleasures (1959) ends with a quotation from that poem, which has been 'Canon Olds's'

1. Portrait of the Lakes (1963), p.166.

reading during the imaginary year in the life of 'Odborough'¹ covered by the book: '"La città già liberata", says Canon Olds; the city now made free'.² This suggests succinctly the pressures of local experience which have demanded expression in so many of Nicholson's poems. The Millom-Jerusalem parallel is brought out overtly in his broadcast-talk 'Millom Delivered', where he quotes a poem about Millom, in Tasso's stanza form, which he once began but never finished:

This ridge commands the estuary. Here,
 Among the cow-licked green, the limestone walls,
 I gaze across grey, gulping sands, to where
 The city watches from her window-sills.
 Her tilted roofs are high with sunlight; her
 Foundations are upon the holy hills;
 Her feet are firm as rivets in the rock;
 Her arms enclose the slagbank and the dock.³

Lest these lines (particularly lines four and five) suggest to the unwary reader a city too like apocalyptic

1. Nicholson's fictional name for Millom, first used in his novel The Fire of the Lord (1944). It is a very transparent disguise; any Millom resident would immediately recognise its similarity to Hodbarrow, the southern end of Millom where the iron mines used to be.
2. Nicholson, Provincial Pleasures, Robert Hale, 1959, p.190.
3. 'Millom Delivered', The Listener, 24 Jan. 1952.

visions of heaven, I should point out that a visitor's first impressions of Millom, especially in overcast weather, are likely to be nearer the 'satanic mills' category; at any rate, the slagbank fails to excite the same instant admiration as a mountain would, and despite the fine sandstone church and the quaintness of the market clock, set in a pewter dome resembling a policeman's helmet, the town seems architecturally rather drab. But Millom's very ordinariness helps to ensure the visitor's response to it as to a typical small provincial town. Familiarity with Nicholson's work should send him back to his own place not full of nostalgia for what he has left behind, but with an awareness of similarities, beneath the surface, between his town and the poet's: to both of them their towns are home.¹ The lack of distracting outward prettiness forces both poet and visitor to look for

..... the truth beneath it all:
 Beneath the shape, the wall, beneath the wall, the stone,
 Beneath the stone, the idea of a stone,
 Beneath the idea, the love.²

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1. This idea comes out in 'On Being a Provincial'.
 2. 'Old Main Street, Holborn Hill, Millom', The Pot Geranium, Faber, 1954, p.14.

Basic to Norman Nicholson's kind of imagination is a respect for facts, an ability to delve beneath the apparent visual discreteness of phenomena and discover the links between them: to put two and two together, to discern the hidden unity of slagbank and mountain, the unity of the beginning and end of a process to which the agency of man - as miner and as foundry worker - is central. The light that transfigures Millom in Nicholson's poetry is not directed on it from outside, is not simply a poetic diamante¹ provided by a sparkling vocabulary: it is essentially the intense glow of the actual, perceived and transmitted by one who is intimately aware of his subject-matter. As Nicholson himself has put it:

A critic of my own generation (Mr. Alan Ross) recently applied to me the words which Matthew Arnold wrote about Wordsworth: 'It might seem that Nature not only gave him the matter for his poem but wrote the poem for him'.¹ This is a larger claim than I would wish to make for myself. But if we take 'Nature' to mean not only the natural landscape but a whole physical and human environment - climate, mountains, rock, the sea, mines, slagbanks, streets, chapels, schools and people - then

1. This quotation occurs in Alan Ross, Poetry 1945-50, Longmans, Green for The British Council, 1951, p.33. The last phrase from the Matthew Arnold quotation should read '...but wrote his poem for him'. (Matthew Arnold, Essays in Criticism, Second Series, 1888: 'Wordsworth'.)

these words express exactly what I always hope will happen whenever I start to put a poem into shape.¹

It is necessary, then, to look at some of the facts behind the not vastly promising exterior of Millom, to get just a little closer to the town's history, to see, even if it be only at this stage in terms of dates and statistics, something of the life out of which Nicholson's poetry springs. It would be inappropriate, when reading poetry as rooted in the factual as his, to treat the many references to the real Millom as if they were references to a fictional world. A brief sketch map will help to place Nicholson's poems in their geographical and historical context, and enable us to see them as part of an impressive and consistent personal vision.

Millom is an industrial town, yet one still small enough for people to know each other by name, and small enough not to have hidden its own rural environment from view behind a stone hedge of high buildings. These two facts have helped, in my opinion, to condition Norman Nicholson's sense of values, both in his poetry and in his many prose justifications of the

1. Norman Nicholson, 'A Statement of Aims', The Grapevine, date unknown, but post-1950 and probably c. 1954.

provincial way of life. Millom's population has remained steady for the last twenty years or so; the 1961 figure was 7,955 people.¹ A hundred years previously the number was a mere 1,183. The increase is due almost entirely to the discovery of large deposits of iron ore south of the small settlements which made up Millom in 1860.²

A castle, now remaining only as a tower, a mile outside the town, was built in 1335 by Sir John Huddleston, the then lord of the manor, and next to it is the old church of Holy Trinity,³ which has one of the two finest fish windows⁴ in Great Britain. Later on, in the eighteenth century, Millom was the terminus of the route from Lancashire to Cumberland which ran by marked tracks at low tide across the

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1. Entry for Millom, Chambers' Encyclopedia, 1967.
 2. I am indebted for much of the information in this section to a valuable article, 'Millom: A Victorian New Town', by Alan Harris, Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, LXVI, New Series, Titus Wilson, Kendal, 1966, pp.449-467.
 3. Entry for Millom, J.M. Wilson (ed.), The Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales, 1872.
 4. The other is in Dunblane Cathedral near Stirling. The name 'fish window' derives from the symbolism of the fish in early Christian art, and the shape is that of a pointed Gothic arch mirrored below itself, i.e. something like the shape of an almond.

Kent, Leven and Duddon estuaries. The route, covered three times a week by stage coaches plying between Lancaster and Whitehaven, was so well known that on a map dating from about 1745¹ it is marked boldly as a road. Guides across the Duddon Sands were provided by an inn called The Pilot which used to stand in Holborn Hill, the largest of the 'Millom' settlements: the inn no longer exists, but

...a carved stone, which served as an inn-sign, is set in the wall of the house built on the same spot. The inscription is still quite readable:

William and Ann
 Barren live heare
 Who mostly keep
 Good ale and beer
 1745
 You that intend
 To cross ye Sand
 Call heare a gide
 Att your command.²

John Wesley came this way to Cumberland, and passed through Millom early one May morning in 1759. But despite this traffic, and despite the fact that iron had been worked in the Millom area intermittently from the seventeenth century,

1. In the possession of the writer. For the crossing of the Leven estuary, see Wordsworth, The Prelude (1805), X, 11.518-30.
2. Norman Nicholson, 'Crossing the Duddon Sands', The Yorkshire Post, 3 July 1965. Cf. Nicholson's poem 'Across the Estuary', Rock Face, Faber, 1948, pp.56-9.

Millom was not thought worthy of mention in Cruttwell's New Universal Gazetteer of 1798.

In fact, the town of Millom as it exists today is almost entirely the creation of the Victorian age. In 1861 'Millom' consisted of a number of hamlets and farms spread within a radius of two to three miles from the present centre. Of these, the largest, Holborn Hill, had only 163 inhabitants. Two thirds of the male segment of the thousand-or-so-strong population were employed as farmers and agricultural labourers; less than twelve had any occupation to do with the sea. But this was soon to change, and change dramatically. The Hodbarrow Mining Company took out a licence in 1855 to work iron on the Earl of Lonsdale's estate at Hodbarrow, the extreme southern point of the peninsula below Millom. A good deposit was struck in 1856, and that same year the company acquired the Steel Green estate near the village of Haverigg. Yet still, in 1858, the largest mine employed only thirty men.

The turning point came in 1860, when large deposits of haematite ore were discovered near Hodbarrow Point. The usefulness of the discovery was enhanced by the fact that, in 1850, the last section of the Whitehaven and Furness

[Barrow] Junction Railway had been opened and Holborn Hill selected as the site of a railway station. By 1864 the mines employed 120 men, who produced 1500 tons of ore per week. Much of this ore went to supply ironworks elsewhere, and was transported by rail and also by sea; the harbour of Borwick Rills, a mile east of Holborn Hill, was used by 600 ships in 1864.

This decade might well be called the 'Iron Rush'.¹ In 1865 Liverpool mercantile interests, advised mainly by two men from Whitehaven, inaugurated the Cumberland Iron Mining and Smelting Company, which came to Millom the following year. An area whose population in 1861 had been predominantly Cumbrian and North Lancastrian saw the influx, from 1865 onwards, of a stream of 'off-comers': Englishmen from the northern counties, Irishmen, and former tin miners from Cornwall and Devon. One of the immigrants was Norman Nicholson's paternal grandfather; others were the Devonian forebears of his step-mother. Names like Pelleymounter and Penaluna (both to occur in Nicholson's work almost a hundred years later)

1. Nicholson himself uses this phrase in Provincial Pleasures (1959), p.144.

began to establish themselves in the town. By the summer of 1866, when the mines were producing almost double the output of two years before, and using double the manpower, between 800 and 1,000 of these varied immigrants were engaged in building the new ironworks, extending the mine railway, and expanding the harbour's shipping facilities. The September of the following year saw the opening of the Millom Ironworks. At first it had two blast furnaces; seven years later there were six.

The industrial expansion of this once rural area, and the population explosion that followed it, created a demand for more houses. Two building societies were formed in 1865, and in 1866 a brickworks was opened near the new railway station at Holborn Hill. By the same year surveys had been made and plans drawn up for a new town, to be called, officially, Millom, after the two main districts, Millom Below and Millom Above, which made up the large ecclesiastical parish. 'Newtown', as it was also known, was intended as 'a sort of model town'¹ with houses having proper drainage and built in a uniform

1. Harris, Transactions LXVI, p.459.

style. There was little chance of these pious hopes being fulfilled, however, as the low-lying Rottington estate south of the railway line had been bought as the site of the new development. The estate was on the edge of marshland, which could not be adequately drained. The growth of the town was accompanied by a number of pains: the 'gross overcrowding' of 1866 led to outbreaks of typhus, typhoid, diarrhoea and dysentery. 1870 brought scarlet fever, 1872 smallpox, and by 1874 the most crowded parts of the town - Holborn Hill and Millom Newtown then held between three and four thousand people - were in an extremely insanitary state.

Such conditions produced a demand for improvement. Popular agitation, supported by the two iron companies, led to the formation of a Local Board of Health for Millom in 1874, and between 1872 and 1875 the Hodbarrow Mining Company, in an attempt to avoid the badness of other housing, built at Haverigg the oddly modernistic block of houses known locally as 'Concrete Square'.¹ More houses were later built by the Company at Steel Green nearby. The 'seventies and

1. The same company still owns these houses: a good example of the continuity of Millom history.

'eighties saw Millom grow physically into the town it is today. The present market square grew up where it is as a result of the railway's decision to build a bridge a few hundred yards further up the line, to the west, than had been expected. The resultant closing of the old level-crossing which had linked Holborn Hill and Newtown threw Millom off balance, so that nowadays what was intended originally to be the town's centre seems oddly unlinked with the rest of it. The present centre is just south of the railway bridge: a small market square, now serving as a bus terminus, surrounded by the town's main hotel, the market hall with its clock, the working men's club and a couple of banks. Opposite the square, on a slope, rises the large sandstone church of St. George, whose spire is visible from miles off. The parish was created in 1877 (the old church of Holy Trinity was too far away to serve the town's needs), and the iron companies subsidised the building of the new parish church.

Along with the final shaping of the town into its present form went the years, from 1870 to the turn of the century, of its greatest productiveness and prosperity. In 1868 more mines started to be worked at Hodbarrow, and after 1880 the annual output was nearly 350,000 tons. In

the eighteen-nineties Hodbarrow mines contributed 59% of Cumberland's haematite, and in their peak year, 1891, produced 535,010 tons of ore. Millom had become an iron town of nationwide reputation, as the following passage shows:

The deposit of haematite at Hodbarrow worked by the Hodbarrow Mining Co. far surpasses in size and richness any other area of the same extent in Cumberland or even in Great Britain. This deposit is not only of vast dimensions, but noted for its uniformly high yield of metallic iron.¹

The development of the mines left its mark not only in Millom itself, in the form of the slagbank, but on the landscape south of Millom, so that a comparison of the map in 1860 with that of the present day shows a gradual change of the shoreline from the original concave curve to the modern convex bulge. Extensive seaward digging had by 1886 caused fifty feet's worth of subsidence, so to protect the shafts a sea wall, known as the Inner Barrier, was constructed, and finished in 1890. This enabled the seams to be worked yet further outwards undersea (there was a joke about miners at the iron face being able to hear the trams running in the

1. James Wilson (ed.), The Victoria History of the County of Cumberland, James Street, Haymarket, 1905, II, 396.

Isle of Man), until further 'reclamation and coastal protection'¹ was called for. This culminated in the completion of a massive Outer Barrier in 1905.

Millom today is a quiet town compared to what it was in those boom years. The slump affected it as it affected all the industrial areas of the West Cumberland coast. Now only 'a single shaft near Haverigg produces haematite', yet the ironworks, now owned by the Millom Hematite Ore and Iron Company (which also owns the one remaining mine) still 'maintains its nineteenth century reputation as a producer of pig iron of exceptionally high quality', and 'Millom, unlike many Cumberland iron towns, has retained direct links with its past'.²

Once the drabness of appearances has been wiped away by some knowledge of Millom's history, the past is recognisable even by the visitor: the street that appears on plans of the town but which was never actually built,³ the farm which still juts out 'like a crag' from the houses 'shunted firm against

1. Harris, Transactions LXVI, p.465

2. Harris, ibid., p.466.

3. See Nicholson, 'Bond Street', The Guinness Book of Poetry 1958/59, Putnam, 1960, p.104.

it' when the town grew up,¹ the gridiron pattern of Millom Newtown, the small quarry in Holborn Hill out of which came 'hard on five hundred houses' of the new town.² A walk out of Millom towards Hodbarrow Point is a walk into the past, into an Audenesque landscape of rusty railway lines overgrown with brambles, and abandoned mine-workings; beyond the deserted lighthouse is the grass-choked shaft of Towsey Hole where the first deposit of haematite was found, and on the right, across a subsidence crater like the bowl of an extinct volcano, the Inner Barrier, 'collapsed like the Great Wall of China...tumbles into the sand now in a slow cartwheel, its central piers already engulfed'.³ Yet, from across the mosses to the left, comes the sound of the ironworks, the smoke from its blast furnaces signalling the continuation of a process started almost exactly a hundred years ago.⁴ In this landscape it is easy to see how Nicholson could describe Millom as:

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1. See Nicholson, 'A Street in Cumberland', Rock Face, 1948, p.13.
 2. See Nicholson, 'Millom Old Quarry', The Pot Geranium, 1954, p.11.
 3. Nicholson, 'Hodbarrow Hollow', Manchester Guardian, 21 May 1959
 4. The sudden Government decision, in 1968, to close Millom ironworks, despite the invention there of a new steel-making process, and against the wishes of the town's inhabitants, has put an untimely end to the process.

...a town which has sprung out of the land almost as naturally as weeds spring up when a wood is felled or burned down: the ore out of the rock; the iron out of the ore; and the houses, the streets, the churches, the schools, very nearly the children themselves, out of the iron.¹

As well as permitting this sense of originating from an almost natural process, a small town like Millom, centred on one industry, can also create for its inhabitants the feeling of belonging to a shared environment, can let a person perceive that his life is intimately interwoven with the lives of others:

Here is a continual approach and meeting, an interpatterning and overlapping of individual lives, a counterpointing of one man's day with that of another.²

And when the town is as young as Millom, when its entire growth can virtually be recapitulated in living memory, this counterpointing' in the present is underpinned by a feeling of continuity with the past, based on a network of common memories:

These people have been fed and watered by the same sun and wind and weather. They have all felt the same excitement queueing

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1. Nicholson, 'The Wheel of Fire', The Listener, 17 April 1952, p.630.
 2. Nicholson, 'The Town Band', Time and Tide, 12 March 1955, p.323.

for the children's matinee outside the same cinema; they have all run over the railway bridge, hearts backfiring like motor-bikes, fearing they would miss the same train. They have known the tension that comes upon a community at a time of local anxieties: the day the tide broke through the sea-wall; the day the viaduct was found unsafe; the week when the roads and railways were blocked with snow and not a soul could enter or leave the town for six days.¹

These two ideas - the connection of man with nature, and of man with man, both in past and present dimensions - are central to an understanding of Nicholson's work. Had he been born in some other kind of town, it is very doubtful whether his poetry would have developed in the way it has. That he has continued to live in the town where he was born has also given him a respect for its existence as an entity independent of himself, with its own organic life. In creating the town for others in his poetry he has come to realise that in many ways the town has created him.

1. 'On Being a Provincial', The Listener, 12 Aug. 1954, p.248.

Irishman named Brennan, who came to England in the 1830s or 1840s as gamekeeper to the Dallam Tower estate near Milnthorpe in Westmorland. She was baptised at Beetham church and grew up on a cottage on the Dallam estate. Long before she arrived in Millom she was familiar with marshes and sandy estuaries:

At night, as a girl, she would gaze across the blackness of the sands or the blackness of the tide and try to spot a single light shining through the mists of Foulshaw Moss.¹

Her husband-to-be, Richard Nicholson, was the son of a farmer of Hard Crag near Cartmel. They were married in the great priory church at Cartmel; she was unable to read or write, and signed the marriage register with a cross. For a year the couple lived at the nearby village of Flookburgh, then moved for a time to Barrow-in-Furness. Finally Richard Nicholson came to Millom, where he was first, because of his farming experience, put in charge of the horses used by Millom Ironworks. Later he became Head Foreman of the Ironworks's Back Furnace.

Richard Nicholson and his wife had no fewer than fourteen

1. Portrait of the Lakes (1963), p.55.

sons, of whom three 'died in infancy'.¹ Joseph, the poet's father, was born in 1877, the year of the creation of St. George's parish. In the eighteen-nineties he was apprenticed to learn the tailoring trade from Seth Slater, 'tailor, sub-postmaster and Methodist, straight as a pew-back in carriage and character, who spoke always in the voice of an eighteenth-century counter-tenor.'² At this time, despite its prosperity derived from iron, the social hierarchy of Millom

...was still that of the village. The children on the kerbstones still doffed their caps to the squires from the country as they drove into town. The shop assistants bowed to them, even when they did not pay their bills. The very bosses at the mines set up as country gentlemen and wore tweeds and judged at the agricultural shows.³

In 1905, when the tradesman was beginning to take a more important place in local society, Joseph Nicholson decided to open a gentleman's outfitters' shop on his own account at 14 St. George's Terrace, just behind the Market Square and

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1. 'The Seventeenth of the Name'.
 2. Norman Nicholson, 'His Own Boss', Time and Tide, 24 July 1954. Seth Slater's son Charlie, born in 1905, was later to become better known as Montague Slater, the librettist of Benjamin Britten's opera Peter Grimes.
 3. Norman Nicholson, Ibid.

just opposite Seth Slater's own shop.¹ Joseph Nicholson married Edith Maud Mary Cornthwaite, the daughter of a Millom butcher, and it was here, in the three-storey terrace house that contained his father's shop, that Norman Cornthwaite Nicholson was born, on 8 January 1914. He has continued to live in this same house all his life.

Nicholson was too young for the First World War to impinge on his consciousness; indeed he records only one memory of himself before the age of five. But it is a passage worth quoting, as it marks the very beginning of his awareness of Millom as 'a kind of shell, grown or exuded by the Millom people':

My father was doing war-work, three days a week, at the Ironworks, and on this day he was brought home in the Ironworks car. He had fallen over a plank and sprained his ankle. I remember him sitting beside the fire, with a towel spread over the hearthrug, bathing his foot in a tin bath of hot water. Now by the time I was four I must have seen the ironworks over and over again and I must have heard the buzzer mooring into the darkness when I lay in bed at night; yet I can remember nothing of this before then. But from that moment the ironworks took on a new reality - it was the place where my father had sprained his ankle.²

1. Now Millom Post Office.

2. Norman Nicholson, 'The Second Chance', The Listener, 5 Sept. 1963, p.343.

In 1919 Edith Nicholson died during an influenza epidemic.¹ It is impossible to assess the effect the death of his mother may have had on a child of five, and Nicholson's poetry shows no obvious signs of a childhood sense of loss. But one may perhaps infer something from his sensitive response to the personality of William Cowper, whose mother died when he was six and who

...after her death...was lost to the world,
like a child who can scarcely walk and who
finds himself suddenly left in the middle
of the room with no hand to guide him to
the nearest chair.²

It may not be quite without significance that, in selecting a group of Cowper's poems for publication in 1951, he chose to open the selection with 'On the Receipt of my Mother's Picture out of Norfolk'.³

Three years later, Joseph Nicholson remarried. While his house was being redecorated for the event, he and his son spent six months at 'Grandmother Nicholson's' house

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1. This was in fact the worldwide epidemic of 'Spanish' influenza.
 2. Norman Nicholson, William Cowper, John Lehmann, 1951, p.16.
 3. Norman Nicholson (ed.), Selected Poems of William Cowper, (Crown Classics), Grey Walls Press, 1951. A few copies of this were printed, but the book was never actually published.

in Albert Street, where also lived four of the long catalogue of uncles in 'The Seventeenth of the Name':

For six months we lived in the end house
of a dark, tight terrace, shovelled
together out of the rock the town was built
on...I cannot say this was the happiest
Christmas of my childhood. My four uncles
were not the brightest company for a boy
of seven.¹

From this period dates the poet's strong affection for the grandmother whose original response to the prospect of living in Millom had been so negative: his memories of her were to find expression many years later in a poem called 'Have You Been to London?':

My grandmother burnished her sleek steel hair -
Not a tooth in her jaw
Nor alphabet in her head,
Her spectacles lost before I was born,
Her lame leg stiff in the sofa corner,
Her crutch at the steady.²

Joseph Nicholson's second wife, Rosetta Sobey, was about thirty-five in 1922. She came of a family of Devon tin-miners who had emigrated in the 1870s to the village of Haverigg a couple of miles from Millom. She was a woman of

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1. 'Christmas Candles at Odborough', Church Times, 22 Dec. 1961, p.7.
 2. In Poems edited for the Poetry Book Society by Eric W. White, Christmas 1966.

some artistic accomplishment, who managed a piano shop only a few doors away from Joseph Nicholson's own shop. She was also a Methodist, and soon began to send the young Norman to the local Wesleyan Chapel and Sunday School. Thus, though his father, an Anglican, had had him baptised in St. George's church, it was in a Methodist atmosphere that his childhood was spent. Methodism was so closely linked with the social life of the town that his awareness was more of this than of its religious elements:

Secular affairs were every bit as much the concern of the congregation as religious ones, and for me, and, I suspect, for many people older than me, there was no conscious differentiation between the two. The concerts, bazaars, socials, Faith Teas and the Harvest Festival sale of fruit and vegetables all took their part in the Nonconformist ecclesiastical year. They did not seem very different from the Sunday services - a little less formal and a little more boisterous, but with the same cosy friendliness, the same readily-roused enthusiasm.¹

It was not until he was fifteen that Norman Nicholson became aware of religion in a truly personal sense, but there is no doubt that the oratory of Methodist local preachers, and the

1. Dewi Morgan (ed.), They Became Christians, A.R. Mowbray and Co., 1966, p.98.

hymns of John Wesley and Isaac Watts had a strong effect on his boyhood imagination, so that he could later say:

Although I have now found my home in the Anglican church, I feel that as a poet I draw more strength from my experiences of Methodism.¹

In 1920 Nicholson had begun to attend the Holborn Hill Boys' School.² From about 1922 the headmaster was Walter Wilson, who had previously taught at Cockermonth. Wilson was to become a lifelong friend, receiving the dedications of two of Nicholson's books.³ This period of his life saw Nicholson's first impact on Millom as a 'public personality': at the age of nine he gave, as chairman at a Sunday School children's concert, an extempore address:

I walked on to the platform and sat beside a rickety cane table with a green plush table-cloth and looked at the two or three hundred gas-lit faces, all turned up to me, every single one of which I could recognize. And when the buzz subsided from the air and the dithering had steadied in my legs and I had made my first few announcements, I was sure of one thing: I could make myself heard;

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1. Quoted by Samuel Davis, 'Portrait of a Contemporary Poet', The Methodist Recorder, 4 Apr. 1957.
 2. For Nicholson's reminiscences of his schooldays there, see Provincial Pleasures (1959), pp.78-81.
 3. Cumberland and Westmorland (1949) and Portrait of the Lakes (1963).

I could make myself listened to.

The result was that soon I was regularly reciting and reading and giving monologues at concerts, speech days, musical festivals and Pleasant Sunday Afternoons. I was far better known in the town at the age of twelve than I am today. And that experience left me with the sense of having an audience.¹

The Millom Musical Festival - at which, for a number of successive years just before the Second World War, the young Kathleen Ferrier was to win the Gold Medal - was a particularly successful field for Nicholson: in 1925 and 1926 he won first prize for Elocution.²

By this time he was attending Millom Secondary School. When he entered it in 1925 it was with the highest scholarship results in Cumberland, and he was predictably the regular top of the class. A schoolfellow and later close friend, Bessie Satterthwaite,³ has described him as

...quite outstanding among Millom boys - he looked different, spoke differently, and was quite the cleverest boy in the class, which did not necessarily endear him to all!

1. Nicholson, 'The Second Chance' (1963), p.344.
2. See Provincial Pleasures (1959), pp.165-7.
3. In 1942 she married Leonard Schiff, now Principal of the College of the Ascension, Selly Oak, Birmingham.

...others in the form made up doggerel verses about him, and...a Millom graduate doing some teaching practice said, 'You've swallowed the dictionary' after he had uttered some well-chosen words.¹

This is certainly not an unusual view of the budding poet in any small town, or, for that matter, an unusual view of any specially talented schoolboy anywhere. His responsiveness to the world about him is brought out rather more sympathetically by another commentator:

He was apt to bubble over with the gusto of delight in all the tiny things which make up a child's experience...and to dance about in an ecstasy of exploration, while other children were itching and impatient to get on to whatever they had started out to do.²

In 1927 Nicholson won a George Moore exhibition, one of only two, competed for by schoolboys from Cumberland, Westmorland and North Lancashire. In this year he jumped - as so often happens with clever boys - from the second to the fourth form. Another boy promoted was Cyril Addison, now a Professor of Chemistry at the University of Nottingham, and in the fourth form at

1. Letter to the writer, 28 November 1967.
2. Letter from Canon Samuel Taylor to George Every, S.S.M., 10 Jan. 1952. Canon Taylor was repeating the views of people who had known Norman Nicholson at school; he himself did not come to Millom until about 1935.

that time was John Edward ('Ted') Fisher, who was later to become a schoolmaster and teach the poet Ted Hughes at Mexborough.

By 1929 it was quite clear to Nicholson and his parents that he was destined for some kind of academic career. He had begun to explore the surrounding country-side, and to realise that Millom in the slump was 'small, old-fashioned, and tagged to the fraying end of what seemed to be a worn-out social era', and

...like most of us at that time at the local grammar school, I saw no future in the town - or not, at any rate, for me. I saw myself as going to the university, getting a degree, becoming a teacher and escaping into the wide world.¹

In fact, his life was running along lines quite normal for a boy of his talents - lines which sent Arnold Bennett from the Potteries to a literary career in London and were, for instance, to send Philip Larkin from Coventry to a First in English at Oxford. It was the direction of these ambitions which brought him back to Anglicanism, for the practical reason that, in the local view, 'you had a much better chance of entering a college if you had been confirmed'.² Oddly enough,

1. Nicholson, 'The Second Chance' (1963), p.344.

2. Nicholson, They Became Christians (1966), pp. 99-100.

the result of this was to bring religion to his consciousness in a personal way, though one which, at this time, was more intense than lasting:

I knelt for long periods in my bedroom, praying and 'preparing' myself for the next Sunday's communion. The thought of the moment of consecration could make me shake like a fever'.¹

'Afterwards came the reaction, sixteen year old materialism and a complete lack of interest in religion.'²

Again, there is nothing peculiarly remarkable in this adolescent devotion; though, perhaps less typically, it was to bear permanent fruit in the poet's later life.

But the ambition of a career in teaching, or possibly some other profession,³ was to be frustrated. In 1930 it was discovered that Nicholson had contracted tuberculosis. At that time, tuberculosis was often thought of as in part a deficiency disease, like rickets, and a certain social stigma attached to it, which must have added to the sense of shock

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1. Nicholson, They Became Christians (1966), pp.99-100.
 2. Letter from Norman Nicholson to George Every, 3 May 1938.
 3. Cf. Norman Nicholson, self-introduction to selection of poems in F.E.S. Finn. (ed.), Poets of Our Time, John Murray, 1965.

and distress felt by Nicholson's parents.¹ Yet the effect on the boy of sixteen was less shattering than it might have been had illness struck later and broken his life in two when he had already started a career.² In fact it may justly be claimed that T.B. has been the single most important factor in Nicholson's life, in that it has determined its shape, forced him to stand still and take stock, and made him into a poet. The root of the matter is that illness forced him to stay at home. Hindsight has certainly enabled Nicholson to see his illness almost as an act of fate, or even as divine intervention: describing his gradual approach to Christianity he later said that 'at this point the course

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1. The writer's father, who was brought up in Barrow-in-Furness, had a sister who died of T.B.; he vividly remembers the subsequent burning of bedding and fumigation of rooms which went on. Mrs. Bessie Schiff (Bessie Satterthwaite) can recall other contemporary cases of T.B. in Millom, and stresses the fact that the poet's father was a leading tradesman in the town. See also Graham Turner, The North Country, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967, p.199. For Nicholson's own version of the origins of his illness, cf. Provincial Pleasures (1959), p.158.
 2. Nicholson expressed this view in a 'Meeting Point' telecast, 'It Happened to Me', B.B.C.1, 2 Mar. 1968.

of my life was signalled on to a new track';¹ he has also said that he would have left Millom 'but for the grace of God and the tubercle bacillus'.²

The immediate effect of the discovery was to oblige him to leave school in October 1930. He was sent to a private sanatorium at Linford, two miles north-east of Ringwood in Hampshire, on the extreme western edge of the New Forest.³ He was not expected to return alive. That he did so was due entirely, in the opinion of the doctors, to 'his own patience and will to live'.⁴ But it is the positive side of his stay at the sanatorium - where he had to spend fifteen months in bed - which Nicholson himself, characteristically enough, chooses to stress. The sanatorium 'was my university' he declared later in a broadcast talk.⁵ The following passage shows the kind of thing he learnt there, and later parts of this study will demonstrate that it is on these early foundations

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1. Nicholson, They Became Christians (1966), p.100.
 2. Portrait of the Lakes (1963), p.174.
 3. The poet discovered many years later that the cost of this had eaten up most of his father's savings.
 4. Letter from Enrica Garnier to George Every, 9 May 1938.
 5. Nicholson, 'The Second Chance' (1963), p.344.

that his poetry has been built:

I had books, for which my appetite was gluttonous; I had leisure; I had the New Forest outside my window. I lived in a small chalet, tucked out of sight, and, at night, I seemed to be skulking, snug as a badger, among glooms of heath, pinewoods and orchards. The nightingales kept me awake in early summer; chaffinches, robins and coal tits hopped along my eiderdown. From my bed I was able to observe over sixty species of wild birds, including some as uncommon as the lesser-spotted woodpecker. As season followed season, I breathed in the dews, dawns, rains, frosts and sunshine of the Forest, feeling the sap and surge of it pulsing through my blood until it hardly seemed to matter whether I got well or not, for to share in, to be aware of, that life of nature was itself a mode of living. I had not then read D.H. Lawrence, but his poems and early novels express much of what I felt - an almost ecstatic joy in the thrust and flux of life, in the renewal of the seasons and the renewal of generations, and even in death as part of that cycle of renewal.¹

The New Forest at that time 'still belonged to the age of Edwardian cyclists, naturalists and Georgian poets'.¹ In such an atmosphere it was natural that Nicholson should read the work of Hardy, W.H. Hudson and Hilaire Belloc. Equally Edwardian, but more important, was his reading of Arnold Bennett, Shaw and H.G. Wells: not only was he almost to begin his own literary

1. Nicholson, They Became Christians (1966), p.101.

career a decade later by lecturing and writing about them,¹ but from Shaw and Wells he derived his view of society as an organism 'growing, multiplying and evolving'.² Their influence also turned him temporarily into an agnostic and a Socialist, aware of injustice and economic stagnation - aspects of life ignored by the Christian morality he had learnt at church and chapel - and looking for the same rebirth and renewal in society as the New Forest had shown him in the cycle of the seasons.

A spell at university, however, has a way of unfitting a man, at least initially, for his home town and its ordinary life. It is not surprising that when Norman Nicholson came back to Millom in 1932, feeling 'a thorough-bred countryman', he should have found it hard to adjust to after the 'winds and mists and sounds and smells of Hampshire'. His description of his arrival transmits vividly - if that is the appropriate word - the sense of heaviness, of being stunned, which he experienced:

I can remember climbing up the steps from
the railway station on the day I came home.

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1. In Man and Literature, S.C.M. Press, 1943.
 2. Nicholson, They Became Christians (1966), p.101.

It was a grey, sooty, September evening. The fells looked flat and listless as a stage backcloth. I did not greatly worry about that. But when I got to the top of the railway bridge I saw a town that seemed to have nothing to do with the fells at all. The slagbanks were the frozen excreta of the earth - huge, fossilized medieval middens. The tarmac and concrete seemed to seal off the living pulse of the soil. The smoke spread over the town like a dirty umbrella blocking off the sun and the sky. I was appalled, not because the town was drab and out-of-date - I had expected that - but because it was so out-of-place, so alien, so un-belonging to the countryside round about.¹

His immediate reaction to the apparent strangeness of Millom was to pretend that the town did not exist. The next eighteen months he spent in twice-daily all-weather walks around the local countryside, hardly entering a building and keeping well away both from the church and the ironworks. Symbolically and actually he turned his back on the town.

From 1934 onwards a number of new influences were luckily to swing Nicholson's mind from denial to some kind of equilibrium. It is important not to over-emphasise any immediacy of change; the process of adjustment, to Millom, to religious belief, to initial lack of striking success as

1. Nicholson, 'The Second Chance' (1963), p.344.

a writer, and to the problems of attaining and preserving a reasonable balance of health, was a complex and very gradual one. Not until about 1942, when his first book was published, can one even begin to talk of a life aware of its purpose and conscious of its powers of literary expression.

The first of these new influences was the poetry of T.S. Eliot - not the Eliot of 'Ash Wednesday', but the apparently disillusioned poet of 'The Waste Land' and the early quatrain poems. The effect of his reading on Nicholson was very powerful: 'The Waste Land', 'like a stinging nettle accidentally grasped,¹ made him really read poetry for the first time. His reaction was a 'bewildered hilarious fervour, like that of a drunk man converted at a Salvation Army street mission'.¹ Nicholson's 'conversion' took place on Millom Cricket Field in the summer of 1934; he was spending much of his time there convalescing, and remembers, while umpiring a tennis match, shouting to a friend at the top of his voice Eliot's lines:

The young are red and pustular,
Clutching piaculative pence.²

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1. Norman Nicholson, 'Words and Imagery', in T.S. Eliot: a symposium compiled by Tambimuttu and Richard March, 1948. Third Impression, Cass, 1965, p.231.
 2. The present writer can testify to his own similar incantatory response to a first reading of both Eliot and Dylan Thomas. No doubt many readers of poetry can bear similar witness to their experiences.

This response to the sheer power of Eliot's language - quite apart from its meaning - was accompanied by a sense of the relevance of 'The Waste Land' to the industrial depression of the thirties, in a way that made Millom suddenly part of a coherent pattern:

It was Mr. Eliot more than anyone else who made us see it whole, who made us aware of the meadow behind the muckheap, who pointed out the significance of the dilapidated school and the empty church on the hill. It was not a very hopeful picture that he made of it, but at twenty years of age, we did not bother much about hope...indeed, we found despair quite exhilarating. What mattered was that suddenly everything in our world had its meaning. The most disparate events and objects took on a new relation to each other, becoming allegorical while remaining themselves. From then onwards it was possible to move about and hear the everyday landscape and everyday lives giving forth liturgies and elegies of purpose and pity.¹

The second influence came from Nicholson's study of wild flowers, a favourite occupation now on his walks into the local countryside. To find the rarer species it proved necessary to look, not in the fields or on the fell-sides, but among the abandoned workings of the iron-ore mines near

1. Norman Nicholson, 'Words and Imagery', op.cit. (1965), p.234.

Hodbarrow Point.¹ This drew his eye back to the town, and he came to realise that it, too, was a part of nature: the rocks of the Lake District made up the houses of Millom no less than they made up the mountains, and the birds were impartial about where they perched:

I saw that the black-headed gulls nested just as happily among the slagbanks and old rubble-tips as they did on the sand-dunes at Ravenglass, and if the incongruity of the site did not bother them, why should it bother me? ²

The synthesis of nature and industry, of rural life and urban man, was cemented by a new awareness of religion, not as 'a puritan, bourgeois, life-denying morality',³ but as itself a part of nature. The influence here was The Golden Bough. Nicholson had gone on from Eliot to Eliot's sources, and Frazer's study of ancient fertility cults, with their motif of the killing of the priest-king, reinforced for him the parallel between Christ's death and resurrection and the cyclical decay and rebirth of the year. The basic morality

1. Cf. Norman Nicholson, 'Hodbarrow Hollow', Manchester Guardian, 21 May 1959, p.9.
2. 'The Second Chance' (1963), p.344.
3. Nicholson, They Became Christians (1966), p.106.

of Christianity was seen as dying in order to live, not as a rigid system of prohibitions. Nicholson's understanding, however, stopped short, at this stage, of belief in the Incarnation, insofar as this was tied down to a precisely dated historical event.

Four friendships were particularly important to Nicholson during this vital period of adjustment and self-discovery. The first was with Bessie Satterthwaite, who was a year younger than himself and, as I have mentioned earlier, had been one of his classmates at Millom Secondary School. In 1933 she went up to Manchester University to read English and in the vacations she and Nicholson spent a lot of their time together. She had no university friends in Millom, and most of Nicholson's own friends had moved away, so it is easy to see how the school friendship would expand into a joint exploration of literature, particularly as Bessie's university life was the pattern of what Nicholson's own life would have been had illness not intervened. In November 1936 Bessie's father died, and her family's lack of money soon made it necessary for her to break off teacher training and find a job near home. She took a school post in

Whitehaven and was able to get down to Millom each weekend;
as a result

I saw a great deal of Norman. We would go for a potter around the ironworks, or Steel Green, every Sunday afternoon, and he would bring me what he had just written.¹

A number of Nicholson's early poems were dedicated to Bessie, and it was presumably through her that his poem 'May Day 1937' was published in The Serpent, the magazine of the Manchester University Union. Her Christian faith, too, was an obvious help to him in his own religious strivings, as some verses he sent her at Christmas 1938 testify:

My love, Bess, and this picture too
I send at Christmas. These to you,
Who showed to my constructive eye
The high Cross girdering the sky,
And how I bricked my flesh upon
The steel Cross of the Skeleton.²

The last four lines of this 'verse letter' also show the influence on Nicholson, referred to earlier, of The Golden Bough:

Find in our carols, reconciled,
The dead God in the new-born Child,
And know the child upon the sod
Is pregnant in the dying God.

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1. Letter to the writer, 28 Nov. 1967.
 2. This poem is unpublished, and I am indebted to Mrs. Bessie Schiff (née Satterthwaite) for letting me see a copy of it. The 'picture' referred to was Raphael's 'Crucifixion'.

It was through Bessie Satterthwaite that Nicholson met the Rev. (later Canon) Samuel Taylor, who had come to Millom about 1935 as Vicar of the old church of Holy Trinity. Canon Taylor was far from being a run-of-the-mill clergyman: he was a passionate admirer, and a relation, of Aldous Huxley, and a decided Socialist in his politics; Kurt Hahn, the founder of Gordonstoun, invited him to go there as chaplain, and he was sorely tempted to accept. At a time when vicars still kept at some distance from their parishioners, he was friendly and outspoken, and from being a sort of 'patron' figure, cultured, sympathetic and shrewd, to the young would-be poet he developed into a lifelong friend.¹ He is clearly the basis for the 'Canon Olds' of Provincial Pleasures (1959). Nicholson used to walk across the fields to the vicarage to talk to him and to borrow his books - a particularly valuable privilege at a time when he could afford to buy few books himself. He also took to going over to sit in the church and, later, to attend the services, though it was not until the autumn of 1938 that he approached Canon Taylor for specific advice on matters of religious doctrine. One can hardly over-emphasise the importance to Nicholson of

1. Canon Taylor died in 1956.

this contact with a man of culture from the world beyond Millom; and the religious significance of the friendship needs no stressing. An extra ingredient in Canon Taylor's feeling of sympathy must have been the fact that it was for reasons of health that he himself had accepted the Holy Trinity living.

A third friendship - and one not without significant difficulties later on - was with Enrica Garnier, whom Nicholson met through another school friend, Ted Fisher. Enrica had been born in China, of missionary parents, and later had attended Homerton College, Cambridge. She and Nicholson met first in 1936 in Sheffield, and their friendship lasted until late into the nineteen-forties. They corresponded regularly, and spent holidays together, along with other friends, on a farm near Banbury in 1937, and in Sheffield again in the April of 1938. In the August of that year Enrica visited Millom for the first time, staying with Nicholson and his parents at St. George's Terrace. She was shown round the town and district with enthusiasm and assiduity: even at this stage of his life Nicholson was not only thoroughly devoted to Millom himself, but

very keen that others should not miss the attractions he had discovered in it. The visit was disappointingly cut short, however, after only four days, when Enrica had to return home to London because her mother was ill. It was not long before Nicholson joined her there, at her parents' house in Kenton, and when, on this visit, Nicholson met T.S. Eliot for the first time, it was with Enrica that he went to the Faber and Faber office in Russell Square.

It will be clear from this description that more was involved here than simply a friendship. Enrica typed out for Nicholson most copies of his poems, and it is to her that the Five Rivers (1944) volume is dedicated. When the school in Kent where Enrica taught was evacuated during the war to Pontesbury in Shropshire, Nicholson visited her there - a very long trip for him - and as a result wrote the poem 'September in Shropshire'.¹ That the friendship did not ripen into marriage - a conclusion expected by a number of Nicholson's friends, including Canon Taylor - was due to several factors, some of which can only be a matter for speculation. One of them was undoubtedly Nicholson's health, which was always more or

1. Five Rivers (1944), p.33.

less precarious during this period and was never certain enough to enable him to take the full-time job which marriage would have necessitated: in his book on William Cowper Nicholson mentions the way in which Cowper's 'physical condition' inhibited him from any intimacy which might lead to marriage, and he also calls the breaking-off of Cowper's long engagement to his cousin Theodora a 'wise decision'.¹ It is tempting to infer, though impossible to prove, a personal application here, particularly when one bears in mind the nature of Nicholson's illness. Another factor was perhaps Nicholson's attachment to his own town, and his sense of a debt to his parents; though Enrica was apparently 'delighted with Millom',² it would hardly be surprising if there had been some tension between this feeling and a sense that the outside world had its claims also: to like Millom, and to wish to settle down there, would not necessarily be synonymous for everyone. Whatever the reasons for its decline, a relationship as 'ambiguous'³ as that

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1. Norman Nicholson, William Cowper (1951), pp.16-19.
 2. Letter from Nicholson to George Every, 25 Aug. 1938.
 3. Nicholson, William Cowper (1951), pp.87-8.

between Cowper and Lady Austen, however suitable to one party, could not prolong itself indefinitely, and in Nicholson's last poem written for Enrica one cannot but notice the mixture of a nostalgic sense of loss and a slightly bewildered feeling of relief:

Lie lonely, love.
 And lonely too am I.
 The red thunder
 Blunders round the sky.
 The hand finds only
 The boundary between you and me.
 Yet the hand wonders
 To feel what is other than hand,
 To know what is other than self.
 The clouds are ruled like sand;
 The lightning shines brightly
 But the sky gives no reply.
 Lie lonely, love.
 Yet, lonely love, lie lightly.¹

It is hard not to escape the conclusion that, whatever the ultimate value to Nicholson of the relationship as a whole, one thing it did reveal to him was how much more strongly than with anything else his life as a writer was identified with remaining in his home town.

More acceptable vistas of the world outside opened to Nicholson as a result of the fourth and most lasting of these friendships. In July 1937 Bessie Satterthwaite attended a

1. Norman Nicholson, 'Lullaby', New Statesman, 28 Sept. 1946.

Student Christian Movement Conference at Swanwick in Derbyshire. She took to this conference a batch of Nicholson's recent poems and showed them to Brother George Every, who was lecturing there on modern poetry. Every was impressed by the vitality of the poems and by Bessie's description of this young man from Millom who had struggled to poetic expression against obstacles both of health and of comparative intellectual isolation. The next day at the railway station he asked for Nicholson's address, and thus began a correspondence which has continued to the present day.

George Every was older than Nicholson, and more experienced. His base was at Kelham, only twenty miles east of Swanwick, and the headquarters of the Society of the Sacred Mission, an order of the Anglican church which educated young men for the Ministry. After graduating from University College, Exeter, where he was a pupil of Christopher Dawson, Every had come to Kelham in 1929. He became a full member of the Society in 1933. When he first read Nicholson's poems in 1937 he was engaged in teaching history and in writing. In secular terms, he was a sort of public relations officer for

the Society, making friends for it 'in the universities and elsewhere'.¹ Every's function as a writer brought him into contact with the London literary world; he was himself also a poet, and wrote frequently for The Criterion, having made the acquaintance of T.S. Eliot, who used Kelham as a place to retire to for periodic religious retreats. Every's own enthusiasm for Nicholson's poems led him to send them to Eliot, who reacted to them with, for him, 'more than his customary caution':

I do think there is very likely something here, if he is young enough, and I am pleased by an interest in a variety of things outside himself, and a livelier experimentation with varieties of metre than is usual. It is still very unformed, of course.²

From Eliot this was high praise, especially as Nicholson was

1. Letter from George Every to the writer, 16 Dec. 1967. In the late thirties Every was connected with the group which later produced Crisis in the Universities (ed. Walter Moberly). He was friendly with Scrutineers like L.C. Knights and D.W. Harding, and also had some meetings with F.R. Leavis. He contributed an article entitled 'The Necessity of Scrutiny' to the March 1939 issue of Theology. His best-known books are Christian Discrimination (1940 S.P.C.K) and The Byzantine Patriarchate (S.P.C.K. 1947).
2. Letter from T.S. Eliot to George Every, 27 Sept. 1937.

still 'young enough' - twenty-three - to be likely to develop from promise to achievement. Every then sent on the poems to Michael Roberts, who replied by writing Nicholson a three-page letter full of careful technical criticism, and suggesting that he submit some poems to Poetry (Chicago). This was to result in the first important publication of Nicholson's poems anywhere, when in the March 1938 issue of Poetry (Chicago) his poem 'Song for 7 p.m.' appeared. A further poem, 'Sonnet for an Introvert', was printed in the January 1939 issue of the same magazine.

The age-gap between Nicholson and Every was small enough - about six years - to enable the younger man to talk freely. One perceives in Nicholson's letters a sense of release: here was a sympathetic representative of the literary world, able to comment on his poems as poems and interested in him as a person. The letters show the young writer's familiar mixture of diffidence and self-confidence, of clear-cut ideas and requests for advice, of sharp self-criticism of his poems and occasional bigotry about aspects of life remote from his own, of self-definition and defensive self-justification. And, as the following extract illustrates,

the letters put forward many ideas that were to emerge with little alteration later:

It does seem that with the growth of popular journalism, the cinema and the wireless people are going to turn less and less to verse for entertainment and amusement. If that happens verse will become the vehicle of the purely 'poetical', and is in danger also of becoming even more private and esoteric than it has been during the last two decades. For all that I am not unduly pessimistic. Before the arts of reading and writing and the mechanics of printing became general, practically all races found that verse was the easiest medium in which to transmit stories and ritual by memory. It seems to me likely that in the future, though not the immediate future, the habit of reading is likely to decline and to be replaced by broadcast news, the cinema, television, and possibly even gramophone-novels. If that is the case, a popular verse may arise to relieve the public's ear from the monotony of the speaking voice, in the same way that many advertisements use jingles or parodies to catch the eye among the monotony of newspaper columns. And I do think that with the development of the cinema, the stage will return again to verse.¹

The far-sightedness of some of this, and its close resemblance to an article of Nicholson's in The London Magazine in 1962²

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1. Letter to George Every, 20 May 1938.
 2. Norman Nicholson, Answer to a Questionnaire on Modern Poetry, The London Magazine, Vol. I, No.11, Feb. 1962.

are very striking indeed.

Every helped Nicholson in a number of ways. He lent him books, suggested him as reviewer to the editor of the New English Weekly (the first English national magazine to print any of his poems), gave a great deal of historical help when Nicholson was writing his Biblical verse-dramas, criticised his poems and sent him his own for criticism, advised him during the period when he was returning to Christianity, and arranged in the autumn of 1938 the meeting, which I have mentioned earlier, between him and T.S. Eliot in London. All these things, particularly the opportunity to speak with the poet for whom he had 'an unavoidable veneration',¹ were tremendously encouraging. Simultaneously, local opportunities were broadening: during the autumn of 1938 Nicholson gave a series of lectures on the modern novel for the Workers' Educational Association in Millom. Not only was the necessary organisation of material a useful intellectual exercise, but 'the regular repetition of the same strain each week has developed a resistance to it and I'm very pleased

1. Letter to George Every, 1 Sept. 1937.

with my health'.¹ The lectures were repeated at Whitehaven (where Bessie Satterthwaite was secretary of the branch) in the autumn of 1939, and in July of the same year he lectured at the S.C.M. Conference at Swanwick on 'Morals and the Modern Novel'.² This conference was organised by George Every, and Nicholson's fellow-speakers were John Betjeman and W. Moelwyn Merchant (now Professor of English at Exeter University), who became a good friend. After the conference Nicholson stayed at Kelham (returning a visit George Every had paid him in Millom in the summer of 1938), and commented appreciatively:

The peace of the house was soothing to soul and body. The strength and steadiness of the faith and life of the Society (symbolised in the building of the Chapel, as compared with the restless striving of Gothic) is something I'm very glad to have experienced.³

Nicholson's last lectures for the W.E.A. were given at St. Bees in the early years of the war. The atmosphere of these classes and their value to him are well captured in

1. Letter to George Every, 6 Nov. 1938.
2. Reprinted in Theology, June 1940.
3. Letter to George Every, 5 Aug. 1939.

a description he wrote a little later:

I remember a class at a coastal village in Cumberland, where I gave a course on Modern Poetry - not an easy subject to introduce to the average W.E.A. class. Most of the class had read next to no modern poetry, and did not like what they had read, and were ready to say so.

I did not try to give an ordered account of the development of modern poetry - instead, I wrote a poem of Hopkins on the board and let the class worry it like a dog worries a rat. Soon they had begun to take the poems to pieces with the enthusiasm of a crossword fan. Hopkins, Pound, Eliot were all dealt with. Dozens of subtleties of meaning were discovered, and enough ambiguities to bewilder Mr. Empson. Many of these were frankly and joyously absurd, but through it all I was able to see for the first time many a felicity of diction or twist of metaphor which I had missed before.¹

These lectures may have done something to reaffirm the sense of an audience which Nicholson had first felt at the age of nine when he addressed his Sunday School classmates. Out of them came his first important book, Man and Literature (1942), and the travelling involved brought him close to a number of places which he wrote about in Five Rivers. When lecturing had to be abandoned in 1943 as a result of a number of minor haemorrhages, Nicholson had successfully

1. Norman Nicholson, 'The Democratic Study Group', Time and Tide, 4 Sept. 1943.

broken out of his isolation by gaining an audience and by attaining the stability of a renewed religious faith, so the physical setback could be more easily borne.

Despite the positive influences and the friendships which I have described, Nicholson's stability and final success were won with difficulty. The latter years of the nineteen-thirties were in many ways a depressing period for him. His problems sprang from poor health, a feeling of undue financial dependence on others, a sense that his work was not getting the attention he had hoped for, and his religious struggles.

His health was a constant problem, requiring a vigilant balancing of 'excitement' and rest. Even in the nineteen-fifties a couple of hours of vigorous conversation would necessitate an afternoon in bed to recover; in the 'thirties any undue disturbance had far severer physical consequences:

If he is worried or unhappy or even suddenly startled or in completely new surroundings or deeply disturbed by any physical mental or spiritual change, his temperature soars, and probably he gets one of his attacks of indigestion which means he is in torment and weakness for a week or ten days, unable to keep down even water or beaten white of egg.¹

1. Letter from Enrica Garnier to George Every, 9 May 1938.

Much mental tension must have been set up by the need always to keep his energies within the limits that his constitution dictated, always to curb himself and realise that pleasures others took for granted were not for him. The following passage describes the modus vivendi he had worked out, but its slight over-emphasis makes it hard not to feel that it must often have been a strain:

I don't go in for extravagant pleasures - I could easily be happy with little in life. I suppose the restrictions I have had to put on myself are enough to take away all the pleasure in life for some people, yet, on the whole, I find them quite a reasonable price to pay for the privilege of going on living. Not to be able to climb Black Combe is well compensated for by being able to see the bottom of it. It is worth while not to run in order to walk; it is worth while to go to bed early in order to wake in the morning.¹

The awareness that his ill-health had taxed his father's savings and had given his parents worry and extra responsibility for him at a time when otherwise they could have been enjoying a comfortable middle-age added substantially to the burden of the ill-health itself.

This burden was exacerbated by a feeling that his life

1. Letter to Bessie Satterthwaite, 8 May 1940.

was not justifying itself: what, he felt, was he trying to preserve his health for?:

When I went to sign on for the conscription register, the man in the Labour Exchange remarked that I would be happier if I were doing something to 'justify my existence'. That is just the attitude of most people - that I simply fail to make any valid claim to be alive, that my life has no apologia.¹

Substantial publication would have provided a kind of self-justification; but his couple of poems in Poetry (Chicago) did little to console him for not being published in influential English magazines. Eliot's interest in his work had not led to publication in The Criterion, though he had sent a group of poems for consideration early in 1938; New Verse had not accepted any of his work; despite 'an encouraging letter'² from Julian Symons, neither had Twentieth Century Verse; the mention of Michael Roberts's name had failed to open the pages of The Listener to him, and

I had a batch of verse returned from Life and Letters with the accompanying note still folded between one of the mss. Obviously they had never been unfolded, let alone read.³

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1. Letter to Bessie Satterthwaite, 8 May 1940.
 2. Letter to George Every, 1 Sept. 1937.
 3. Letter to George Every, 20 May 1938.

A first novel had been rejected both by Longmans and by Chatto and Windus in 1939, and in the March of 1940 T.S. Eliot drastically criticised a second novel in which he originally appears to have expressed an interest. This left Nicholson feeling like 'a cart without a horse - or perhaps a car with a driver but without any petrol'.¹ By May he was expressing the low ebb of his literary hopes with more open depression:

The refusal of the novel after a year's intensive and purposeful work made me very unhappy. That is not all. I've tried in all sorts of ways to get something published during the last few months. Written all kinds of muck and other things which weren't muck, and a steady stream of refusals has come back. Letters addressed to myself in my own handwriting half a dozen or more times in a week, sometimes three by the same post. Many of these, I think, were never read. But it has gone on, more or less, for four years. I've sent hundreds of things away, and all have been returned. You don't know what happens the other end; it's like knocking on the door of a house and getting no answer, and not knowing if the house is empty or the people won't answer.²

His movement towards a strength of religious feeling akin

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1. Letter to George Every, 20 March 1940.
 2. Letter to Bessie Satterthwaite, 8 May 1940.

to the intensity he had briefly experienced when he was confirmed took Nicholson a long time, and the lack of firm belief added to his other troubles. The awareness of the involvement of Christianity with the cycle of nature, which he had gained through reading The Golden Bough, was perhaps too abstract, but even the desire for something more than this was held back by a sense that true faith could not be forced:

I know the aridity of saying that it is sufficient to believe in Christianity as a set of symbols, and I refuse to be taken in by this. I do not yet believe enough to say: Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. I want the belief; yet at the same time, I'm afraid to seek it deliberately in case the belief I should find might only be a creation of my own wanting and not really faith at all. I'm afraid of persuading and conditioning myself into a spiritual pose. And at the same time, I'm sometimes afraid that my fear of a pose is itself a pose.¹

Yet Nicholson did reel that 'only Christianity can give the stability I need', and he was happy attending the Morning and Evening Services at Canon Taylor's church. He held back,

1. Letter to George Every, 3 May 1938.

however, from the Mass,¹ as it required 'too great an act of faith even to behold without communicating',² though in the same letter he refers to a recent reading of the Catholic missal and to his seeing for the first time 'something of the significance of the Eucharist'.

Liturgically, of course, the significance of the Eucharist is that it is a visible symbol of Christ's Incarnation. Though he believed in the existence of God as Creator, and could accept the idea that God was 'continuously in touch with his creation',³ Nicholson found it extremely hard to grasp - whether intellectually or emotionally it is impossible to distinguish - the actual Incarnation of God in the person of 'an obscurely-born Jewish child'.³ Another obstacle to his complete return to Christianity was his belief, influenced

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1. One inference from Nicholson's use of 'Mass' rather than 'Holy Communion' is that Canon Taylor was a High Churchman. A letter from Nicholson to Bessie Satterthwaite (3 June 1942) says that the previous Sunday Canon Taylor had celebrated his first sung Eucharist in the church.
 2. Letter to George Every, 17 July 1938.
 3. They Became Christians (1966), p.107.

by his reading of H.G. Wells at Linford, in the fundamental goodness of man. One day in 1938 his view of this changed, not as a result of ratiocination but of what one can only call a kind of personal revelation:

Last week, when I was tying up my shoes or something, it came upon me in a flash that - well, I can only say, the truth in the idea of the doctrine of Original Sin.¹

This realisation, about which Nicholson nowhere goes into any more detail, led him to ask Canon Taylor for doctrinal advice, advice which Taylor himself felt could better be provided by George Every.

Acceptance of the reality - rather than what he calls in They Became Christians (1966) 'the general idea' - of the Incarnation seems to have taken Nicholson rather longer to reach, but when it came, it was with a similar suddenness. Nicholson had been arguing with friends who were professing Christians, but who shrugged off the Incarnation - as he believed he did himself - as merely a symbol: the man called Christ, who was born on earth, had not really been the Son of God. Nicholson was jolted by this essentially Unitarian view

1. Letter to George Every, 24 Nov. 1938.

into a defence of the very doctrine which he had previously found it hard to comprehend:

I said that to deny the uniqueness of Our Lord's divinity was to take the whole point out of Christianity, to remove from it the one concept that made it Christian at all. I do not know that my arguments convinced anyone else, but they certainly convinced me. Slightly shocked at what seemed the heresy of some, at least, of the church-going faithful, I proclaimed myself a Christian, almost as an act of protest. But once that key had been turned, all the rest turned with it - creed, liturgy, theology, the imagery, wisdom and experience of Christendom. One hesitant creak, and the whole door swung open.¹

Describing in 1966, his progress towards what may be called 're-conversion', Nicholson speaks of himself as 'literal, matter-of-fact, fond of specifications, distrustful of abstractions'.² He also stresses the 'literal-mindedness' of Christianity, and the way in which it

...stakes everything on the claim that God was born as one person on such and such a date and in such and such a locality.²

The juxtaposition of these two things makes it easier to understand why Nicholson was suddenly, and finally, able to accept the doctrine of the Incarnation. To believe that God had embodied himself in a man born at a precise time and in

1. They Became Christians (1966), p.107.

2. Ibid., p.108.

expenditure, gained Nicholson himself a mere £7. The book, however, brought his name before the public as a young man keen on making Christianity relevant to his contemporaries: it was subtitled 'Designed for the Times', and unlike R.S. Thomas's Penguin Book of Religious Verse (1963) its selection was entirely from the work of twenty nine twentieth-century poets. It included two poems by Nicholson himself, but the poets most strongly represented were Charles Williams, Andrew Young, Eliot, David Gascoyne, Rayner Heppenstall, George Every and S.L. Bethell.¹ The aim was to show that Christian poetry was not stereotyped as 'moral uplift in rhyme or pious verse about the Good Shepherd', but something essentially fresh and up-to-date:

To many modern poets the events of Our Lord's life are so vivid that they seem to be contemporary, so that it is natural for them to write in the language, imagery and form of our time.²

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1. The inclusion, also of poems by writers not obviously Christian, like D.H. Lawrence, Allen Tate and Tambimuttu, gives the anthology a rather random air. Nor is a consistent style of poetry aimed at: Belloc and Chesterton are represented, it would seem in the hope that the anthology might appeal to readers who were unfamiliar with 'modern' poetry. The anthology is in fact very eclectic, both in the type of poem and in the relative merit of the poets included: names like M. Farrow, J.D.C. Pellow and Andrew Murray would make it seem rather dated to a present-day reader who located a copy. But the book's sales indicate that it served its strictly topical purpose very well.
 2. Norman Nicholson, Introduction to An Anthology of Religious Verse, Penguin books, 1942, p.ix.

The success of the Anthology led the S.C.M. Press to ask Nicholson for a book. This book, entitled Man and Literature, 'an enquiry into the assumptions as to the nature and purpose of Man which underlie much of modern writing',¹ was published in October 1943. The essays, mostly on modern novelists, of which it is composed were derived from his lectures for the W.E.A., and the book is dedicated to the members of his W.E.A. classes in Cumberland. The section on 'Natural Man' was thought by Nicholson to be the best part of the book: it includes very full studies of D.H. Lawrence and William Faulkner, the latter Nicholson's favourite modern novelist at the time. The book drew the favourable attention of The Times Literary Supplement, which devoted a full-page leading review to the ideas it presented: its conclusion must have been particularly gratifying to Nicholson both as a writer and as a Christian:

At a time when more than ever perhaps men need to build up a faith on true foundations, so clarifying an inquiry is of particular value.²

The first substantial publication of Nicholson's poems

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1. Man and Literature, S.C.M. Press, 1943, p.5.
 2. Times Literary Supplement, 18 Dec. 1943, p.606.

came in the same year. John Bale & Staples were intending to issue a small volume of Selected Poems by Keith Douglas, J.C. Hall and Alan Rook (now mainly remembered for his anthology piece 'Dunkirk Pier'¹). Alan Rook was then offered separate publication elsewhere, and a batch of twelve poems by Nicholson (four of them never reprinted) filled the space left vacant. Keith Douglas was to come into his own later with his maturer war poems, but at the time Selected Poems appeared it was Nicholson who received most of the favourable critical attention given to the volume. One reviewer praised his 'delight in the minute details of nature',² and Stephen Spender, despite some curiously double-edged comments, called him 'much the most skilful of the three'.³

The group of poems which was to become the volume Five Rivers was first submitted for consideration to M.J. Tambimuttu, who had published four of Nicholson's poems in his anthology Poetry in Wartime (1942). Tambimuttu was at this time editor of the very influential Poetry London. He rejected the poems,

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1. See M.J. Tambimuttu (ed.), Poetry in Wartime, Faber and Faber, 1942, p.146.
 2. Séan Jennett, Poetry Quarterly, Vol.5, No.1, Grey Walls Press, Spring 1943, p.34.
 3. Stephen Spender, New Statesman, 17 Apr. 1943.

but this rejection was to prove fortunate for Nicholson: Anne Ridler, then T.S. Eliot's secretary, suggested that the collection be submitted to Faber and Faber. Eliot responded favourably, impressed by the coherence of the poems as a whole and in particular by the imagery of some of them,¹ and the volume was published in 1944. Five Rivers made Nicholson's poetic reputation. It was widely, and on the whole very warmly, reviewed (John Betjeman called Nicholson 'a real poet';² Julian Symons called him 'a considerable poet' and spoke of his 'brilliant and original talent'),³ and by 1945 it had been twice reprinted. The volume also secured Nicholson's connection with a major publishing firm. Had it been published under the imprint of Poetry London⁴ - which vanished along with many other small publishing firms that had flourished during the war - copies of it might now

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1. The source of this information is a letter from T.S. Eliot to Anne Ridler of 17 June 1943. Mrs. Ridler has kindly allowed me to consult this, but unfortunately, under the terms of Eliot's will, I am unable to quote from it verbatim.
 2. John Betjeman, Daily Herald, 6 July 1944.
 3. Julian Symons, Tribune, 6 Oct. 1944.
 4. It could have been: Tambimuttu changed his mind about the collection, but by that time Fabers had accepted it.

be as difficult to obtain as those of the very rare Selected Poems of 1942. A further bonus was the award of the newly-established Heinemann Prize - a very useful £100 - in 1945, and the invitation by the Royal Society of Literature, in whose gift the prize lay, to become a Fellow. The award of the Heinemann Prize was to be paralleled in 1954, when Nicholson's third collection, The Pot Geranium, was the first Choice of the newly-established Poetry Book Society.

After Five Rivers, Nicholson's biography becomes mainly a list of books too extensive to detail here: four plays, two more verse collections, a Selected Poems in 1966, works of criticism and topography and a large number of articles, reviews, broadcasts and lectures. Only four more personal matters need to be mentioned. In 1954, Nicholson's father died at the age of seventy-seven, leaving his son in the rather odd position of running the family shop for two months while a tenant was found for it.¹ In 1956 he married Yvonne Edith Gardner, a Londoner who had come to teach at Millom Grammar School and was happy to stay in the town. In 1959 he was awarded the honorary degree of Master of Arts by Manchester

1. Norman Nicholson, 'His Own Boss', (1954), p.988.

University, a fit tribute to a writer who, however wide his appeal, had remained in and of the North of England. In 1965 he was rewarded in another, no less welcome way: after over thirty years spent in self-disciplined care for his health, he was informed that all traces of tuberculosis had disappeared. This must truly have seemed 'a crown upon a lifetime's effort'. The nature of that effort, and its success, in terms of poetry and drama, it now remains to examine in detail.

CHAPTER THREE1. Early and uncollected verse.

Though the first volume devoted exclusively to his own poetry, Five Rivers, did not appear until 1944, Norman Nicholson in fact began to write poems considerably earlier than this, at least as early as 1937, when he was twenty-three. This age in itself, however, makes Nicholson something of a late starter compared to the many poets who begin to write when they are in their teens. A partial explanation may be the possible lack at home and at school of the kind of cultural ambience in which verse-writing would have seemed natural: certainly Millom Secondary School had few societies, nor was there a school magazine.¹ At the age of fifteen Nicholson walked to the Stone Circle at Swinside a few miles from Millom, and described his impressions thus:

...and there, at last, I saw the stones, black,
huddled and hooded, with the snow mounded
against them on the one side. There was no

1. This information is drawn from an essay entitled 'My Schooldays', written in October 1936 by Bessie Satterthwaite as part of her Dip.Ed. work at Manchester University.

comfort in them, no hint of anything to do with humanity at all. They were as frightening as the moor, yet they were not just a part of it. They were separate, persisting through the centuries in a dumb, motionless struggle. They were in opposition to the moor, struggling against it, just as I was - but they were on my side.¹

This vague sense of menace - the affinity with certain well-known passages of The Prelude is clear enough - betrays the sensibility of a poet, but George Every, writing in the nineteen-fifties, felt that it was Nicholson's illness which produced the actual circumstances in which this sensibility could emerge in verbal shape. Without his illness, Nicholson, in Every's opinion,

...would have been a mountain rambler, an adventurer, probably a teacher, perhaps a preacher, but a man of action rather than contemplation.²

Whether or not Nicholson would have written poetry at all except for his illness is of course a conjecture impossible to verify. But I think it is true to say that his illness, in restricting his movements to a narrow radius, did determine

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1. Portrait of the Lakes (1963), p.63. The visit had first been described in Cumberland and Westmorland (1949).
 2. George Every, 'Norman Nicholson, Poet and Critic', The British Weekly, late 1950s.

the kind of poetry which one thinks of as typically his: poetry rooted in the awareness of a particular place. Certainly it was not until after his illness and convalescence that the actual writing of poetry began. Almost none, however, of these earliest poems survived in Five Rivers; only one, 'The Blackberry', dates from before 1940, and very few from before 1942. On the back of a rejected poem of that year, entitled 'Entr'acte', Nicholson wrote a letter to Bessie Satterthwaite in which he said that

...on the whole I'm glad to destroy much of my stuff - indeed there's scarcely anything written before the war which I would now wish to preserve.¹

It would be a pity, though, to ignore these early poems, of which there are about twenty in manuscript and a further ten in various magazines. Nicholson felt fairly strongly about them at the time, and though they differ from the more mature poems in Five Rivers, the difference is interesting in that it affords an insight into Nicholson's poetic beginnings in the socially-conscious nineteen-thirties. Most of the poems

1. Letter to Bessie Satterthwaite, 3 June 1942.

show clear signs of a lively, though at this stage sometimes imitative, poetic talent, and a number of them could, one feels, have been profitably reprinted in a volume.

The dominant image in the poetry of the nineteen-thirties was that of the sick society: the key sentence of the period is Auden's: 'What do you think about England, this country of ours where nobody is well?'.¹ Though not so aggressive as Auden or Day Lewis, nor so sophisticated as Louis MacNeice, Nicholson in 1937 was equally aware of the sickness, as someone actually living in a depressed area could hardly fail to be, and his poems of that year are extremely socially-conscious. But the most moving statement of his awareness of the situation is in a letter describing among other things a ride through Sheffield in April 1938:

On the last evening of our visit we went for a drive through the suburbs and city of Sheffield. I had been anxious that Enrica...should see some of the industrial life of Sheffield, and asked that we might drive among this rather than the Derbyshire moors. By industrial life I meant furnaces and chimneyscapes, but we were driven

1. W.H. Auden, The Orators, Faber, 1932, p.12.

instead through the slums of the city. I suppose I must have known that people lived in such conditions, but I had never felt it before. I have met poverty in small towns, but here were people living by the score in appalling squalor. There were dozens of children 2 or 3 years of age running about the streets, some crying, all in rags and dirt, all, or so it seemed, totally uncared for...Enrica and I felt guilty somehow or other. I felt as if the people ought to come and smash the windscreen of our car; as if we were insulting them to drive in comfort among their houses.¹

This feeling of guilt, characteristic of many of the 'thirties poets, was most typically expressed in the work of Stephen Spender. But unlike Spender, Nicholson was not so removed in upbringing from the people he pitied; and himself a working-class man,² he could certainly never have described the 'proletariat', in Auden's words, as 'disheartened sweeps' or a 'hopeless race',³ - or rather, had he done so, he would not, like Auden, have considered their lack of heart and hope to be their fault. In a rather strained, over-dramatic poem of November 1937 called 'Sonnet at Night' he expressed his wish

1. Letter to George Every, 3 May 1938.

2. Nicholson describes himself thus in a letter to George Every of 29 Sept. 1937. It is not quite an accurate description of the son of a shopkeeper, but the inaccuracy is symptomatic of the times.

3. Auden, The Orators (1932), p.94.

to be identified with man - imaged in the iron-workers of Millom, seen in the heroic light shed by his 'left-wing idealism',¹ of the period:

Edged by diamond-hard light the chimneys bore
 Down deep into the cloudy strata of the dark.
 Along the cakewalk gangways workmen steer
 Bogeys freighted with pigiron limestone coke
 And the pencil ore of their own veins, the muscle
 Of their tensile limbs, their lungs, and the skill of their
 Hands, rammed in the hell-on-earth furnace that smelts all
 All to forge the flame of the mailed future.
 But in the shadow shrinks my base-metal soul
 That a matchflame squibs to a magnesium-white
 Gone-in-an-eyeblick flash, that a fingernail
 Scratches, or the breathed air tarnishes in dirt.
 God, self like liquid in love's melting pan,
 Alloy my blood in the steel blood of man.²

Despite his 'unavoidable veneration' for the poetry of T.S. Eliot - whose influence is felt in a number of his poems and in the verse of his first play - Nicholson reacted more strongly at this time to the magnetism of poets closer to his own generation:

Of the younger men, Auden seems to me of incomparably the greatest stature, and most of his aims in poetry seem to be mine - I can aim at the stars even if I only succeed

1. Letter to George Every, 3 May 1938.
2. There is a strong similarity in the imagery and sound-patterning of this poem to Hopkins's 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire, and of the Comfort of the Resurrection'. Perhaps Nicholson's poem could better be called a laboured imitation of Hopkins.

in hitting the galvanised iron roof. I also like MacNeice and Michael Roberts, and some Empson and MacDiarmid - poetry with edge to it.¹

The younger poets were reacting 'against esoteric poetry in which it is necessary for the reader to catch every recondite allusion'.² Despite Nicholson's own pursuit of the sources of The Waste Land, that poem was such an example of esotericism; and despite Auden's unsympathetic view of the working-classes in The Orators, the poetry in that volume clearly had a catchiness, a popular ring, that Eliot's lines lacked. Nicholson approved of the service to a possible future popular poetry which Auden had performed by writing the 'Letter to Lord Byron',³ and he approved of MacNeice's verse play Out of the Picture (1937) for the same reason. It is an early sign, despite the uncharacteristic context, of Nicholson's awareness of the need of an audience for poetry. He expressed what seemed to him the needs of the time most sharply thus:

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1. Letter to George Every, 1 Sept., 1937.
 2. Michael Roberts, Preface to New Signatures (1932)
 3. Published in Letters from Iceland, by W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, Faber 1937.

The Magnetic Mountain, at least of those parts of Day Lewis's poem which point disgustedly at society's evils and wish to be rid of them. But its tone, and the incantatory pattern of its four longish stanzas, recall Auden's vague and sinister warnings to the middle-classes,¹ and there is the same air of the poet's being in on some dark and exclusive secret:

Sniff the air, Auntie,
 Sniff the air;
 The chloric air that bleaches soots
 And salts the roofs and chimney pots,
 That scours the sky above haemorrhaged brick
 To let the styptic sun attack.
 Sniff the air, Auntie,

With an inquisitive spaniel nose,
 Are you aware, Auntie,
 Of a faint smell of burning singeing the breeze?
 Will it compare, Auntie,
 To a bonfire stoked by mischievous boys?
 What do they care
 That there's lace on the guy as well as rags,
 And banknotes in the sawdust and money-bags,
 That the crackers are shells - it's a blaze they're after
 In the rubbish dump flared by their daredevil laughter.

And isn't there, Auntie,
 A subtler stench in the smoky acid
 Like the rare
 Carrion taint of a civilization gone bad?
 Sniff the air, Auntie,
 There's still time to ask for the latest gas-mask,
 Sniff the air.

1. Cf. W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, The Dog Beneath the Skin, Faber, 1935, pp.15-16. This poem was reprinted as 'The Witnesses' in W.H. Auden, Collected Shorter Poems 1930-1944, Faber, 1950, pp. 195-6.

There is certainly vigour and verve here, but the poem is too much a virtuoso performance, contrived and rhetorical, and though adjectives like 'styptic' and 'haemorrhaged' are not uncharacteristic when seen by the light of Nicholson's later work, the 'tub-thumping', 'popular' manner fits in rather too easily with the general atmosphere of the time; the constant reference to 'Auntie' is bathetic and the poet's own pose of being outside the civilisation he is warning smacks comically of an immaturity of attitude, though Nicholson was not, in the thirties, the only poet to display this immaturity. One might say that the problems of communicating real experience have not been truly faced, but rather avoided by the adoption of a kind of mimicry.

Writing in 1953 about the role of the poet in society - whether he should prophesy doom like Amos, or, like Hosea, accept his own involvement in the weaknesses of humanity - Nicholson gave a useful indication of his own and many other poets' tendency in the 'thirties:

For the writer of today, and especially to the poet, the role of Amos is a tremendous temptation. We nearly all like to imagine ourselves as prophets of doom - from Mr. Ezra Pound's descent into hell, to the

by a director's whim by a slump
 in a gluttoned world by a poverty-
 strangled demand by investor's
 mumps by a war by a peace
 by profits by corners by swindlers
 by deals scoops ramps threats lies,

 now father dependent on son
 brother on brother man
 on men unknown, hands
 reft of pickaxe and spade
 grudgingly take the dole
 of another man's hewing and digging.

Reinforcing this saeva indignatio is the poet's observation
 of the local landscape, both natural and industrial; one
 feels that he really knows from first-hand experience what
 he is talking about. The positive side of the poem derives
 from Nicholson's hope that in nature itself is a kind of
 rejuvenation and his tense wish to believe that life was not
 created simply to die out in an Eliotic 'whimper':

Sea, sea, on whose crusting shores life first crawled
 And stretched buckram wings,
 Give us again your chanter, the independence of the
 cormorant,
 Teach us to live like men, no longer
 Like ripe maggots in a gorgonzola world,
 Digging our graves with our teeth.
 Sea, to whose dynamoed systole our pulse first throbbed;
 And, deeper than heart of the sea, brighter
 Than the first flash that electrified the waves, Who bade
 The waters be gathered together
 Into one place and the dry land appear
 Let it never be said:
 Were the waters gathered together into one place
 For this, only for this?

Of the poems belonging to 1937, only one seems to have been published, 'May Day, 1937'.¹ The title has communist overtones, but the poem as a whole deals with the rejuvenating power of spring, seen in terms of its challenge to society's status quo. A phrase in 'By the Sea' - 'the clowning spring tides' - is paralleled by 'the clownish spring' in the last line of 'May Day'; but what is one motif among many in the former poem is taken up by 'May Day' as its whole subject, and the latter poem unfortunately lacks the earnestness and personal involvement of the longer one. 'May Day, 1937' is boisterous, but it is as if Nicholson had versified Eliot's line 'April is the cruellest month' in the manner of Auden's 'Danse Macabre'² ('It's farewell to the drawing-room's civilized cry'), and added a crude verbal slapstick of his own:

Kangaroo derricks box the sky,
Sunlight skittles the roofs awry,
Chimneys rear a spiky joke
Quoited by the hempen smoke.
The liberal nickel-plated wind
Dollops rice-pudding clouds beyond
The pewter slagbank's scalloped rim,

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1. In The Serpent (Manchester University Union).
 2. 'Danse Macabre', W.H. Auden, Collected Shorter Poems 1930-1944, Faber, 1950, p.77.

And the acid dust guzzles at random.
 The blue-serged sea shakes its paunch
 And thwacks the harbour, pleased as Punch.
 Springtime cracks the quaker silence
 With a chuckle of chickweed by the ramshackle fence,
 With a guffaw of hooters, a crackle of sparrows,
 And a cricket-ball smashing the drawing-room windows.

There is gusto here certainly, but the combined quaintness and vigour of the language indicates a gift for words absurdly misapplied. The world is seen too facilely in terms of artificial conceits. It is hard to know what to criticise more: the disconnected comparison of derricks to boxing kangaroos, or the determination to carry an unsuitable image - for example, the metaphor of 'rice-pudding clouds' - to the bitter end by making the wind a spoon and the slagbank a bowl. The picture of the sea, 'pleased as Punch', has all the false heartiness and vacuity of the song 'The Laughing Policeman', and the 'vigour' of the language is almost entirely manufactured: the deliberate use of 'hard-hitting' verbs like 'dollop' and 'guzzle', and the cartoon-like animation of the chickweed and the hooters. The situation is not improved by the agonising mixed metaphor and the Day Lewis-like industry/nature collocations in the last verse:

In the lactic steam's steel-jointed churn
 Laughter is blossoming like the blackthorn,

In the dawn-song of sirens, flames' yellow flags,
And the brave efflorescence of the tipped slag.

'May Day, 1937' is an extreme example of language run riot. Such harsh criticism is rarely merited by other early poems, but it is perhaps helpful to show the kind of errors into which Nicholson sometimes falls while he is working towards a style of his own. In later work, when he had found subjects more deeply congenial to him, he was to be able to hold his language more in check.

Apart from 'By the Sea', whose social commentary is underpinned by strivings for religious belief and a direct awareness of unemployment in a painstakingly-realised local environment, Nicholson's 'political' poems of 1937 are rather tributes to the widely-felt urgencies of their time, and to the influence of that time's 'social' poets, than milestones in his own development. Aside from 'Prayer for a Political Meeting',¹ where fingermarks of Auden's 'Sir, no man's enemy' and 'Spain' are accompanied by a metrical pattern reminiscent of Eliot's choruses to The Rock, there is nothing in the 'social poetry' vein later than 1937. Indications of more

1. Published in New English Weekly, 12 Jan. 1939.

significant development are found in Nicholson's personal poems, which began to be written in 1937 and make up the major part of his poetry in the following year.

1937 produced the twin poems 'Poem in Pencil' and 'Poem in Ink'. Both are love poems, and use the short line pattern, itself originally derived from John Skelton, already made familiar by Auden,¹ 'Poem in Ink', which draws parallels between bread and woman's flesh, human love and Communion, begins with a yoking together of raw-material and product which was to become very important later in Nicholson's view of the unity of man and nature:

The knife in the loaf
Saws into the sheaf,
The crisp sheaf bundled
Like firewood on my table.

.....
The analyst teeth
Pestle the bread
To elemental sun
And oxidised corn.

In May 1938 the same metre was used for 'Poem before Pentecost', one of a group of poems which Nicholson in vain sent to Middleton Murry. The poem is not only graceful in movement and natural

1. Cf. Auden, Collected Shorter Poems (1950), pp.31, 36, 94-5.

in its language, it is also evidence of Nicholson's religious problems at the time - his need, like Donne's, for God to 'batter his heart' and free his trapped love, just as the burning of fellside bracken frees the earth to grow new grass:

The love in our blood
 Cannot burn the flaked skin,
 Is choked from within
 For lack of air.
 Come love from above
 And scorch us bare,
 That spring may burst
 From our budding blood
 With the flare of the first bracken,
 With the fire of God.

The same grace and freshness of language is found in 'The Wind and the Window', written 5 July 1938. The preoccupation here, however, is a different one: the need to believe that the outside world really exists, that it is not the creation of the poet's fancy, that it will survive him when he dies. Writing in 1949 about his attitude to poetic imagery, Nicholson said:

The first article of faith for me as a poet is a complete and unreserved belief in the objective reality of the world around me, and in the general trustworthiness of my senses to inform me about that world. I realize, of course, that my picture of the world must be modified by the limits both of those senses and of the brain which interprets

them, but this does not prevent me from believing that my experience, however incomplete it may be, is still an experience of something which has a real existence outside of and independent of me.¹

This passage does much to explain why Nicholson's poetry dwells in such detail on the world of nature, the precise names of flowers and the correct geological terms for rock-strata. 'The Wind and the Window' shows that his 'complete and unreserved belief' in such things was not something he was born with: like E.M. Forster's Ricky and Ansell, he had to discover that the cow was really there:²

Tell me, Window, all the wonder
Of the bobbed, winding hours,
People cut from cardboard, spellbound,
Prams and pigeons and torn flowers,
Puppet pageant of the street,
Is it truth or is it sleight?
Eyes that sift the light
Tell, if you can tell.

When my breath is broken, Wind, oh
When my sight is shuttered too,
Will you blow, Wind? Window, will you
Open still for others' view?
Or are noises in the street
Only echoes of my note?
Flickerings of fate -
Breath upon the sill.

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1. Norman Nicholson, 'The Image in my Poetry', Orpheus Vol.2, John Lehmann, London, 1949, p.121.
 2. Cf. E.M. Forster, The Longest Journey (1907), Ch.1.

The parallel construction and the portentous alliteration of the last line seem a technical trick: the line itself does not really communicate anything.

But it is needless to labour the point. All the two poems show, really, is a temporary misdirection in Nicholson's search for a form of expression natural to him. Misdirection, however, is again evident in two poems entitled 'Sonnet for Good Friday',¹ both of them dramatic monologues spoken by Christ on the cross. (Even Dylan Thomas and David Gascoyne, with whose work these poems display some affinity, present the Crucifixion in the third person.)² The sonnet, in fact, had the effect of a strait-jacket on Nicholson, and it was a form he soon dropped. That Nicholson to some extent felt the temptation to bare his soul, but even more realised the dangers of posturing inherent in such self-confession, appears clearly in a remark he made about Dylan Thomas, a poet whose technical skill and verbal fluency he otherwise greatly admired:

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1. One is unpublished; the other appeared in Poetry in Wartime, ed. M.J. Tambimuttu, Faber, 1942, p.116.
 2. Cf. David Gascoyne, 'Ecce Homo', Poems 1937-1942, Editions Poetry London, 1943, pp.5-7; and Dylan Thomas, 'Altarwise by Owl-Light' VIII, Collected Poems 1934-1952, Dent, 1952, p.70.

His introversive twining of words around himself irritates me almost to the extent of disgusting me. He represents, in a highly-developed form, what I do not want from poetry, and the direction of his work is the one which I feel the poetry of the immediate future must at all costs avoid.¹

One way in which personal feelings can be more safely presented is in the form of a fable or myth; narrative supplies an objectifying framework which helps the poet to appeal to his audience by suggesting a basic similarity between his feelings and their own. By and large, Nicholson's most characteristic work has chosen to stress not the more private elements in his experience but those capable of general application. The urge has been to communicate rather than simply to express. In many of the poems in The Pot Geranium (1954) he moves quite consciously from pictures of Millom to conclusions about human society anywhere. In some longer poems in Five Rivers (e.g. 'The Garden of the Innocent') and in Rock Face (e.g. 'Across the Estuary'), he places his own and his audience's questions about life in a fairly particularised

1. Letter to George Every, 24 Feb. 1938. In face of the strong dislike evinced by this quotation, one should in fairness emphasise Nicholson's strong admiration for Dylan Thomas's later poetry, particularly 'Fern Hill'.

landscape - real plants and animals, Duddon marshes and mist. But the questions here, being more inward, more concerned with man's soul, man's moral nature, and his relationship to God, permit of less clear statement and solution, so that the poems have a certain symbolic quality: the images - garden, mountain, fog, water - communicate emotionally on a number of levels, and their total effect is more than their separate, extractable, intellectual 'meanings'. Nicholson's use of this method is clarified by an article he wrote in 1945 about allegory. He divides it into two kinds - parable and symbol:

Symbol appeals to the imagination; it is a means by which the poet expresses broad conceptions which may not be capable of definition but nevertheless can evoke a great emotional response. Parable appeals to the intellect; it deals with precise ideas expressed in terms of a substituted imagery. Of course, both types co-exist in the greater works of allegory. The Pilgrim's Progress was intended to appeal as a parable, but it is the force of the symbols of the journey and the search which move us as we read it..... At present there is a natural turning away from parable towards symbol. This is an age when no dogma is universally or even widely accepted, nor any standard of value. This is a time of scepticism, of experiment, of search, and a time both of distrust and of the need for trusting. Hence symbol, with

its evocative power, and its avoidance of dogmatic definition, is well-suited to the literary needs of the age.¹

The last three of the early poems with which I wish to deal exemplify the beginnings of this kind of symbolism in Nicholson's poetry: a symbolism created when the poet's own feelings - his raw-material - are transformed and externalised in a fable which, though it takes place in a world composed of real objects, summons a response from what may be called the 'folk memory' of the audience. The poems are 'The Headless Horse', 'No Man's Land', and 'The Burning Tarn'. The first of these remains unpublished; the other two appeared in the same magazine, The Southern Review, in 1940 and 1942 respectively.² All three date from early in 1938,³ all three deal roughly with the same theme (human doubt and fear, and the magnetism of the unknown). They can therefore reasonably be considered as a

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1. Norman Nicholson, 'A Note on Allegory', Focus One, Dennis Dobson, 1945, pp.41-2.
 2. 'No Man's Land', The Southern Review 6, No.2, 1940, pp.372-4; 'The Burning Tarn', The Southern Review 7, No.4, 1942, pp.867-8.
 3. Nicholson sent 'No Man's Land' and 'The Headless Horse' to T.S. Eliot on c. 16 May 1938. In a letter to the writer (22 Jan. 1968), Brother George Every (who received copies of all Nicholson's early poems as soon as they were written, and should therefore be in a position to know) said: 'I am sure that 'The Headless Horse' and 'The Burning Tarn' are almost contemporary with one another'.

group. None is flawless or wholly original,¹ but all are vivid and striking, and more than most of Nicholson's early poems one regrets their never having been reprinted in a volume. A fairly detailed examination and quotation of them would seem to be merited.

'The Headless Horse' is cast in the form of a ballad, its metre based roughly on an alternation of four- and three-stress lines, this use somewhat resembling that in C. Day Lewis's poem 'Johnny Head-in-Air'.² This metre allows the number of unstressed syllables to increase or decrease at will, giving the poem the air of a popular improvisation, and carrying the reader rapidly along without his needing to stop and consider too deeply the exact significance of the symbols. The poem is in fact a sort of myth, its very force in part deriving from its appeal to the subconscious. This is pointed up by the first section, of five stanzas in all, in which the horse first appears in the past:

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1. In a letter to the writer (12 May 1968) Nicholson mentioned Kafka as an influence working in the three poems. This influence is perhaps strongest in 'The Burning Tarn'. A chapter on Kafka is included in Man and Literature (1943).
 2. C. Day Lewis, Collected Poems (1954), pp.132-7. Originally published in A Time to Dance (1935).

When the noon soldered the shingle
 Brittle to the smuggler's tread,
 When grey sand oozed like ectoplasm
 Round a medium's head,

Through the gap that a thorn shadow
 Like a conjuror's hand concealed
 Out of the darkness galloped silent hooves
 Across the field.

Then in the haunted hollow
 The headless horse was at bay -
 That drew the wind through unseen nostrils,
 And neighed with the sea's neigh.

The references to 'smuggler' and 'ectoplasm' are too consciously scene-setting and melodramatic; this and the rhythm vaguely recall Alfred Noyes's 'The Highwayman'. The actual meaning of the headless horse is clearer in stanza four, where a pregnant girl (who, as usual in this kind of poem, is simply there, unexplained) screams on seeing it: the horse is frightening, but also the symbol - like the sea - of a power beyond man's control, and a power which, (because 'headless') it is impossible to define rationally. The fifth stanza locates the poem in the past of Millom:

Cattle-drovers waiting for the ebb
 To cross the estuary
 Saw the cattle worried as with gadflies
 Sniff at the dubious sea.

These local references are continued in the poem's remaining thirteen stanzas, which shift first to the Millom of the iron-

rush and then imperceptibly into the Millom of the present. The headless horse is now transformed into the pit-ponies (from the New Forest, significantly enough) which pull the 'trollies' underground and are too tired when they finally emerge above ground to do more than give 'a timid whinny at the wind'. The 'girl' of stanza four becomes 'the managing director's daughter' who feeds these tame ponies with sugar lumps. The inference is that the present has freed itself from the irrational: power has been domesticated. But the headless horse still returns, at night; it is now identified with the power of the iron-works, and is therefore 'no longer headless':

It snorts with the snort of the foundry,
Its eyes smoulder like coke.

The steam of the donkey engine
Hangs from its hide like flocks;
The pithead lights as sparks from its hooves
Fly up from the flint rocks;

With the flare of a tapped furnace
Its mane flows through the air;
Among pitheaps slagged with moonlight
It seeks a mare.

The poem concludes by emphasising the continued presence of unknown forces; though some, like 'the miners on night-shift', may ignore it, the fact that the stallion 'seeks a mare' and 'now has a head' seems only to emphasise the power which it

symbolises:

But still in darkness wide as sleep
Which the girl fears and the man ignores,
The headless horse that now has a head
Haunts the human shores.

Exactly what kind of power Nicholson is trying to embody in this poem is uncertain: it may be the subconscious, the sensual instincts, the energies only apparently harnessed by industrial man, perhaps even the seeking of God to enter the soul. But the poem has an undeniable crude impact, based on the incantatory force of the ballad-metre, and on the fundamental images of sea, fire, and the horse itself. One remembers the symbolism of the horses in the mist in D.H. Lawrence's Women in Love.

'The Headless Horse' presents 'the unknown' as an 'it'. 'The Burning Tarn' swings the focus on to the lure of the unknown as experienced by an individual - at first just a parabolic 'seeker', then the poet himself. The two are essentially the same, but the initial emphasis on the quest makes easier the reader's identification with the seeker. In the first stanza the 'seeker' turns away from the last daylight of the west and moves towards 'the haematite fells' of the hinterland. The view of the unknown is ambiguous: the

first image suggests that darkness both threatens and offers an avenue of escape:

Night with a battering ram of clouds
Breaks down the horizon's fence.

The seeker does not know what he is looking for, and is implied to be a sort of Cain, running away from 'the inquisitive west', who feels 'the memory of sunset...congealed like blood... on his forehead'.¹ The exact significance of 'inquisitive' is left unclear. Thus the west may stand for light and reason, or, possibly, for the intellectual processes of western philosophy. Whatever the case, the seeker must move towards the east, the darkness: his quest is in part a search for the Holy Grail, and in stanza seven he is seen as a priest

Whose hands shake to break and bless
But never possess the chalice'd grace
Held towards the east.²

In fact, the quest itself ceases in stanza four, in a mood of uncertainty. Not only does the seeker not know what it

1. In February 1938 Nicholson wrote a poem entitled 'Cain', in the form of a dramatic monologue.
2. The 'east' of the poem is of course an ambiguous symbol, both of darkness at evening and of light at morning, but the light - of revelation of God or of human understanding - is only implied by the poem's search-motif, and never actually reached.

is he is driven to search for, he is also uncertain of how the world will judge him for his searching. The quicksand image used in the fourth stanza anticipates Nicholson's poem 'Across the Estuary', written in 1946:

The fells dissolve like shifting sand,
 And darkness sucks at his feet;
 And ahead of him squat the four farms,
 Lichened in mist, where no hand welcomes
 Nor voices greet.

The 'four farms' stand for four ways in which the searcher is seen by the outside world. He is a kind of Don Quixote 'wielding a shield bossed with a kettle'; he is a teenager riding towards his 'unknown loved one'; he is a would-be priest searching for God but not finding him. But the fourth view is a hostile one: he is an enemy pilot whose plane is trapped 'in a searchlight beam'. The mystic, the romantic, the idealist images of search are suddenly arrested by the realisation that, to some people, a quest is a frightening, anti-social activity - the seeker is a pariah, shunned by, as well as shunning, the world he leaves behind, and suddenly aware of his own fear of the unknown. In stanza nine the poem becomes more directly personal: it is revealed that the quest is an adult attempt to recapture something that

the child, in Wordsworthian fashion, experienced without being fully aware of what it was:

What is it I never sought
 But without seeking found?
 When a child I risked a licking
 And wore out my patent toecaps kicking
 A salmon tin around.

In the middle of so much symbolism, the plain realism of this is refreshing, but we are still not told what the 'burning tarn' of the title means, because the poet has forgotten. All he is now left with is his sense of isolation, his sense that the categories into which his searching could once be conveniently fitted are no longer sufficient to protect him from the world's hostility:

But the tin is lost and the knight's feather
 That led me there before;
 The chalice is broken, the lamp spluttered out,
 And the hands that loved are wrinkled with hate,
 And I fear the fourth door.

The reader is left to find his own precise meanings; but the narrative framework involves him in the poet's search for understanding in the shadowy world beyond 'the noonlit garden' and 'the familiar wood'. Perhaps, in a way, the poem is a fable about the processes of the imagination, about poetry itself. All that is finally clear is that not everything can be clearly comprehended.

It may be that Nicholson was later dissatisfied with these two poems because they were too vague, too tarred with a neo-Romantic brush: their landscapes are made up of real details, but the balance tips rather more towards what the landscapes and their semi-allegorical figures symbolise to the imagination. The same objection could not be made to 'No Man's Land', where the sense of the unknown emerges from a sharp visual and aural presentation of landscape. The poem, to begin with, is not in ballad metre, but in spare, tense quatrains reminiscent of Auden's 'telegraphese':

I have heard crack the warning
Ice, alone,
By the debated track
Scotched on bare stone.

I have traversed the salient,
Been aware of
The cairn beyond the next cairn,
The menace in a sheep's cough:

The snaring bog,
The threat of nightfall,
The sniper's cue
In the snipe's call.

The last two lines are more than a piece of clever verbal economy: 'the snipe's call' could easily be a man in ambush.

But there is an unmistakable echo of Auden's 'Missing':

Hear curlew's creaking call

From angles unforeseen,¹
The drumming of a snipe¹

and there is the same kind of threatening atmosphere as in Auden's 'O where are you going?' said reader to rider'.²

But similarity is not necessarily the same thing as pastiche.

In fact 'No Man's Land' is closely linked with Nicholson's experience at Swinside stone circle, quoted at the beginning of this chapter.³ The actual landscape is different, but the sense of an unknown presence is similar:

What is it?
What is there?
At bay on startled heels,
I challenge the blank air.

Stockstill. Take my bearings. I know
Every quarry in the valley, every chock
-stone in the gully, every gutter in the ghyll...
I do not know that rock.

Faltered;
Turned back.
Sought cover beside a friendly dyke,
Or a furry haystack.

The short, staccato phrases reproduce, with uncanny mimicry, the pricking-up of ears, the sharpening of vision, of a man in

1. 'Missing', W.H. Auden, Collected Shorter Poems (1950), pp.58-9.
2. Auden, ibid., p.253.
3. Bessie Satterthwaite's copy of this poem was actually accompanied, when she lent it to me, by a photograph of the stone circle at Swinside, endorsed 'See "No Man's Land"'.

the act of registering the presence of an extra dimension just beyond the range of his senses. There is all the immediacy of a convincing ghost story. And the reaction is the same - a hasty return to the normal. After his experience at Swinside, Nicholson

turned and went as fast as I could down
the snowy track to the main road, and
walked home towards the friendly glare
of the furnaces purring through the mist.¹

The poem's later stanzas register this change of environment in a smoother metre:

I have fled to the lowlands,
Called my thoughts in;
Entrenched between houses
I have saved my skin;

With a thousand watts
Patrolled the dark;
Caged my linnet,
Policed the park.

Yet the fear of the unknown is also a lure; the 'linnet' of the imagination (an image that seems to be deliberately selected to emphasise the 'tame'ness' of running away) will not remain caged for long, even though what it seeks may not be found on this side of death:

1. Norman Nicholson, Portrait of the Lakes, (1963), p.63.

.... I know well

I shall break this truce
 And one day again
 I shall go to the black tarn
 Slaked with rain;

The unknown I shall know,
 Though how to do
 May take all my living to learn,
 Or dying too.

'No Man's Land' is the most successful of these three poems. The nature of 'the unknown' is no clearer, but the greater particularity of the poem's language and the experience it presents convince us that this is because it cannot be known. We do not suspect a lack of clarity in the poet's own mind or the wilful adoption of a fog of vaguely portentous symbolism. 'No Man's Land' is also of greater technical skill and interest than the other two poems. But all three poems show Nicholson trying to fuse the literalness of local details with a broader appeal to the reader's imagination, trying to find a language which would express the spiritual aspects of human experience.

ii. Early Fiction

Although Norman Nicholson's two novels were not published until the mid-nineteen-forties, it seems most appropriate to deal with this aspect of his creative work in this chapter, both because the novel was a form which he did not pursue any further, and because his first attempts at fictional prose date from almost as early as his earliest poems. Before 1940 he had produced a small number of short stories, and also in fact two other novels, though these latter were never published.

It is noticeable that in Nicholson's early poems his local area is not the subject, and only occasionally can it really even be called the background. Most of the poems I have mentioned, and others which I have not, display Nicholson simply as a young poet, learning the technique of his trade and responding to the social pressures of the time and to his own emotions. It would be inaccurate at this stage of his development to call Nicholson a true regionalist (who may perhaps be defined as a writer interested in his region for its own sake). The most that can be said is that a number of his early poems do indicate that his background is not metropolitan, though few of them are as aggressively provincial as 'Bucolic':

I have an assignation in the clouterly lonning
 With a lass who is ticklish and giggles at love;
 Through plum-juice lips effervescent with laughter
 Will bubble all the idiocy of spring.¹

Nicholson was, in fact, very much aware of the difference between his background and that of Auden and his Oxford contemporaries. Early letters show that he was conscious of being working-class, of having had a grammar school rather than a public school education, and of being 'rather bigotedly...a North countryman'² who found it hard to believe in the South as a real place. He also felt that, though it might be an affectation for Day Lewis and Spender to mention gasometers and pylons in their poetry, for him this sort of reference was far more natural, as such things were closer to his everyday life and experience:

You can't call it affectation for me to
 bring mines and blast furnaces and the
 like into my landscape for I can see
 them out of the windows of my home.³

Something of this northern background comes out in a short

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1. New English Weekly, 1938.
 2. Letter to George Every, 7 Nov. 1937.
 3. Letter to George Every, 29 Sept. 1937.

story entitled 'Pisgah', published in 1938. Fiction enabled Nicholson to do two things which presumably he was not yet ready to do in verse: to present other people than himself, and to use dialect for their speech. In fact the dialogue gives the impression of a deliberate trying-out of a certain kind of language, of the potentialities of local speech, which was to find fuller expression in his first play:

'What fettle this morning, Sam, lad?', they would ask, and he would say, 'Just middling like'. He always said the same. Once he used to vary it a bit; one morning he would say, 'Nicely thanks', and the next, 'Nobbut t'same', but now every morning, he said, 'Just middling like'.¹

Sam, the main character, has clear autobiographical overtones: seriously injured in a mining accident, he has spent six years in bed, six years of listening to the outside world through a window, of being excluded from the experiences of his fellow-townfolk. This type of character was to recur in the two published novels. Clearly the idea of illness, and of the connection between illness and imaginative activity, was a potent one for Nicholson.² Sam's imagination works on the

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1. Norman Nicholson, 'Pisgah', New English Weekly, 15 Sept. 1938, p.343.
 2. He refers in 'By the Sea', (Autumn 1937) to a young man who 'coughs into a lean hand', and in other poems there are occasional references to bacteria. See also 'Cave Drawings', The Pot Geranium (1954), p.56.

newly-built chemical factory, and the passage dealing with this shows Nicholson as a writer using prose in an essentially 'poetic' way:

He saw the pinnacle of the factory chimney holding itself erect behind the roofs. There it stood, proud and regal, pouring forth smoke which gleamed white in the sunlight like glazed paper, like the wings of swans against the keen starling's-egg-blue of the sky. Away the smoke-swans flew, showing underbellies starch-white where the sun glinted, away over the crouching streets.

But the environment so transfigured in the hopeful images of the bedridden Sam is that of the poverty-stricken 'thirties. In a letter of a few months earlier Nicholson had described to George Every the dole-based existence of Cleator Moor; in 'Pisgah' he presents the empty lives of the unemployed thus:

For the rest of the day they would stand at the street corners with the other miners, standing about, leaning against the doorways and lamp-posts, hands in their pockets, humpbacked beneath the heavy leaden sky. Men with the life bled out of them like a stuck sheep, standing about in a flat, grey world which had lost perspective and proportion for them. Men ready to go without a meal for the solace of tobacco, ready to go without soles to their boots for a bob's worth of hope on a football coupon.

This was a scene to which Nicholson was to return many years later, in 1966, in a poem entitled 'To the Memory of a Millom Musician'. In 'Pisgah' the hopelessness of the town only underlines for Sam his own sense that he has no contribution to make:

There were quarrels and frayed tempers in the home, and Sam felt that he was a weight tied round the family's neck. He lost all desire for recovery: he did not care if he died.

In fact, Sam does die: the story ends with the sudden explosion of the chemical factory, and Sam is killed by a falling slate. The violence of this story's conclusion is paralleled in an unpublished story, 'Tree of Knowledge', in which the main character, who is soft in the head, is electrocuted when he climbs a pylon. It is easy to sense behind such stories the frustration and depression which must often have accompanied Nicholson's own care for his frail health at this period of his life. It might even be suggested that the violence is a kind of literary compensation for a way of life which ill-health so narrowly circumscribed.¹

1. Nicholson in fact says this himself (in an undated fragment of a letter to George Every, c. 1945-50): '...the picture of myself as a sort of tough explorer-cum-mountaineer was almost certainly built up in my mind while I was in bed at Linford...I fancy that the note of toughness, roughness, hardiness, which shows itself now and again in the rhythms and language of my verse (and in projections of myself into violent characters) is probably a way of "compensation".'

The most striking point about the first of Nicholson's two unpublished pre-war novels is the ambitious nature of its technique. He described it as essentially 'a simple readable novel about ordinary people doing ordinary things',¹ but the novel's method seems to have been of considerable complexity. First of all, there were two sets of characters, the first a young middle-class man and woman, Paul and Anne, the second an equivalent 'lower-class'² couple. Secondly, their stories were intended to parallel each other, the second story being a sort of commentary on the first. Thirdly, the two stories were presented in two different ways: the first was told 'in a series of musings or reveries alternating between the one and the other'; the second was rendered 'entirely in the form of dialogue'. In connection with the dialogue method, one should mention Nicholson's strong admiration for the work of Ivy Compton-Burnett; the 'reverie' method obviously suggests some such influence as Virginia Woolf's The Waves. Finally, the book as a whole was divided into four main sections, and a coda. Ulysses-like, each

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1. Letter to George Every, 20 June 1938.
 2. Ibid., Nicholson's inverted commas.

section was

dominated by a particular type of movement,
and the imagery...drawn from some simple
symbol in which this movement is to be seen.¹

Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' suggested the first section's image of 'circling round and round' and the coda's completion of the circle: the last words in the book, spoken by Bill, the working-class man, to Paul, the main character, were 'Same here'. The imagery of the third section was 'drawn mostly from railway lines and stations'. The novel was begun in 1937 and finished in the June of 1938. Its technique seems to have guided Nicholson's search for a title; after considering 'Parallel' and 'Twin Compasses', he fixed on Love to the Nth, and later hit on the possibility of using the novel's last words, Same Here.²

The interest in a division into 'movements' was worked out in the two later published novels, and also in the long poems in Five Rivers and in the poem 'The Seven Rocks'. But Nicholson found the writing of the novel slowed down by what he later

1. Letter to George Every, 20 June 1938.
2. This title was offered to George Every for his opinion in a letter of 17 July 1938.

called its 'elaborate technical scheme',¹ and even before it was refused by Longmans and by Chatto and Windus in 1939, he had begun in the May of that year another novel, to which he gave the somewhat bizarre title The Cat's Got the Toothache. Into this, without the technical frills, he worked some of the material of the earlier novel, particularly the story of Paul and Anne, which T.S. Eliot had spoken of as 'very genuine indeed'.² It would appear that it was this part of Love to the Nth that Nicholson was especially interested in.

Nicholson had described Love to the Nth as

...contrary to the accepted formula for a best seller, in which the treatment and thought must be ordinary and the action bizarre.³

The Cat's Got the Toothache seems to have been an attempt to work to the best-seller formula. The plot as Nicholson

1. Letter to George Every, 10 June 1939.
2. Ibid., Eliot had advised Nicholson, in his revision of Love to the Nth, that 'the finished product should not be less than 80,000 words. Preferably 85-90,000'. (Letter from Norman Nicholson to George Every, c. October 1938).
3. Letter to George Every, 20 June 1938.

described it to George Every sounds exceedingly surrealist, not to say zany: the 'cat' of the title was the main character, and

...the whole idea of the book springs from the toothache, the gumboil and the belly-ache.¹

The actual labour of writing, however, was much less. A quarter of the novel was written in a month, and the whole thing was finished early in 1940. But it had no more success than its predecessor. Faber and Faber rejected it, and Eliot's criticism was 'very drastic',² particularly about the cat:

I cannot see that the unfortunate cat, whose toothache was a perpetual worry to me, even when the cat was off the stage, has any valid enough symbolic intensity to make the poor creature more than an exasperating intruder.³

Despite the half-humorous, feline elegance of Eliot's phrasing, and despite both Nicholson's spirited defence of his conception of the cat as a 'symbol...deliberately intended to be absurdly inadequate',⁴ and his continued conviction that the novel had 'some merit', he was in fact very depressed by his failure to

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1. Letter to George Every, 10 June 1939.
 2. Letter to George Every, 20 March 1940.
 3. Quoted by Nicholson, ibid.
 4. Ibid.

communicate via plot and action this time instead of by means of a complicated 'experimental' structure. The whole matter was to become in time no more than an item in the bibliography of a youthful writer's trial-and-error, but one comment of Nicholson's is perhaps of more permanent significance in the graph of his development, as it indicates the kind of emphasis his maturer work was to adopt:

The introspective element in my earlier work I am now seeking to eradicate.¹

1. Letter to George Every, 20 March 1940.

iii. Published Novels

Norman Nicholson does not regard himself as a novelist. His two published novels, The Fire of the Lord (1944) and The Green Shore (1947), are of considerable interest, particularly when one sees them in relation to ideas and motifs which appear in his plays and volumes of poetry, but he once remarked that any criticism of them simply qua novels would be 'neither helpful nor relevant'.¹ I shall therefore not attempt this kind of discussion of them, though it is fair to mention that when The Fire of the Lord was published in New York in 1946, the Saturday Review of Literature was at least able to say that

. In the dignity of its conception..it
belongs with books of quality and accomplishment.²

The two novels have a number of similarities to each other. Their themes are basically sex and religion, but the context in which these themes are presented is that of Millom,

1. Letter to the writer, 19 Jan. 1957.
2. See entry for Norman Nicholson in Twentieth Century Authors: First Supplement, ed. Stanley Kunitz, New York, H.W. Wilson Co., 1955. The entry also calls the novel 'a somber picture of life in a Cumberland village' [sic], and 'overwritten'.

only very thinly disguised as 'Odborough'. In The Fire of the Lord the parish church has a tower instead of a spire, and both novels employ fictional names for places in the area, but the locale is definitely Nicholson's home town, and indeed its very presentation can be considered another theme. One of the important characters in each novel is handicapped: Elsie Holliwell is partly deaf, Alice Dale is lame. Each novel has a character who can be described as a religious eccentric: in The Fire of the Lord Benjamin Fell, 'old Benjy', in The Green Shore the hermit Anthony Pengwilly. Each novel has a scene in which a young girl offers herself physically to a man, and is dissuaded from her rashness.¹ And each novel has an interesting formal structure which gives the plot and the regional setting a kind of poetic or symbolic underlining.

The Fire of the Lord is basically a love story, but this is counterpointed against a religious theme mainly centred on old Benjy. The 'love story', slow to unfold and presented with considerable sensitivity, is that of Jim Birker and Elsie Holliwell; but it is complicated by the fact

1. Cf. The Fire of the Lord, pp.204-7, and The Green Shore, pp. 163-6.

that Jim is already married, to a middle-aged woman called Maggie. She has been married previously, and has remarried under the impression that her former husband, Benjamin Fell (much older than herself) is dead. Unfortunately for her, he is not, and when after many years he reappears in the town she pretends he is her uncle, a deception he maliciously enjoys but does not demolish. Only when he dies and Maggie's eagerness to get his money leads her to reveal the truth, are Jim and Elsie left free to marry. Elsie herself is religious, and her love for Jim is for a long time a struggle with her moral principles.

More interesting than the plot is the atmosphere of the novel, which is one of darkness and claustrophobia.¹ This atmosphere is created in the very first chapter, which takes place on Guy Fawkes' Night in the blackout. Only at the end does the story emerge into the light. The difficulties of Jim and Elsie occur in late autumn and winter, and are reinforced by the picture of nature struggling forward to spring - the resolution of the love-theme, when Benjy's eventual death

1. Cf. The Fire of the Lord, p.113. The description here of Millom cut off by snow from the outside world is based on fact (see 'On Being a Provincial', The Listener, 12 Aug. 1954, p.248).

makes this possible, is a kind of resurrection.

The secular plot is given seasonal and religious overtones by the structure of the novel, which is divided not in fact into chapters but into sections of the ecclesiastical year. The significance of these divisions is not always clear, but it is obvious enough in a number of instances: old Benjy dies on Good Friday, and the novel ends, with Jim and Elsie looking forward to their future together, on Easter Sunday. This tendency to see human life in terms of a larger cyclical pattern is typical of the way in which, in his mature poetry, Nicholson draws together his regional and religious themes.

The dominant image, or presence, in the novel is that of the slag-bank. It is here that old Benjy is first discovered, and it is here that he finally dies, burnt to death by the tipping of a load of molten slag. In secular terms, his death is accidental, but it has a symbolic inevitability. Throughout the novel old Benjy, a fanatical prophet-like figure, has been harping on the need for some sort of burnt offering, some sort of recognition of the fact that man is connected to God, and must make some kind of return to him for the fruits of the earth, even though these fruits, in the modern industrial world, are not farm-crops but iron:

'So we used to light a bonfire to praise the Lord', he said. 'We got together all the old rubbish, the wicks and the dead wood and the dirty straw and we piled them up and we burned them. We knew it was good for the crops. It cleaned the land and made it fresh and sweet ready for spring. We gave back to the earth what the earth had brought forth and we made it a burnt offering to the Lord....Well, what's the difference?.. You get iron out of the land, don't you? You dig for the ore like taties, and you thrash it in the furnaces like corn, and you stack up the pigs like mangles. If you want a good crop of iron you must treat it same as a crop of anything else.'¹

The 'fire' of the novel's title is partly the fire of Pentecost, seen as something which consumes trash and dross 'so that the new stuff can grow'.² Benjy's own death by fire is therefore, in symbolic terms, the necessary act without which the love of Jim and Elsie cannot bear fruit. But 'the fire of the Lord'³ is also a reference to Elijah's burnt sacrifice of the bullock on Mount Carmel, and Benjy can be considered as a prototype of Elijah in Nicholson's play The Old Man of the Mountains, particularly when one notes in the novel a theme very important in the play of only two years

1. The Fire of the Lord, pp.38-9.
2. Ibid., p.93. This subject had already been treated in Nicholson's pre-war poem 'Poem before Pentecost'.
3. I Kings 18, v.38.

later - the theme of the correct utilisation of the land:

I find that the people who are here now don't know the land, and don't know what the land needs. They try to get everything out of the land without asking themselves what they owe it. I find that they don't know the Lord, and don't know what the Lord wants. They try to get everything out of the Lord and they never stop to ask what they owe him. There was one thing I learned when I was working on the farm, and that was that if you give nowt to the land you'll get nowt out of it.¹

A final theme, only just touched on at the end of the novel, is that of remaining in one's home town. Jim has been suggesting to Elsie that, now everything has resolved itself, they might find it easier to 'go somewhere where nobody knows us'. Elsie's answer to this seems to flower smoothly from her contemplation of the peaceful scene around them - a scene described in a way typical of the whole novel's placing of its incidents in a context of life, natural and human, quietly going on whatever dramatic events happen to the protagonists:

A pair of starlings flew past the window and across the allotments, their shadows speckling the brown earth like a thrush's

1. The Fire of the Lord, p.92.

breast. Purple broccoli thrust up its stems, ready to flower in a week or two, and in some of the gardens potatoes were already rigged up and set. On the grass paths between plots men stood and talked, and others fed the hens. From beyond the roofs came the sound of the Salvation Army band playing 'Christ the Lord is risen today'. 'No', she said, 'there's no need for us to go away. We'll stay here'.

The calm of the novel's close is like a cadence resolving itself in a final, quietly-sustained chord. It carries a significance which extends beyond the novel itself: out of such an acceptance in his own life, and out of such simple, but universal, details as this final paragraph is composed of, has come Nicholson's most characteristic poetry.

The Green Shore is in many ways a complement to The Fire of the Lord, as if Nicholson were not only repeating motifs from the earlier novel but had also decided to present aspects of Millom and its life which had been ignored in it. The Green Shore takes place in summer. It begins, not with a night-blind policeman feeling his way in the blackout, but with a group of teenagers sauntering down to a rocky shore and gawkily flirting. The Fire of the Lord had confined its action almost entirely to the centre of Millom and to the slagbank - when Jim, Maggie and Elsie visit 'Furness' (Barrow),

one is conscious only of the darkness of a cinema and the darkness and cold of the railway station. The Green Shore makes one aware of the sea, of Hodbarrow Point, and of places up the coast like Seascale (called 'Burnet Scales' in the novel) and Whitehaven ('Blackport'). Although old Benjy is presented as having 'the confidence of the practised lay preacher',¹ the religious ambience of The Fire of the Lord is not Methodist but Anglican: Elsie's experience at Holy Communion in its intensity recalls Nicholson's confirmation in 1929,² and the novel's sections are those of the Church of England year. The Green Shore is entirely nonconformist in its religious affiliations: Christopher Champion is choirmaster of the Bible Christian chapel, and Anthony Pengwilly is converted by a travelling Methodist missionary.

The Green Shore was in fact described by Nicholson as

...an attempt to write a story of one of the Desert Fathers, adapted from the Desert of 3rd or 4th Century Egypt to that of 20th century industrialism.³

The actual theme of the novel - the tension between aloofness

1. The Fire of the Lord, p.35.
2. Ibid., p.198.
3. Letter to the writer, 19 Jan. 1957.

and a wish to belong - is embodied in two main characters. The first is Anthony Pengwilly, who after his conversion has elected to lead the life of a hermit on the shoreward outskirts of 'Odborough', and the second is Alice Dale, the daughter of the woman Anthony once courted, whom he one day helps and who strikes up a friendship with him. Though sex comes into the friendship, in a rather ambiguous way, the affinity of Anthony and Alice is mainly based on a common religious awareness. But the relationship Anthony has with God, in the exile of his own choosing, leads him gradually to realise that isolation is not enough, and his friendship with Alice serves in fact to draw him back to society. Ironically, the same process - it is part of the novel's patterning - works in the opposite way on Alice herself. She sees in Anthony's hermit existence a solution to her difficulty (caused by her lameness) of feeling at one with normally-healthy people of her own age. She also seems to be trying to escape the sexual challenges of growing-up; she wavers between a liking for Alan Grisebeck, the young man who is fond of her, and revulsion from his awkward physical advances. Yet her admiration for the solitariness and self-denial exemplified by Anthony is accompanied, unknown

to her, by a sexual element which he recognises and denounces with medieval harshness. Alice's mixed-up state is indicated by the quotation from William Morris which is the novel's epigraph and from which its title comes:

Dark shore no ship has ever seen,
 Tormented by the billows green
 Whose murmur comes unceasingly
 Unto the place for which I cry.
 For which I cry both day and night,
 For which I let slip all delight,
 That maketh me both deaf and blind,
 Careless to win, unskilled to find
 And quick to loose what all men seek.¹

Considered in relation to Alice, the novel is a study in the problems of adjustment to the adolescent: the unidentifiable longings for spiritual purity which in a balanced personality must eventually turn to an acceptance of the fact of being human, of being part of society. This need to belong is finally experienced by Anthony, and his disappearance at the end of the novel, though at first it leaves Alice with a sense of disappointment, enables her more easily to see the virtues of ordinary, social life. The close of the novel is very similar,

1. William Morris, 'A Garden by the Sea' (in Poems by the Way, 1891). It is slightly misquoted. Line 7 should begin 'Whereby I grow', and in line 9 'loose' should read 'lose'. Nicholson originally intended to call the novel No Man is an Island, but someone else published a novel with this title, so The Green Shore was substituted after the book had been sent to Nicholson and Watson.

in texture and feeling, to that of The Fire of the Lord:

They walked on again. The lamps were lit at the pitheads, and a glow came from an engine as it pulled up the incline dragging a chain of trucks which clanked in the darkness. Sparks flew from the funnel, dropping like little fireworks among the willows and brambles. The smoke waved against the green sky.

'Warm now?', he asked.

'Yes', she said.

They walked on towards the town.¹

Anthony himself is modelled very closely on the hermits described in the Lausiatic History of Palladius,² and of course his name is designed to recall St. Anthony, whose life occupies such a large part of that work.³ It would be tedious to enumerate the many characteristics which Anthony shares with the monkish hermits of Upper Egypt, but the following passage will serve as an example of the kind of rules he imposes on himself:

1. The Green Shore, p.189.

2. Vide The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, translated from the Syriac by E.A. Wallis Budge, 2 Vols., Chatto and Windus, 1907. Palladius (364 - c. 430) wrote his original Lausiatic History in 420. The book consists of a number of biographies of, and stories about, various monks and ascetics whom Palladius had heard about, or met on his travels among the monkish settlements of Upper Egypt. Nicholson did not get his material direct from Palladius, but from Helen Waddell's The Desert Fathers.

3. The Life of Saint Anthony was actually written by Archbishop Athanasius. Later, however, much writing on monasticism tended to be attributed to Palladius whether it originated from him or not.

The man filled the mug at the tap and stood with it in his hand. He was panting like a dog with thirst. Alice felt her own mouth go dry with nervousness. He raised the mug to within an inch or two of his mouth, and then he stretched out his arm and slowly poured the water on to the ground. Alice felt suddenly and inexplicably afraid. Although she was heavy and moist with heat, she shivered. Pen stood there as still as an old tree watching the water dribble out of the mug and make a little pool in the dry soil through which it quickly drained away. His mouth was hard and his cheeks were drawn in as if he had had all his teeth extracted. He hung up the mug on its nail again, moving slowly and with self-satisfaction. He was breathing more steadily now, and before he turned away he bent and dipped his hands in the trough and splashed the water over his face and arms. It dripped from his face on to his shoulders and vest and for a moment he seemed cooled and calm, and then his face suddenly opened in a grin as if it had been slit. He stepped across to the privet hedge and tore up a handful of nettles which grew there on the waste soil, and began to wipe his face and arms on them, using them like a towel.¹

Anthony also fasts, washes in ice-cold water, goes for a run along the sea-wall before breakfast, never speaks to women (except, finally, to Alice), and never sings, even to himself. His rule is the Negative Way. Eventually he comes to realise

1. The Green Shore, p.28.

that, even if this is not wrong, it is not the only way to 'praise the Lord':

'But now I'm beginning to see that it was all a waste and all what the Bible calls vanity, because you can't praise the Lord by yourself. Oh, I know in one way you've got to praise the Lord by yourself - nobody else can do it for you. But not by yourself, that is, separate, alone, holding yourself off from your fellow men. Not like that'.¹

Whatever self-restraint Nicholson had to practise himself because of ill-health, whatever his own experience of living apart from others, of not being able - and perhaps, as a result, not always wishing - to 'join in', at a point like this one remembers that it is the Affirmative Way that he most inclines to write of.² It is significant therefore that Anthony arrives at this way of thinking, that - to give a later example - Elisha in the play Birth by Drowning is instructed not to 'climb to the high crags' or 'converse with the echoes', but to go 'back to general practice'.³

The technical scheme of the novel emphasises the real presence of Millom in it. It is divided into four parts:

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1. Ibid., pp.177-8.
 2. Cf. Norman Nicholson, 'Notes on the Way', Time and Tide, 21 July 1951, p.697, and 28 July 1951, p.719.
 3. Norman Nicholson, Birth by Drowning, Faber, 1960, p.63.

The Rocks; The Town; The Lighthouse; The Sea. Of these, the second is set in Edwardian times, and describes Anthony's life until his conversion. 'The Rocks' presents the first, accidental, meeting of Anthony and Alice, and demonstrates the kind of man Anthony has become after his conversion. The last two sections show the effect on each other of Anthony's and Alice's friendship, and move forward in the post-Second World War present to the novel's resolution in favour of integration rather than aloofness. In all the sections one is made aware of the environment in which the two main characters exist. Other people are also very real, as are events in the calendar of the town - great stress is laid on the Bible Christian chapel choir and its participation in the 'Blackport' Musical Festival. Its conductor, Christopher Champion, and one of its members, Ethel Riggs, turn up with only slightly altered names in Provincial Pleasures. The documentary element is particularly strong in the second section of the book, where one sees Christopher and Anthony and their girl-friends when young. This picture parallels the picture of the teenagers at the beginning of the novel, and one gets a strong sense of the interpenetration of past and present, and of the recurrence of the same patterns in different generations.

Section Two shows very strongly Nicholson's interest in the factual. It presents the real town and history of Millom as the medium in which the fictional characters move, and many details are derived, with certain modifications, from the life of Nicholson's family. Anthony Pengwilly's parents resemble the family of Nicholson's step-mother in being tin-miners who came to Millom, though from Cornwall rather than Devon, and Mrs. Pengwilly's horrified initial reaction to the town is identical with that of Nicholson's own paternal grandmother who wanted the cart-driver to 'turn the horse back'. Anthony, like Joseph Nicholson, is apprenticed for seven years to a tailor, and when Mrs. Pengwilly dies, it is, like Nicholson's mother, in the influenza epidemic of 1919. Much of one's pleasure in the novel comes from one's sense that the town is a real town, like the one presented in Nicholson's poems. The main characters are interesting less in themselves than because they act out in their fictional lives the tensions which Nicholson must have experienced as a young man. They present what is basically his own evolution from an awareness of self to the realisation of the larger social and religious framework in which the self exists and finds its meaning.

CHAPTER FOUR

Norman Nicholson's career as a poet stretches from 1937 to the present day. He has published, in all, six collections of verse: the Selected Poems of 1942 (in which he appeared alongside J.C. Hall and Keith Douglas); the four Faber and Faber volumes, Five Rivers (1944), Rock Face (1948), The Pot Geranium (1954) and Selected Poems (1966); and a seven-page pamphlet of ballads and carols, entitled No Star on the Way Back, published in 1967 by the Manchester Institute of Contemporary Arts.

I shall be concerned in this chapter with the three volumes, Five Rivers, Rock Face and The Pot Geranium, on which Nicholson's reputation as a poet mainly rests. The Selected Poems of 1942 contained only twelve poems, eight of which were reprinted in Five Rivers; the four which were not¹ had little to recommend them, and so this first book cannot be said to have an independent existence which would render it worthy of separate examination. No Star on the Way

1. 'Corregidor', 'Before I was Born', 'Love Was There in Eden', and 'Carol for Holy Innocents' Day'. This last poem was also printed in Poetry in Wartime (1942), pp.113-4.

Back can fairly be called religious occasional verse; its contents were part of a play Nicholson wrote for performance by Border Television at Christmas, 1963. The 1966 Selected Poems is simply Nicholson's own selection of poems from his three earlier Faber volumes; it betrays the poet's predilection for his later work¹ and incorporates a number of interesting textual modifications, but includes no poems written after 1954. During the late nineteen-fifties and early nineteen-sixties Nicholson wrote few poems, of which even fewer satisfied him; but in about 1965 he seems to have recovered impetus, and the new direction which his poetry has taken since then will be discussed in Chapter Six.

Each of the three volumes to be considered in this chapter has its own individual flavour and represents broadly a distinct phase in Nicholson's development. It would be unfair to the quality of Five Rivers and Rock Face to imply that they were merely steps on the road towards a maturity arbitrarily located in The Pot Geranium, so each volume will be given a section of its own. But as it is also possible to discern clear thematic links between the three volumes, a certain

1. Out of a total of 40 poems, 20 are from The Pot Geranium, as against 11 from Rock Face and 9 from Five Rivers.

amount of cross-reference will be necessary to show the different emphases laid by each of them on basic Nicholsonian themes: Man and God, and the relationship between Man and his physical environment. Nor can one safely ignore the poet's own implication, by choosing for the Selected Poems of 1966 more poems from The Pot Geranium than from the two earlier volumes, that it is this third volume which presents the most characteristic sample of his work. Certainly one can say that, whereas in Five Rivers (and, to a lesser degree, in Rock Face), regional and religious themes tend to be treated separately, in The Pot Geranium they are fused together in an awareness - often overtly stated - of the underlying unity, for Nicholson, of man and the God-created world in which he lives. One can also trace through the three volumes Nicholson's growing ability to let the rhythms of speech rather than 'verse' shape his poems, and to cut back what is often an undergrowth of conceit and metaphor so as to allow 'the meaning of the object itself'¹ to show clearly through.

The three volumes share a common structure and way of presenting their contents. In each one the title poem comes

1. Norman Nicholson, 'The Image in my Poetry', Orpheus, Vol.2, ed. John Lehmann, John Lehmann, 1949, p.122.

first, which seems to indicate that, when assembling the poems, Nicholson had discerned in them a pattern, or a dominant note, which he wished to be struck right from the start.¹ The poem 'Rock Face' was even written as a title poem: Kathleen Raine had suggested Rock Face as a suitable title for Nicholson's second volume, and the poem itself was written afterwards.² The last poems in each volume are almost invariably the longest and most ambitious. Within this framework the poems are arranged according to subject or type; one can distinguish various categories such as 'regional', 'Biblical', 'lyrical', 'philosophical', 'religious' and so on. By comparing, therefore, the number of poems in each approximate group in each volume one can trace changes of attitude and emphasis as Nicholson's work progresses. Sometimes, as with 'On My Thirty-Fifth Birthday' and 'Rising Five', juxtaposed in The Pot Geranium, the grouping of poems displays a deliberation akin to the cutting of facets in a diamond: the same subject is seen from different, even

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1. One may compare this with the method of James Kirkup, who seems to have chosen the titles of his volumes for their euphony, or named his volumes after the longest poem, usually printed at the end. The themes of his title poems do not so clearly indicate the nature of the volumes as a whole.
 2. Nicholson himself said this, in a conversation with the writer.

opposite, viewpoints.

Such 'arrangements' of his work by Nicholson himself facilitate a thematic approach by the critic, and it is this approach which I have chosen in the main to adopt. It must, however, be modified in two ways: certain 'key' poems will also be considered as specimens of Nicholson's poetic technique at a given point, and within thematic groups an attempt will be made to indicate the order of composition, or at least the order of publication, of the poems. For it would be quite wrong to assume that the following of one poem by another in a Nicholson volume indicates a neat chronological development: the hindsight of the poet's organisation, which makes a pattern out of a far more random recurrence of certain preoccupations, implies no parallel logic in the poetic process itself. 'The Seven Rocks', the last poem in The Pot Geranium, was published in December 1948,¹ whereas the title poem was started on 8 October 1949² and not finally published until 1953.³

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1. In Horizon (ed. Cyril Connolly), Vol. XVIII, No.108, Dec.1948.
 2. Letter to George Every, 9 Oct. 1949.
 3. Time and Tide, 31 Jan. 1953.

I

Tickel, a man of no common genius, chose, for the subject of a poem, Kensington Gardens, in preference to the Banks of the Derwent, within a mile or two of which he was born. But this was in the reign of Queen Anne, or George the First. Progress must have been made in the interval...¹

Wordsworth, who clearly disapproved of Tickell, would have approved of Norman Nicholson. Already, with his Anthology of Religious Verse of 1942, Nicholson had put himself forward as a Christian poet. With the publication of Five Rivers in 1944 he put himself forward as a Cumbrian poet: the first eight poems in the volume have local places as their titles, and even the three long religious poems at the end are set in an obviously Cumberland landscape.

In discovering his subject-matter in his own area - a possibility which had not occurred to him in his first few years of poetic activity - Nicholson also discovered his own manner of writing or at least the earliest form of it. In an interview in April 1964 Nicholson said that this manner was first discovered, quite unconsciously, in the poem 'The

1. Wordsworth, Guide to the Lakes, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1951, p.84, footnote. The normal spelling of the poet's name is Tickell.

'Blackberry', written 17 September 1939. This is the earliest of the fifty-one poems collected in Five Rivers:

...I can clearly remember the poem which seems to me to be the first of my poems, the first Nicholson poem. I can remember writing it. I was out one day after the war began, and I scribbled this and I was almost imitating Herbert. I wasn't writing the sort of poem which I wanted to write, and it wasn't till some months after that, that I found that I had begun to write without knowing it. I had begun to write in the way I was going to write.¹

Derek Stanford, who was the first to give Nicholson the recognition implied by the inclusion of a chapter on his work in a book of criticism,² singled out 'The Blackberry' for comment. As the points he made by no means exhaust the topic, I shall preface my discussion of Five Rivers with a more detailed analysis of this same poem. It provides an obvious introduction both to the merits and the faults of Nicholson's newly-found style.

The poem is quite short, and can be quoted in full:

Between the railway and the mine,
Brambles are in fruit again.
Their little nigger fists they clench,
And hold the branches in a clinch.

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1. Interview with Peter Orr, 3 April 1964. Published in The Poet Speaks (General Editor Peter Orr), Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, p.156.
 2. Derek Stanford, The Freedom of Poetry (1947), pp.157-75.

Waggons of ore are shunted past,
 And spray the berries with red dust,
 Which dulls the bright mahogany
 Like purple sawdust clogged and dry.
 But when the housewife, wind-and-rain,
 Rubs the berry spick and span,
 Compound it gleams like a fly's eye,
 And every ball reflects the sky.

There the world's reflected like
 Coupons in a ration book;
 There the tall curved chimneys spread
 Purple smoke on purple cloud.
 Grant us to know that hours rushed by
 Are photographed upon God's eye;
 That life and leaf are both preserved
 In gelatine of Jesus' blood.
 And grant to us the sense to feel
 The large condensed within the small;
 Wash clear our eyes that we may see
 The sky within the blackberry.

One's immediate reaction is to the combination of a well-known theme (Blake's 'infinity in a grain of sand' is called to mind rather than any specific poem of George Herbert's) and unexpected language: words like 'nigger' and 'gelatine' strike one's attention right away. Colloquialisms like 'spick and span' and a topical image like that of the ration book help to give the poem an air of up-to-date vividness. Indeed, the 'freshness' of Nicholson's language and imagery frequently occasioned favourable comment when Five Rivers was reviewed.¹

1. Vide, for instance, Reginald Snell, 'The Poetry of Norman Nicholson', The New English Weekly, 31 Aug. 1944, pp.151-2. The 'freshness' of the 'ration book' image has a rather dated air now, however.

In a way typical of Nicholson - though not only of him - the 'universal' conclusion emerges with apparent modesty from the carefully-observed details with which the poem begins: a religious theme is deduced from what the phrase 'waggons of ore' shows to be a specifically Millom context.

A closer inspection reveals a method of composition which may reasonably be likened to that of metaphysical poetry. The images are really conceits, and, in that they are frequently pushed a little too far, conceits in a slightly pejorative sense. One notices how Nicholson is not content with just the phrase 'nigger fists' in line three: instead of leaving the boxing metaphor just under the surface of the 'colour' denotation, he renders it overt in the phrase 'in a clinch', and his attempt to be 'witty' (in the seventeenth-century sense) results in an image which, unusually for him, does not accurately describe the natural object. The later comparison of the multi-faceted blackberry to a 'fly's eye' (l. 11) is reasonable enough in itself, but it has unsuitable repercussions when, further on, the blackberry becomes 'God's eye', which records life and the passing of time as the blackberry mirrors the 'tall curved chimneys'. The major objection is raised by lines nineteen and twenty. In what

sense, exactly, are 'life and leaf' (the world of nature and the world of man) 'preserved' in 'Jesus' blood'? The likeliest meaning, theologically, is that Christ has redeemed the world by dying for it: 'life and leaf' have been saved from destruction. The image of 'gelatine', however, suggests the 'fixing' of something in a state of stillness. One feels that 'preserved' is being associated in the poet's mind with 'preserves' (jam), and that this has in its turn suggested fruit jelly at a child's Sunday tea. What seems to have happened is that an obscure verbal pun has clouded what should have been a simple idea. It would appear, at any rate, that Nicholson was dissatisfied with the image, as he suppressed these two lines in the version of the poem printed in Selected Poems (1966). Unfortunately, his desire not to upset the stanza pattern led him to excise the two following lines also, with the result that the poem's conclusion is now much too hurried.

One does not want to insist too strongly on these flaws in a poem whose surface effect is vivid and mildly pleasing, but it is necessary to point out that Nicholson's imagination in many of the Five Rivers poems is too often verbal: words beget words, images images. The total effect of a poem is occasionally spoilt by the desire for a merely local 'felicity', as in

'Stalingrad: 1942', where the comparison of 'broken sandstone slabs' to 'gingerbread' lowers the would-be heroic tone of the poem. Sometimes the vigour of language can be a trifle ludicrous, as in 'Cleator Moor' where

...railway lines from end to end
Corseted the bulging land.

Sometimes Nicholson lapses into an excruciating homophonic pun, as in the line 'By raising raisins unto blood' in the poem 'Now in the Time of this Mortal Life'. There is a tendency to see objects too patly in terms of decorative metaphor, as in 'September in Shropshire', where Nicholson speaks of

...the blue
Earrings of bilberries in the tiny lobes of the leaves'.

Strictly speaking, 'lobes' could easily have been omitted, as it is implied by the previous image. A further example from 'Stalingrad: 1942' shows an actual mixing of metaphors:

...a peel
Of sun curls round the axles of the waves.¹

This habit of digressing from the observed facts into a loose sequence of imagery dangerously close to verbal self-

1. This image may reflect in transposed form the influence of ll. 95-7 of Milton's *Comus*: 'And the gilded car of day/ His glowing axle doth allay/ In the steep Atlantick stream'.

indulgence was a characteristic of such early poems as 'May Day 1937' and even of 'By the Sea', so that to claim that 'The Blackberry' inaugurates a completely new style would be an exaggeration. Its faults, however, and those of other poems in Five Rivers, are compensated for by a developing control of language, a greater sense of structure and a more interesting content. Noticeable also is Nicholson's use of half-rhyme. Though this use was influenced by the practice of poets like Auden and Day Lewis, it also indicates Nicholson's desire to escape, within metrical forms which themselves were quite conventional, from "too jingly a reproduction"¹ of sound patterns, and in a number of poems, especially 'Egremont' and 'Cleator Moor', it serves not only to bind lines together loosely yet strikingly but to add to them an appropriate ironic inflection. But perhaps the most interesting aspect of 'The Blackberry' is in fact the way in which it works forward from a small detail to a large conclusion. The method itself underscores the subject - the finding of wider significance in something which might ordinarily go unnoticed, the discovery of 'the sky within the blackberry'. The apparent cliché takes

1. Norman Nicholson, Letter to the writer, 27 Sept. 1968.

on a new force when one realises that it is, essentially, the same idea as is demonstrated, with far greater individuality and personal relevance, in the poem 'The Pot Geranium', where Nicholson sees in his local environment a microcosm of the world.

It is the group of 'regional' poems which the reader of Five Rivers first encounters when he opens the volume. This placing of them is clearly intentional, and the title poem, 'Five Rivers', serves as it were as Nicholson's passport, handed immediately to the reader as if to make unequivocally clear the area from which the poet comes:

Southward from Whitehaven, where cliffs of coal
Slant like shale to the low black mole,
The railway canters along the curving shore
Over five rivers, which slowly pour
On the steps of the shingle where the grey gulls bask:
EHEN and CALDER, IRT and MITE and ESK.

The very straightforwardness of this is striking. The poem aroused some comment when it first appeared,¹ as landscape-description for its own sake had been out of fashion for some time,² and this poem is essentially a description, written in

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1. In Today's New Poets: Resurgam Books, n.d.
 2. In a letter to the writer (8 March 1957) Nicholson said, in connection with the poem 'To the River Duddon', '...the description of nature was not common in the early 40s - I was going against the prevailing fashion'.

the third person throughout. Almost the only hint of the poet himself lies in the vivacity of the language he chooses.

The description is of a number of kinds. The printing of the river names in capitals gives the poem an eighteenth-century air, but the 'prospect' laid out before the reader is far larger than his eye could take in at any one time. A better analogy would be Baedeker's Guide; the listing of the rivers in strict north to south order sends one to look at a map. The poem in fact is a summary, a landscape seen from above:

...the channels burst through a gap in the sand
Like a three-pronged pitchfork jabbed in the flank of the
land.

The simile here was probably suggested by the appearance of the rivers Mite, Irt and Esk on the map, but as with the phrase 'in a clinch' in 'The Blackberry', the urge to bring the landscape alive has caused inaccuracy - the rivers, after all, flow outwards to the sea. Each river is described in slightly different terms. The Ehen runs red with 'the blood of the ore/
Of the mines of Egremont and Cleator Moor'. The Calder provokes the poet to reconstruct in his mind the life of the now-ruined Calder Abbey. The Irt recalls folklore and the famous teller of tall stories, Will Ritson.¹ The section on the River Mite is

1. This section of the poem is clarified by reference to Portrait of the Lakes (1963), p.75.

simply playful, an excuse for what is perhaps a pardonably punning sketch of the Ravenglass and Eskdale Light Railway :

The MITE, the tyke, lollops along
 Like a blue-haired collie with a dribbling tongue,
 The children's plaything as they ride the toy train
 That runs beneath the rocks in a hawthorn lane,
 Where dog-daisy, dogrose and stiff dog-grass
 Bark at the wheels as the whistling truckloads pass.¹

The flexibility of the couplets creates in the poem a light-hearted feeling, so that Nicholson can easily string together visual impressions, verbal fantasy, history and economics. The poem purports to be little more than a lively travelogue of the various faces of Cumberland, with the rivers supplying the barest framework of organisation. The last lines strike a rather 'romantic' posture, which almost immediately relapses into a more befitting, though less beautiful, inconsequentiality:

Brown clouds are blown against the bright fells
 Like Celtic psalms from drowned western isles.
 The slow rain falls like memory
 And floods the becks and flows to the sea,
 And there on the coast of Cumberland mingle
 The fresh and the salt, the cinders and the shingle.

By far the most serious lines in 'Five Rivers', and the only ones which suggest Nicholson's commitment to an economic view of Cumberland, describe the 'mines of Egremont and Cleator

1. See Portrait of the Lakes (1963), pp.39-40.

Moor' where

...drill and navvy break the stone
And hack the living earth to the bone.

In the following two poems, 'Egremont' and 'Cleator Moor', Nicholson works out this idea in more detail, and shows that for him the 'living earth' is no facilely anthropomorphic tag but a truth which needs to be realised if man is to organise his life sanely. It is the first premonition of a theme which is to reverberate throughout Nicholson's work: the correct relationship between man and the earth out of which he extracts a living. The evils of unrestrained exploitation, of dust-bowl farming, had already been indicted in Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1939).¹ Nicholson was to deal with this theme in his first play The Old Man of the Mountains (1946) and give it a religious overtone: the fruits of the earth were extended to man by God, and man's duty was to acknowledge the giver and not merely to snatch the gift greedily from his hands. Rock itself was to become the main recurrent image in Nicholson's poetry.

Both 'Egremont' and 'Cleator Moor' employ tight octosyllabic couplets and a high proportion of half-rhymes to give an edge

1. Nicholson had not read this novel at that time, but his views on farming were strongly influenced by similar attitudes expressed in The New English Weekly (edited by Philip Mairet). T.S. Eliot had taken out, anonymously, a subscription to this periodical on Nicholson's behalf in the late thirties.

of emphasis to their statements, but 'Egremont' begins in a mood of lazy, almost Tennysonian lyricism:¹

November sunlight floats and falls
 Like soapsuds on the castle walls.
 Where broken groins are slanted west
 The bubbles touch the stone and burst,
 And the moist shadows dribble down
 And slime the sandy red with brown.

The extension of the 'soapsud' simile into a conceit by the words 'moist', 'dribble' and 'slime', and the ensuing three stanzas, devoted to the description of the castle, deceive one into thinking the poem simply a picture of the 'romantic', Border-ballad past. The fifth and sixth stanzas turn (or invert) the literal Egremont castle into a metaphor for the modern iron mines where

With lantern flints the miners spark
 And gouge their windows to the dark.

But the poem is more than a clever ironic contrasting of the past with the 'sordid' industrial present in which man seems no more than some kind of digging animal.² The real point emerges in stanza seven, which tacitly equates the true past of rapine and murder with the modern 'theft from earth' which

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1. Cf. Tennyson's line 'The splendour falls on castle walls'.
 2. 'Cleator Moor' describes the miners as 'Digging like dogs dig for a bone'.

mining has become. For solution, Nicholson has recourse to an old legend, used by Wordsworth in his poem 'The Horn of Egremont Castle', which he adapts into an apocalyptic judgement executed by the angel Gabriel on man's misuse of the earth:

But the robbed earth will claim its own
 And break the mines and castles down
 When Gabriel from heaven sent
 Blows the Horn of Egremont,
 Tabulates the tenants' needs
 And re-assumes the title-deeds.

The conclusion suits the poem's rather sweeping conspectus of history, but one may feel that though Nicholson is clearly concerned to indicate an evil, the evil itself is not rendered with sufficient contemporary immediacy. One is not necessarily pre-disposed to think industry a form of robbery, and the Deus-ex-Machina ending, however justified by local tradition, is not satisfactory on a realistic level.

More successful, and more enlightening, is 'Cleator Moor', which in trenchant ballad-like quatrains confines itself to three stages in the history of local iron- and coal-mining - early prosperity when both coal and iron were dug from the same shaft,¹ the slump when 'we saw the disgusting absurdity of huge stocks of coal which nobody would buy, while the local people

1. See Norman Nicholson, Portrait of The Lakes (1963), p.163.

had to gather sticks on the shore for fuel',¹ and the revitalization of the industry due, ironically, to the wartime demand for armaments (the poem was written about 1941). It is clear that what horrified Nicholson was the way in which Cleator Moor, which in a letter to George Every of 20 June 1938 he had described as 'a mortuary', should owe its new life to the killing of others. This perversion of man's proper relationship to the earth is pointed up by the change from the early harvest imagery of 'black and red currants on one tree' into the brutal facts of stanza seven:

Every waggon of cold coal
Is fire to drive a turbine wheel;
Every knuckle of soft ore
A bullet in a soldier's ear.

The half-rhymes strike with a peculiar appropriateness here, recalling Wilfred Owen's use of the device in his front-line war poems of twenty-five years before. 'Cleator Moor' conveys indignation by the starkness and bite of its short, terse lines: the facts speak for themselves. It may at first seem that the final stanza declines into rhetoric and cliché:

1. Letter to the writer, 8 March 1957.

The miner at the rockface stands,
 With his segged and bleeding hands
 Heaps on his head the fiery coal,
 And feels the iron in his soul.

Yet the last couplet, when one considers it, is not just the adoption of an all-too convenient figure of speech. This poem's iron and coal are real; the miner's hands could very easily bleed. It is as if the poem itself describes a situation which re-animates the 'clichés' and makes them inevitable. It is surely more than the poet's wishful thinking which causes him to ascribe a feeling of moral guilt to those whose renewed prosperity grows out of the repugnant necessities of war.

'Five Rivers', 'Egremont', and 'Cleator Moor' treat the West Cumberland landscape in terms of the tourist brochure, of history, and of economic 'hard facts'. 'Cleator Moor' has a technical discipline which makes it the most impressive, but 'Egremont' and 'Five Rivers' can also be said, on their different level, to succeed. 'Whitehaven', however, demonstrates clearly the weakness of the historical approach to a place, and the danger of expanding one basic image - here the idea of 'barricades', of defending oneself against any kind of invasion - until everything is explained in terms of it. The poem's first section is pleasing as an example of

'atmospheric' writing:

Curlews wheel on the north wind,
 Their bills still moist with Solway sand,
 And waves slide up from the wide bays
 With rumours of the Hebrides.

But the second section turns the initially visual impulse of the poem into a historical interpretation which seems forced and is certainly arguable. To call Whitehaven 'the last invasion port' is strictly true: in 1778, as Nicholson goes on to say, John Paul Jones sailed into the harbour and did some damage before being driven off.¹ But it is hard to believe in the truth of the subsequent statement that

Every man and woman born
 In shade of this beleaguered town
 Bargains blood and brain and thew
 To keep the world from breaking through.²

The last section is a wild piece of 'apocalyptic' fantasy, which goes to such lengths that one feels that it is being indulged for its own sake. The angel Gabriel is again enlisted to punish the nameless sins of the townsfolk, but here Nicholson has not even the justification provided in 'Egremont' by the local legend of the Horn which 'can be blown only by the

1. Cf. Nicholson, Portrait of the Lakes (1963), p.88.

2. See, however, Norman Nicholson, Cumberland and Westmorland, Robert Hale, 1949, p.135.

rightful owner of the castle':¹

...Gabriel, the brigand, guides
His fiery frigate down the clouds,
Tears up the lighthouse in his hand
And waves it like a burning brand.

The piratical imagery tends to equate the activities of Gabriel - who puts into action a policy Nicholson clearly, even gleefully, approves of - with those of John Paul Jones, to approve of which would surely be irresponsible.

To do Nicholson justice, 'Whitehaven' is not a poem which he now likes. He sees it as a misguided attempt to repeat the idea of 'Egremont'. He also feels that the poem 'St. Bees' (with its conceits and paradoxes) has no particular reason for existing, and also that 'South Cumberland 16 May 1943', with its comparison of fells at sunset to 'gilded galleons on a sea of shadow', should not have been published. And in 1953 he expressed his bewilderment at the inclusion of 'Michaelmas', 'surely the worst poem in Five Rivers'² in John Heath-Stubbs's Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse. 'Whitehaven' seems an attempt to make poetry out of a place,

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1. Nicholson's footnote to 'Egremont', Five Rivers p.10.
 2. Letter to George Every, 15 Sept. 1953.

rather than to draw out of the place the significant facts which would make a poem about it something more than an exercise in verbal self-indulgence. In his later poem 'From Walney Island' he criticises the creative impulse when it is merely 'playing at poet with a box of colours' and 'daubs its pleasures across the sky'.¹ The application, doubtless intended, to some of his own mistakes is obvious. Elsewhere, he has described the urge which for him must precede poetic composition as a desire to 'make the acquaintance of the object ... for the love of the object itself, never with a deliberate desire to seek out material for poetry'.² This knowledge of the object Nicholson gains 'primary from visual observation'.³ It is clear that such observation has given rise to the poems I have so far dealt with. Nicholson himself has described what can happen when the mere desire to write a poem precedes a genuine impulse from the object:

1. 'From Walney Island', The Pot Geranium (1954), p.17.
2. Nicholson, 'The Image in my Poetry', Orpheus, Vol.2, John Lehmann, 1949, p.121/2. One thinks in this connection of such poems as 'A Correct Compassion' and 'The Descent into the Cave' by James Kirkup, where the experiences (of watching an operation and of caving in the Mendip Hills respectively) are sufficiently unusual for a poet to permit one to suspect that they have been courted for their 'poetry potential'.
3. Ibid.

Whenever I have fallen into the temptation of looking for a subject, the result has always been either a stubborn barrenness, or, worse still, a bad poem, and, later, a sense of shame.¹

That there should be some faulty poems in any collection is hardly avoidable, though as the poet's critical faculty sharpens one can expect more to be discarded prior to publication - at least six poems published separately by Nicholson between Rock Face and The Pot Geranium were never reprinted in the latter volume. That a relatively young poet's first collection should contain flawed articles is quite to be expected, and Nicholson's mistakes are generally due to an excess of verbal inventiveness, itself a quality without which no poem would get itself written. But Five Rivers has one special positive quality which is missing from later volumes where Nicholson's sense of purpose and his theories about regional life are in conscious control. This quality can only be indicated by the word 'magic', which is perhaps only the obverse of Nicholson's youthful tendency to resolve the problems raised in a poem by an appeal to some supernatural agency, like the angel Gabriel in 'Egremont' and 'Whitehaven'

1. Nicholson, 'The Image in my Poetry' (1949), p.121/2.

or St. Michael in 'Michaelmas'. The 'magic' seems to operate most obviously in poems where Nicholson is registering the Celtic atmosphere which, like the Norse, is part of the heritage of Cumberland.¹ It has shown itself already in the last lines of 'Five Rivers' which I quoted earlier:

Brown clouds are blown across the bright fells
Like Celtic psalms from drowned western isles,

- lines which either please immediately or not at all: no kind of analysis would help. The sequence of three poems 'Songs of the Island' shows this magical quality most extensively. The poems have no real subject, but express an emotion of yearning for something barely glimpsed - Nicholson seems to be imagining the transit of the soul to some 'islands of the blest' or fabled Atlantis, though it is the Isle of Man, visible from the Cumberland fells, which his conscious mind was thinking of.² The three poems show a very sensitive balancing of rhyme and half-rhyme, and in their rhythms, an effect of ebb and flow, which, taken together, enhance the incantatory effect of the words themselves:

Daily I watch the ships
Topple beyond the horizon where the sunset dips,
Daily I hear the sea whisper with wet lips.

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1. The Norse heritage is brought out in 'For the Grieg Centenary', Five Rivers, p.27.
 2. Letter to the writer, 8 March 1957.

The ships sail to the island and never come back,
 Only a broken barrel drifts against the rock,
 Only a spar or sailor's fingers tangled in the wrack.

Daily at the shingle's edge I gather wood,
 And pick the sea-coal from bladders of salty weed,
 Daily I feel the tug of the tide in my blood.

This 'Maiden's Song', though it has in it undertones both of the war (sailors lost in the long Battle of the Atlantic) and of the slump (the coal picked up on the shore), makes one think of the nostalgia of Alice in The Green Shore¹ for an existence whose nature she cannot define. The lines also suggest Nicholson's own problems of adjusting to the limited local environment to which his ill-health restricted him. When he finally came to terms with his physical limitations (a process he describes in 'The Pot Geranium', begun some seven years later, in 1949), his poetry became more muscular in its rhythms, more tightly-structured, more conscious of having ideas to transmit, and the 'magical' element was lost. It was perhaps, psychologically, an inevitable process, but one is at liberty to regret the loss, particularly as the 'magic' could be created not only within a myth-like framework, but also by an ordinary activity like riding a train from Barrow to Millom. 'Coastal Journey' transmutes

1. Alice is the female protagonist in Nicholson's second novel, The Green Shore (1947). See my discussion of this in Chapter Three, Section iii.

this simple experience into a genuine experience of strangeness:

A wet wind blows the waves across the sunset;
 There is no more sea nor sky.
 And the train halts where the railway line
 Twists among the misty shifting sand,
 Neither land nor estuary,
 Neither wet nor dry.

In the blue dusk of the empty carriage
 There is no more here nor there,
 No more you nor me.
 Green like a burning apple
 The signal hangs in the pines beside the shore
 And shines All Clear.

There is no more night nor evening;
 No more now nor then.
 There is only us and everywhere and always.
 The train moves off again.
 And the sandy pinetrees bend
 Under the dark green berries of the rain.

By stressing this aspect of Nicholson's work here I am not necessarily implying a preference for it over the different qualities displayed in the poems of eight or ten years later. Were one forced to choose only one volume by Nicholson for preservation, that volume would indeed be The Pot Geranium. Its poems are more wholly satisfying and are most clearly poems which only Nicholson could have written. But while emphasising this it is important not to underrate the very real qualities of poetry which is less 'mature' - the compensating charm, the poet's ability to throw off individually beautiful lines without worrying too much about their relevance to a central plan, the

appeal to that side of the reader which is willing to give rein to fancy rather than to the side which only feels happy when it can extend intellectual and imaginative assent.

Five Rivers was on the whole favourably received by reviewers when it appeared. In Chapter Seven I wish to discuss their opinions of it and of Nicholson's other volumes of poetry, and the changing fortunes of his work. To produce material for such a discussion is easy enough, as the evidence is scattered through newspapers and literary magazines. But Five Rivers appears also to have been successful with the public, since a second impression was produced in August 1944 and a third in September 1945. The reasons for this success can only be a matter for speculation.

One reason must lie in the renewed interest in poetry which flourished during the war, partly because the shortage of paper for printing made any new reading material welcome, even poetry. But such a practical, cynical explanation cannot, one hopes, completely explain Nicholson's success; one looks in his poetry itself for further answers. His imaginative powers must surely have had a strong effect on people imprisoned by the realities - harsh or humdrum - of wartime and looking for colour and hope. But combined with a response to the

piquancy and newness of the words carrying this power must also have been a recognition that the poet himself was not all that different from themselves. He was, in Orwell's sense, a 'decent' man, responding to the same pressures as affected them. It may also be that Nicholson's provincial background, so pervasive in the volume, worked in his favour. One of his main points in the broadcast-talk 'On Being a Provincial' is that

...the vast majority of mankind does not belong to a metropolis - either in England or in any other part of the world. The vast majority of mankind is provincial. It always has been throughout the ages.¹

Another ingredient of Nicholson's appeal was with little doubt his Christianity. In an article he once said that '...the Christian who is sufficiently aware of himself and his age must know that his faith segregates him from society',² but though Nicholson's religious beliefs seem to have set up barriers to critical recognition, it is unlikely that, for the ordinary reader during the Second World War, they did anything but make Nicholson seem more in tune with him. That the

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1. Nicholson, 'On Being a Provincial', The Listener, 12 Aug. 1954, p.248.
 2. Nicholson, 'Tell It Out among the Heathen - The Christian Poet Today', Christian News-Letter, Oct. 1956, p.33.

widespread resurgence of religious feeling in wartime may have been a temporary phenomenon is immaterial here.

The topical nature of Five Rivers is most evident in the group of poems¹ which show Nicholson as a Christian Cumbrian poet reacting to war: war is either the underlying theme of the poems or the larger context in which they exist, but they also reflect the specific place where they are written and show Nicholson's involvement in the general wartime predicament not only as a man but as a believer. The three constituents - local setting, wartime context, and religious feeling - of what may be called Nicholson's 'war poetry'² are most impressively fused in the poem 'For St. James 1943'. The setting is St. George's Square, Millom, and the evidence of wartime is unobtrusively there:

The last clinkers of sunset are strewn on the hill;
 The mist is blown about the town like smoke.
 Girls stand in the street in the brown dusk
 Talking to soldiers, and the swifts still
 Wire their screaming spirals round the market clock.

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1. In addition to the two poems I have chosen to discuss, this group includes 'Eskmeals 1943', 'Waiting for Spring 1943' and 'For Anne and Alison'.
 2. In 'Waiting for Spring 1943' Nicholson is careful to point out that his part of the world was immune from the harshest aspects of the war, like the blitz.

In this peaceful moment (a moment tinged by the screaming swifts with premonition) a calm religious faith is readily found:

Now we are able to take the cup.
 The purple evening is like holy wine;¹
 We drink in grace and feel the spirit near.

The transition in the next stanza - in which Nicholson turns to the difficulty of maintaining their faith experienced by those actually being bombed - is made easier by the ambiguities of 'cup' and 'purple': Holy Communion and Gethsemane, the royal colour and the colour of the robe mockingly given to Christ before his crucifixion. In this way an equation is made between the sufferings of Christ out of which came redemption and the sufferings of man in wartime, which should not cancel out the beliefs he holds when life is more peaceful. The image of the swifts now implies the turning of the wheel of nature and man's eventual survival:

Yet this evening's quiet does not deceive:
 The quiet is what endures. The swifts fly higher
 Through the drifting ash of the last light
 Into the nights of the future. And all we now believe
 Still will be true when the sky is wild with fire.

1. In Selected Poems (1966) Nicholson improves this line by omitting the word 'holy'. It is obvious from the context what sort of wine he means.

Such a sentiment was doubtless heartening to some wartime readers, and in that the 'solution' to the problems raised comes from man's, or at any rate Nicholson's, inner resources the poem shows an improvement on the 'bolt from the blue' endings used in 'Egremont' and 'Whitehaven'. But 'For St. James 1943' illustrates a perennial difficulty of the religious poem. The poet himself feels the sustaining power of belief, but if the reader is not prepared to respond to this with at least a will to believe of his own, no amount of careful planting of the religious theme in the images and texture of the poem will bring it truly alive. There are no self-evident grounds for the note of faith on which 'For St. James 1943' ends and its complete success depends finally on the existence of a current of sympathy between poet and reader. It is to a considerable degree the lack in the twentieth century of this current which accounts for the neglect of much of Nicholson's work by critics. As he himself once put it:

It must sometimes appear to a young poet...
that it is one of the greatest hindrances to
literary recognition to be known as a
believing Christian.¹

1. Ms. of Leading Article for T.L.S. by Nicholson on Roger Lloyd's The Borderland (George Allen and Unwin, July 1960).

The other wartime poem which I want to discuss, 'The Evacuees', presents another belief of Nicholson which might not be universally accepted - his belief in the importance of belonging to a particular place. The poem dates from 1943¹ and tells of the influx into Millom four years previously (during the period of the 'phoney war') of a number of families from the Newcastle area. When the scare passed off

The women returned
 To the Tyneside husbands and the Tyneside coal,
 And most of the children followed. Others stayed and learned
 The Cumberland vowels, took strangers for their friends,
 Went home for holidays at first, then not at all,
 Accepted in the aisle the bishop's hands,
 Won scholarships and badges, and were known
 One with the indigenous children of the town.

It is with these 'others' that Nicholson is concerned; they are now teenagers, and need to find their place in the world. Can it be enough for them to remain in a town which is only their second home?

Will they rest,
 Will they be contented, these
 Fledglings of a cuckoo's egg, reared in a stranger's nest?
 Born of one people, with another bred,
 Will they return to their parents again, or choose
 The foster-home, or seek the unrented road?
 Grant that in the future they may find
 A rock on which to build a house for heart and mind.

1. It was first published in The Spectator, 21 Jan. 1944.

The symmetry of the fourth line, and the gravity of its tone, suggest that, for the poet, acclimatisation to a new environment is an unlikely solution. The objection that the stanza may immediately raise is that the older poet - with his particular circumstances which obliged him to put down mental and emotional roots in his own town - is importing into the children's lives a problem which might in fact strike them not at all, or, if it did, strike them as less important than ambitions for a career to be followed elsewhere. Clearly the question is a very important one for Nicholson himself. 'The unrented road' is not for him; instead he feels the value of 'the unity of the breed, of the clan, of fledglings hatched in the same nest'.¹ But when the majority of writers - if not the majority of people - tend to move away from their birthplaces,² it is sometimes hard to come to terms with one who has not only stayed at home but made his home his main subject. It was perhaps a good thing that in his later regional poems

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1. Norman Nicholson, Provincial Pleasures (1959), p.184.
 2. Consider for instance D.J. Enright and James Kirkup. The case of the latter, born across the Pennines in South Shields, is one which seems to strike Nicholson - no doubt aware of his own difference - especially strongly. In an anonymous (Church Times, n.d.) review of Kirkup's The Prodigal Son (1959), he says: 'If ever there was a man who needed to come back where he belongs, that man is Mr. Kirkup'. One notes Nicholson's casual assumption that writers belong in their home town.

Nicholson worked out a justification of his provincial experiences based on their wider relevance.

The goodwill of the attitude conveyed by 'The Evacuees' is, however, patent; and apart from prompting a certain objection to its basic, unargued assumption, the poem conveys its subject-matter with a moving simplicity. It also indicates Nicholson's developing ability to describe events in something like a plain speaking voice, without forcing a moral. He leaves the issue of the children's future unresolved. The slight lameness of the poem's ending is a possible indication of the victory of honest uncertainty over his occasional earlier tendency to sum things up with a rhetorical inflation:

Grant that in the future they may find
A rock on which to build a house for heart and mind.

The 'rock' referred to is, in the immediate context of 'The Evacuees', a sense of rootedness, of belonging. But in turning, at the end of the poem, away from 'telling the reader', and in making what is for him the natural gesture of 'asking God', Nicholson reveals clearly the other rock, of religion, on which his life is based. And the verbal form of the gesture - 'Grant that in the future' - leads one into a consideration of the largest single group of poems in Five Rivers, those

poems which not only show a religious attitude but also deal with specifically Christian themes. This group of poems is the distinguishing feature of this particular volume; in his later work Nicholson tends to express his religious views more obliquely in terms of natural imagery, especially the imagery of rock examined primarily for its own sake and yielding only secondarily a metaphorical application. One might say that in later poems like 'The Seven Rocks' the religious attitude develops out of the imagery. In Five Rivers Nicholson's beliefs seek more direct expression, and in view of the problems of the Christian poet in the twentieth century it is interesting to see how Nicholson has gone about presenting this aspect of himself.

The very phrase I have used - 'how Nicholson has gone about presenting' - in itself hints at the nature of the problem. Elizabeth Jennings, in her book Christianity and Poetry (1965), has stated it thus:

What is unique about this age is the fact that the really Christian poets have had to be rebels. Christian culture has always continued, in however quiet a way, but the twentieth century has been more interested in Marxism, existentialism and Communism than in any other philosophy.¹

1. Elizabeth Jennings, Christianity and Poetry, Burns and Oates, 1965, p.92. Chapters 1, 8 and 10 of this book are particularly useful.

T.S. Eliot had expressed the situation with specific reference to writers in After Strange Gods (1934):

...amongst writers the rejection of Christianity - Protestant Christianity - is the rule rather than the exception.¹

Nicholson, writing at length about the dilemma of the Christian poet in his article 'Tell It Out among the Heathen', said that the result of the Christian poet's awareness of being in a minority is that he becomes 'self-conscious about his faith' and 'begins to calculate its possible effect on the reader'. In the past it was not so: Chaucer, for instance, was free either to ignore his faith, or speak of it, with equal naturalness, because it was common ground between him and his readers. A rare modern poet like Andrew Young, whom Nicholson greatly admires, is able to do likewise, but

for other contemporary poets there is no such solution...inevitably, though often against their will, they become propagandist in their poetry.²

In fairness to Nicholson, one should diminish the pejorative associations of the word 'propaganda' by saying that, in view

1. T.S. Eliot, After Strange Gods, Faber, 1934, p.38.
2. Nicholson deplures this, feeling that 'the poet should have his eye primarily on his work' ('Tell It Out among the Heathen', p.33) So does Elizabeth Jennings (Christianity and Poetry. p.11).

of the hostility of some non-Christian readers and critics, any taking seriously by a poet of something that seems to them manifestly absurd may appear propagandist. One should mention that, at the end of his article, Nicholson repudiates, on behalf of Christian poets including himself, any inference that they are

...all the time consciously and deliberately setting out to preach, to explain, to persuade.¹

Nicholson's religious poems in Five Rivers fall loosely into a number of categories. Some can be called devotional. By this I mean that they are addressed not to the reader so much as to God. Like many of the poems of Donne and Herbert, these pieces are concerned with the poet's own sense of inadequacy and unworthiness and give the impression of being overheard. Because of his special predicament, however, the modern Christian poet is less able to write many poems of this type than his seventeenth-century predecessors. 'Gethsemane' and 'The Ride to Jerusalem' are rare examples in Nicholson's

1. 'Tell It Out among the Heathen', p.38. In only one poem can Nicholson fairly be said to strike a self-righteous, exclusive attitude. This is in his poem 'For All Sorts and Conditions' (The Pot Geranium, 1954, p.59), which is rightly criticised by G.S. Fraser (Review of The Pot Geranium, New Statesman, 29 May 1954).

work. The last stanza of the latter poem will serve to illustrate the tone adopted:

The window-sills are empty; no crowds wait;
 Here at the pavement's edge I watch alone.
 Master, like sunlight strike my slaty heart
 And ask not acclamations from the stone.

The non-Christian can scarcely object to this rendering of an individual experience, and no attempt is made to imply that it is necessarily more than that.

When, however, the emphasis moves from the devotional to what I shall loosely term the doctrinal - that is, from the individual religious experience to the desire to express matters of theology, faith or religious tradition - there is a greater need to meet an audience halfway. The poet speaks now with more of a public voice, and whether he uses parable or direct statement he is closer to the devices of the sermon than to the intimate utterances of prayer. For Nicholson it therefore follows that the Christian poet must 're-state the Christian faith in the language and imagery of our time'.¹ It was partly to this end that he had compiled his Anthology of Religious Verse (1942). In that anthology he printed a poem

1. 'Tell It Out among the Heathen', p.35.

entitled 'Carol for Holy Innocents' Day'¹ which equates the slaughter of the innocents with the massacres going on in Nazi-occupied Europe, and the Flight into Egypt with the evacuation of English 'refugees' to areas free from the threat of bombing. But a severe reviewer of the Anthology in Scrutiny felt that Nicholson carried contemporaneity too far in the 'insensitive...boisterousness'² of his language:

The cat was let out of the bag by an angel
 Who warned them and planned their getaway,
 And told how Herod would make holy with death
 The day that a birth made a holy day.³

It may certainly be agreed that the jauntiness of the metre, which is perilously close to doggerel, and the colloquialism with which the poem, to use the Scrutiny reviewer's ironic phrase, 'kicks off' are unsuitable to the gravity of the subject, and Nicholson wisely omitted this poem from Five Rivers.

He did better in 'The Preachers'⁴ which tells in parable

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1. Reprinted in Selected Poems (1943); also in Poetry in Wartime (1942), pp.113-4.
 2. R.C. Lienhardt, Scrutiny, Spring 1944.
 3. The theme is dealt with very effectively, however, in the later poem 'Innocents' Day', The Pot Geranium (1954), pp.64-5.
 4. Five Rivers, pp.60-61.

of the difference between the innocence of birds and the sinfulness of fallen man. Here the stanzas are terse and pointed, and the crudity of some of the phrases has the same relation to a serious theological truth that a gargoyle has to the grandeur of a Gothic cathedral:

The juice was sweet
 But tart the core,
 No herb in field
 Their gripes could cure.

.....
 Tits trapezed
 Upon the spouts,
 Starlings dropped lime
 Like marguerites.

They said to the saint
 With scornful beak:
 'The berries give us
 No bellyache'.

St. Francis' sermon to the birds is neatly thrown back at him by the birds themselves; the 'dramatic' framework enables the poem's theological point to be made with wit and economy.

'Song for Pelagius'¹ also attempts a humorous presentation of its material, but is far less successful. To rebut Pelagius'

1. Like 'Carol for Holy Innocent's Day' this was published in 1942 (in Poems of This War, ed. Patricia Ledward and Colin Strang, Cambridge U.P., 1942, pp.57-8). 'The Preachers' appeared first in the New Statesman, 9 Jan. 1943. It would be dangerous, however, to attribute any improvement in the latter poem to the apparent time-difference.

doctrine of the supremacy of the will simply by piling up analogous impossibilities in the world of nature is neither truly argumentative nor poetically engrossing. Success would depend on one's agreement that the 'illustrations' were genuine analogies, but this is hardly felt:

When oaks and elders
 Pump sap into the soil,
 When props and pitshafts
 Stuff the earth with coal,
 When the bright equator
 Illuminates the sun,
 Man of his will
 Shall hoist himself to heaven.

The longest poem in this rather heterogeneous group of doctrinal poems is 'The Council of the Seven Deadly Sins',¹ which pictures the traditional vices in terms of a local parish council. The poem could be called an allegory, but only in the simplest sense that each councillor stands for one of the Deadly Sins. There are no problems of identification, as the key to each section is built in in the form of the appropriate adjective.²

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1. Published in Horizon (ed. Cyril Connolly), Vol.VIII, No.48, Dec. 1943.
 2. Nicholson follows the same method in identifying the Virtues in 'The Seven Rocks' (The Pot Geranium, 1954, pp.69-78).

A possible link with Piers Plowman suggests itself,¹ but in fact the only real parallel between Nicholson and Langland is the stress they both place on the physical features, as well as on the actions, of their characters. Here is Nicholson's Envy:

The second councillor is there,
 Sitting upright on his chair.
 His face is lean and whippet-jawed
 And blue as slate with three-day beard;
 His eyes from out their sockets bore
 Like corkscrews at the stubborn air;
 His lips, like whetstones in his cheeks,
 Sharpen the words that his tongue speaks.

As the first two lines of this extract show, the demands of the octosyllabic couplet sometimes involve the poet in padding. The sections themselves vary considerably in the degree to which they seem closely related to local situations. Sometimes, as at the end of the Envy section, one suspects the poem of being a poem à clef. Envy is clearly a bigoted Nonconformist, as he

1. For example, Langland's Invidia has 'lene chekes', Nicholson's Envy has a lean face; Langland's Ira has 'two whyte eyen', Nicholson's Anger has 'eyes like white-hot poker ends', but there is hardly enough evidence in these conventional descriptions for one to infer an influence, and in any case Langland's Sins are repentant while Nicholson's are very much the opposite. Also, 'the only woman member' of Nicholson's Council is Lechery, whereas in Langland it is Superbia who is a woman. (See Piers Plowman, ed. W.W. Skeat, Clarendon Press, 10th Edition, 1923, Passus V, pp.43-6).

...shuts his eyes on heaven's blue
Because it blesses Bishops too.¹

But the description of Gluttony is made in very general terms; though the satire has gusto it is also somewhat immature, and the irony of 'good' in the first line is elephantine:

The fourth good governor has eyes
Purple with blood and dull with booze,
Red as ripe strawberries, his lip
Slobbers with juice like dripping tap.
Down his throat he'd quickly swill
The bitter sea if it were ale,
And, gluttonous as fire, he'd eat
The sand if it were sausage meat,
And stuff Scawfell inside his belly
If it were lamb and currant jelly.

The most interesting detail in the poem is in the description of Sloth as a farmer who

...gives no thought of future peril
If earth's rich womb be laboured sterile,
Nor cares the price of a dead wick
What happens to the men he'll sack.

It is tempting to conclude from this that the character of Squire Ahab in Nicholson's first play The Old Man of the Mountains was drawn from local life. The poem as a whole, though, is uneven

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1. It has in fact been suggested to me by Mrs. Bessie Schiff (Bessie Satterthwaite) that there were Millom originals for all but one of the councillors in the poem, and that Nicholson would not have been very popular in Millom had they read it. She thought there was no model for Lechery, which would make Nicholson's choice of a woman for the part a revealing psychological quirk.

in its mixture of topicality (in the description of Anger) and old-fashioned monkish denunciation (the description of Lechery might have been written by Anthony Pengwilly¹ at his most misogynic), and in the way in which the couplets momentarily suggest the epigrammatic yet reproduce themselves in a succession which seems to have no inevitable end. There seems no clear relationship between the place where the Council meets - a town being mysteriously covered in sand, so that

The little dunes like molehills rear
Day by day in the town square

- and the Council itself, with the result that when we leave the Council, its decision still not reached, and return to the world outside there is a feeling of arbitrariness. The mistake, perhaps, has been to allegorise the Seven Deadly Sins in a setting which is by implication dramatic, when the Sins themselves are essentially static and timeless.

As a poet who is also a Christian, Nicholson has not unnaturally tended to find much of his material in the Bible. His Methodist upbringing ensured that he was as familiar with 'the mythical land of Palestine'² as he was with his own part of

1. The male protagonist of Nicholson's second novel The Green Shore (1947). See discussion of this in Chapter Three, Section iii.

2. Norman Nicholson, 'The Comic Prophet', The Listener, 6 Aug.1953.

Cumberland. It was when he was about fourteen that the 'two countries' came together:

...I remember that my uncle, who was a Sunday School teacher, gave us a lesson on the Good Samaritan. 'A certain man', he said, 'went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, just as it might have been from Broughton to Foxfield'.¹

The homely illustration suddenly 'condensed and solidified' the imagined landscape of the Bible and gave it the sharpness of local relevance. In the last group of religious poems to be examined here - those based on Biblical stories or single incidents - Nicholson attempts in various ways to transmit this same relevance and contemporary application. The material itself is taken from the Old Testament, but it is not all the same kind of material. Some of the poems are based on history, others on what must be called fundamental Christian myth.

The historical poems may be considered first, as they show in simple terms how Nicholson handles his source material and what different degrees of success he has. 'Babylon' is based on Revelation xviii, which describes the destruction of the proverbial city of sin. The last two-and-a-half lines are a direct

1. Norman Nicholson, 'The Comic Prophet', The Listener, 6 Aug. 1953.

quotation of Revelation xviii, 10, and the rest of the poem builds up to this conclusion by describing the voyage of merchant-ships to Babylon laden down with goods for sale there. The opening of the poem is colourful and breezy, and its rhythm suitably buoyant, though it may be objected that in his quest for liveliness Nicholson has tried to work in too many metaphors:

The wind was bright when we left the trading isles,
The sun was keen as a western gale; our keel
Cut like a saw the rolling logs of the sea.
Porpoise bounced in the waves' blue shavings,
And gulls followed our decks as they follow a plough.

There is no description of a voyage in the Bible; here Nicholson is simply letting his imagination sketch a context in which the discovery of burning Babylon can have considerable shock effect.¹ But the contents of the ship's hold are straightforward, innocent foodstuffs and clothes-materials, quite unlike some of the typical stock-in-trade of the Biblical Babylon:

...all manner vessels of ivory, and all manner
vessels of most precious wood, and of brass, and
iron and marble...and beasts, and sheep, and
horses, and chariots, and slaves, and souls of men.²

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1. The basic influence here is perhaps Eliot's 'The Journey of the Magi'.
 2. Revelation xviii, 12-13.

The result of Nicholson's change is to make the fall of Babylon seem undeserved; and the historical Babylon, 400 miles up the Euphrates, and thus a riverine city, is changed for no apparent reason into a port on an estuary.¹ There seems to be no special contemporary 'message' in Nicholson's embroidery of his source material; the poem appears to exist solely because he saw in the Bible passage an opportunity of exercising himself in sheer description. The same limitation attaches to this poem's companion piece 'Belshazzar'.²

Considerably better, as a whole, than either of these poems is 'The Raven'. Its Biblical source is not even a chapter or section but the single verse which tells of the feeding of Elijah by ravens,³ and the poem is a descriptive improvisation on this idea, recreated in terms of the Cumberland landscape of

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1. According to Nicholson himself the place he was thinking of was Liverpool.
 2. 'Babylon' appeared in the New Statesman, 20 March 1943; 'Belshazzar' in the Spectator, 28 May 1943. The material on which the two poems are 'based' was also used by Sacheverell Sitwell in his text for William Walton's oratorio Belshazzar's Feast (1930). One wonders whether the poems were prompted by a performance of this, or whether the stories of Babylon and Belshazzar were simply popular with Revivalist preachers and struck Nicholson's imagination from this source.
 3. I Kings xvii, 6.

which Nicholson has first-hand knowledge:

The raven flew down the long wedge of the dale,
 Above the upland dykes and slate and cobble walls
 Piled against the high waves of the fells.
 With slower corrugations of its wings
 It dropped below the bracken cut for bedding
 To where green oats were sown on the brant fell,¹
 And the lyle herdwick^s fed in the wet pastures
 For the grass was thicker there and orchids and burnet grew.

The slight use of dialect, and the mention of specifically Cumbrian sheep, give the poem an air of precision, yet the pastoral imagery itself has a universality suited to its Biblical subject. More importantly for the poem's total coherence, Nicholson's choice of a local setting ensures complete consistency in the imagery, instead of the rather amateurish unevenness of this in 'Babylon' and 'Belshazzar'. Nicholson's inclusion of 'The Raven' in Selected Poems (1966) implies that he himself is well aware that his real strength emerges when he composes his picture from details chosen from a known landscape, rather than when his imagination tries to work on disparate and second-hand information. There is still, however, even in this poem the reservation that it does not transcend its visual and sensuous details and educe from its 'text' any specific human

1. Cumbrian dialect word meaning 'steep'. See Introduction, p.12.

relevance. It is only when Nicholson turns the Old Testament into plays with speaking characters (the connection between 'The Raven' and The Old Man of the Mountains is obvious) that he is able truly to use his Biblical source material and give it a moral application and a contemporary meaning.

The last three poems in the volume, 'The Garden of the Innocent', 'The Holy Mountain' and 'The Bow in the Cloud', are long and ambitious. The poems are attempts to deal with the fundamental Christian myths presented in the Book of Genesis. A decade later, Nicholson described myth as

...the common ground on which Christian and non-Christian could converse. The Garden of Eden, the Fall, the Flood... - these were seen to have a universal significance which could be perceived and acknowledged by those who did not accept the Christian doctrines.¹

These Christian myths correspond to secular views of Man as a creature nostalgic for an unattainable, or lost, perfection, as a creature aware of the dichotomy in himself between body and spirit, and as a creature whose relationship to nature fluctuates between that of master and that of victim. Nicholson's poems, therefore, are able to some extent to communicate on

1. 'Tell It Out among the Heathen', Christian News-Letter, Oct. 1956, p.37.

these levels as well as on the religious, though it must be pointed out that 'The Holy Mountain' and 'The Bow in the Cloud' lean more directly on their Old Testament material than on a psychological transformation of it, and much of their very language is modelled on that of the Bible. But all three poems gain immediacy from being located in a Cumberland landscape described lovingly and in great detail. Since adolescence Nicholson had in fact visualised the myths of Genesis as taking place in his own local area:

For me, the site of the Garden of Eden was no longer a matter of conjecture: it belonged to the lower Duddon, where the waters divide and subdivide, and the daffodils cock their heads like some yellow-billed wading-bird eyeing the soil for worms. The flood occurred in Eskdale, and the first Noah saw of land was an archipelago of mountain peaks - Scafell, Bowfell, and the rest of them - emerging above the ebbing water.¹

The ambitiousness of conception in these poems is matched by the ambitiousness of their technical scope. Each poem makes use of a number of different metrical forms and is accordingly divided into four or five sections. 'Movement', however, would be a more apt term than 'section': the change from long unrhymed

1. 'The Comic Prophet', The Listener, 6 Aug. 1953.

descriptive lines to ballad quatrains to octosyllabic couplets to exultant passages reminiscent of the Psalms has the effect of music. Very roughly the progress of each poem resembles the balancing of recitative, aria and chorus displayed by an oratorio.¹ The length of the poems enables Nicholson to build up an atmosphere which will render his subject emotionally acceptable, and the sectional divisions serve partly to move the narrative forward and partly to reveal the central symbol from different angles. To put it another way, one might say that the poet strikes from a number of directions, so that, if one approach fails, another may succeed.

Within this broad frame of similarity, the slanting, or emphasis, of each poem varies with the intrinsic possibilities of its subject. The simplest is 'The Bow in the Cloud', which is basically the narrative of the Flood adapted from its source in Genesis vi-x to a Cumbrian setting and ornamented with a lyrical rather than a philosophical conclusion. Section I gives the story a context in the post-diluvian world of today, which waits, not now for the Flood, but for the Second Coming.

1. This method of construction is also used later, in 'The Seven Rocks' and in 'Silecroft Shore' (Rock Face, pp.60-64).

The immediate scene is the shore off Hodbarrow Mines at sunset:

The wooden groins run back from the shore
 To the long seawall that hoards in its rocky cordon
 The pitshafts with wheels like a sailor's helm,
 The rubble red and dark in the sandy dusk,
 The mines where once the purple ore was broken
 To boom as a gun or ring out as a clattering peal.

Section II is a ballad,¹ which represents Noah as 'old Tyson', a statesman farmer and revivalist local preacher, and tells of his instructions by God in Genesis vi to build an ark and

Take in all birds and animals,
 Two of every kind.

Section III describes the Flood as a sort of cosmic cataclysm, the moon growing larger and larger until it splits and showers itself 'on the cringing continents as fiery hail', and the tide rises and overwhelms the earth. In his desire to convey the disaster adequately, Nicholson is tempted into too 'apocalyptic' a style of writing, but towards the end there is a very powerful use of shortened lines to represent the effect of the Flood on the animal kingdom, though the last three lines of this passage perhaps echo too closely the end of Eliot's 'Gerontion':

And now the tall waves bound
 Over the mountain tops. The animals are drowned
 Where they crouch; the birds fly
 Till they drop. The sky

1. Nicholson's ballad-sections in all three poems are very reminiscent, rhythmically, of ballads by Auden like 'Victor' and 'Miss Gee'.

Is black as a coal-pit, and the breaking moon
 Spreads in a belt of smoke and dusty rain,
 With a gravelly hail of flying shale
 Stretched behind like a comet's tail.
 It bursts as if charged with dynamite, is whirled
 In closing spirals, and the fragments hurled
 Down to the dark equator of the world.

After this hectic fortissimo climax it is as if the poem draws a deep breath. The final section is tranquil, like the aftermath of a Lakeland thunderstorm: Tyson steps on to Scafell Pike, the sun shines through the 'simmering mists' and God's covenant with man, the rainbow, is seen in the sky. Tyson thanks God in long exultant lines reminiscent of Christopher Smart's 'Jubilate Agno':

Let the sun rejoice with the sun spurge, an herb running
 with milk like the loving kindness of the Lord.
 Let the moon rejoice with the moon daisy, which was a del-
 ight to children in the meadows when the flood flowed back.
 Let the stars rejoice with the starfish.¹ Praise the Lord
 for the recurrence of the tides.
 Let the earth rejoice with the earth-apple, the potato, a
 sustainer of men in times of famine.
 Let the sky rejoice with the skylark, which was the first
 voice to sing above the floods.

The poem ends with psalm-like lines in which the colours of the rainbow are equated with the seven virtues (a device which clearly anticipates the structural plan of 'The Seven Rocks'),

1. Cf. 'The Seven Rocks', The Pot Geranium (1954), p.78.

and the very last lines of the poem show a typically Nicholsonian return - as at the close of The Old Man of the Mountains and Birth by Drowning - to a sense of the duties and necessities of everyday life:

The moon hangs in the bright sky,
The bow fades in the cloud, the mist
Rises like thanksgiving, the sea returns to its routine,
And Tyson buckles his horse to the shafts of the plough.

Nicholson's impressive, musical handling of his material in this long poem, and the simple, moving eloquence of its last section, require no doctrinal acceptance for their appreciation.

Less can be claimed for 'The Holy Mountain', which has the same range of metrical forms but with the ballad as the third instead of the second section. The title is an allusion to Dante's Purgatorial Mount, but the phrase itself is a quotation from Isaiah xi, 9: 'They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea'. It is with this verse that the poem ends, prophesying - in stanzas again recalling Christopher Smart, this time the poet of 'A Song to David' - another covenant of God with man which will put an end to the post-lapsarian miseries of man and the animal kingdom. The first section of the poem is a description of the

Garden of Eden in terms of a Lakeland valley in which 'there is no need of seeding...where there is no dying'. This natural landscape is conveyed with a combination of lyrical rhythm and descriptive particularity:

The orchard grows on the slope that slants to the sun -
 Damson, bullace and crab, and gean, the wild cherry,
 White as lambs in spring. And the flowers of the dale,
 Bigger than those of the fells, frailer than those of the
 fields:

The globe-flower, like a lemon, quartered but unpeeled;
 The bell flower, hanging its blue chime from a steeple of
 nettle-leaves,
 Betony and cow-wheat, golden-rod and touch-me-not,
 And in the woods, enchanter's nightshade,
 And by the river, daffodils.

From this state of timeless innocence Man is excluded, and in the two middle sections of the poem Nicholson describes the Fall which brought this exile about. It is here that at least some theological interest is required of the reader, if he is to find more in them than 'the impersonal organisation of scriptural story' complained of by one reviewer.¹ Behind the two central sections lies Nicholson's reading of N.P. Williams's book The Ideas of the Fall and Original Sin,² which discusses the two rival theories of the Fall which these sections present.

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1. Anonymous review of Five Rivers, The Listener, 12 Oct. 1944.
 2. Bampton Lectures, 1924. Published by Longmans, 1927.

Section: Three deals in ballad form with the usual myth of the Fall as recounted in Genesis iii, the story of Adam and Eve and the Apple of Knowledge, but Nicholson tells this from the point of view of the apple. Man's Fall is transposed into the apple's growth and decay; its rotting is clearly a symbol for the vice of pride which is the result of forbidden knowledge:

The blossom shrivelled on that tree,
 The fruit was as small as a hip or a sloe,
 But the one apple grew till the bough bent
 As beneath snow.

And the apple sang to the bright air:
 'Thus does heaven its favourites bless,
 For the elements are transmuted to
 My apple-ness'.

Red as the sun the ripe skin shone,
 The core and pulp began to swell,
 Till the short stalk snapped beneath the weight
 And the apple fell.

The apple rotted on the ground,
 Rotted in the grass by the roots of trees,
 And through the soil the proud rot ran
 Like a disease.

Section Two recounts the earlier (and because supplanted in Church teaching, less familiar) story of the Fall: that of the punishment of the Rebel Angels. This story is only briefly described in Genesis vi: its real presentation is in the pseudepigraphic Book of Noah whose fragments are preserved as

Chapters vi-xi of the First Book of Enoch.¹ Various details of this story are mentioned by Williams, and it is either from these or the Book of Enoch itself that Nicholson derives his references to 'the Watchers', 'the four rivers', the birth and death of the Titans (a race half-human, half-angel), and the idea that the Rebel Angels taught both man and beast dangerous arts and predatory instincts. The description of the Titans as

Creatures with necks as long as larches,
With legs like oaks and tails like birches;
Creatures from shoulder blade to knee
Upholstered like a plush settee,
Or jointed along spine and hip,
And plated like a battle-ship

provoked in Scrutiny the hostile remark that

Mr. Nicholson has a persistent interest in apocalyptic events and fantasies, releasing him from the control of any logic or responsibility and allowing his 'descriptive talents' to spawn their own cosmology and mythology...To be more serious than the passage quoted merits, one might say that such creations cannot be convincingly visual as they are not part of any convincing vision...He should try to make his verse sound less like Cyril Fletcher.²

The criticism is not entirely unmerited. But in Nicholson's

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1. This was written by various authors between 200 B.C. and 100 A.D. Vide The Book of Enoch (or I Enoch), Trans. and ed. R.H. Charles, Clarendon Press, 1912.
 2. A.I. Doyle, review of Five Rivers, Scrutiny, Sept. 1945.

defence it needs to be pointed out that a knowledge of his source would at least have freed him from the charge that he was simply spinning out fantasies of his own, and it may also be said that in describing the Titans in terms of dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures he was at least gesturing in the direction of scientific accounts of evolution. But it has to be agreed that the running together of different accounts of the Fall stems from an interest in theological speculation and a knowledge of Apocalyptic writings that the reader of 'The Holy Mountain' cannot be expected to share, and thus the poem is too obscure and fragmentary to be successful.

'The Garden of the Innocent' is the shortest of the three poems, but it has five sections instead of four. Its reliance on Biblical material is only slight; it begins with a description of Eden, but this time not the Eden of Genesis so much as the Eden of moral innocence in which the animal kingdom exists and from which Fallen Man is excluded. It is in fact a poem about Original Sin, and its approach may be called a philosophical or existentialist one. This renders the poem more acceptable to readers who do not share its religious premiss but are aware of an inadequacy within themselves, a sense of exclusion and nostalgia. Alone among the three poems, 'The Garden of the

Innocent' invites the reader's participation by its introspective use of the first person and its Kafka-like sense of the human predicament. Section II describes man's search for innocence in his own subconscious, but man soon realises that he will not discover it in the jungle of fear and animal instincts of which the subconscious is composed:

The darkness skulks in crevices;
 A rabbit squeals at a stoat's eyes.
 Where the spruce bends like a green claw
 The furry silence slinks away.
 The fir trees scream like knife on bone,
 The sap like blood pounds through the pine.

Even were man to find the garden, there would still be 'the voice in the upper branches', man's sense of guilt personified in the voice of God, and the section ends with mixed feelings: Man desires, yet fears, to find the lost state of innocence. Section III celebrates rather portentously and with echoes of T.S. Eliot the amoral state of the animals whom, at this stage, man envies:

For these there are no bounds to the garden, neither inside
 nor outside,
 Those who do not hear the voice, and, without hearing, obey.
 They do not choose whether to know or know not,
 Neither choose rightly, nor choose wrongly.
 They do not know what it is to choose or choose not.
 They know neither temptation nor conscience, choose neither
 innocence nor sin.

The fourth section is rather obscure, a ballad which has overtones of Auden's and Isherwood's The Ascent of F6 and Nicholson's

earlier poem 'No Man's Land'. It seems to be a parable of the search for forbidden knowledge which led to the Fall. Man climbs the mountain in search of the hidden garden, but what he apparently finds is the frightening knowledge of himself:

No cloven hoof, no buzzard's talons,
 But a naked human toe - 1
 I reeled, and slid down the frozen slope
 To the valley below.

The fifth and final section seems to be a coming to terms with the imperfect human state, a realisation that man is what he is and must make the best of this. The animals are not only (as in Section I) 'the creatures who have never been me' but 'the creatures whom I can never be'. The last lines of the poem, with a bleakness reminiscent of Eliot's verse in parts of Murder in the Cathedral, indicate that man's life must be lived on the terms laid down in the final verses of Genesis iii. Even this kind of life, however, carries dignity and the possibility of development:

That to which we cannot return is not to be found before us;
 There is no other garden beyond the bright sea.
 The nettle will follow the opportune harrow,
 The thorn increase in the blandishments of spring.

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1. This seems to recall Robinson Crusoe's discovery of the enigmatic footprint in the sand. Two stanzas previously Nicholson mentions a fear of 'the snowman' (doubtless the 'Abominable Snowman') who is presumably a grotesque and horrifying mirror-image of man himself.

Not in the prospectus of a blind tomorrow,
 But in the scything of nettles shall we find bread,
 In the burning of thorns shall we find warmth.
 The hand that is stung by nettles shall know deftness,
 The foot that is pricked by thorns shall develop strength.¹

The language of 'The Garden of the Innocent' is sometimes rather too stilted and derivative,² but the poet's attempt to use the Biblical myth as the basis for a psychological study of man's nature and his place in the world is perhaps more finally impressive than the decorative eloquence of the other two long poems. Eliot's view of all three poems was that their bid for major stature did not come off,³ but the failure of 'The Garden of the Innocent' is perhaps the most interesting and relevant by non-Christian standards.

I have spent some considerable time on the religious poems in this volume because they indicate Nicholson's concern at this

1. Cf. The Raven's speech, The Old Man of the Mountains, 1950, (3rd Impression, revised), p.83.
2. Apart from the overtones of Eliot perceptible in some of the extracts quoted one also notes in Section III a rather Audenesque periphrasis: 'the creature with the ape-like skull who learned to look at fire'. Cf. Auden's lines: 'Now in that Catholic Country with the shape of Cornwall/, Where Europe first became a term of pride', in Commentary to 'In Time of War', Collected Shorter Poems (1950), p.291. For the literary affinity of the four stanzas which begin Section V, cf. Kathleen Raine, 'The Crystal Skull', (1943), p.20. (Stone and Flower, 1943.)
3. T.S. Eliot, letter to Anne Ridler, 17 June 1943. By the terms of Eliot's will, his exact words cannot be quoted.

stage with direct representation of his religious beliefs. His slow progress back to Christian faith during the late nineteen-thirties had, as I have shown in Chapter Two, culminated in his taking communion again in 1940 and declaring that 'it is time that I trained my tongue to speak of God'. Such a recently regained faith would not have been likely to 'disguise' itself 'in unfamiliar imagery'.¹ It may be possible to find a secular relevance in the three long poems, for instance, but there is no reason to doubt that, for Nicholson, the Genesis stories on which they are based had a real religious meaning and that he was interested in them for their own sake. 'The Garden of the Innocent' and 'The Holy Mountain', however, both date from early in 1942, and as Nicholson's poetry developed its emphasis changed. A reviewer's comment on Selected Poems (1942), in which 'The Garden of the Innocent' and 'The Holy Mountain' first appeared, to the effect that 'part of Nicholson's fascination is that he exacts not even a temporary belief from the unbeliever'² may have indicated to him the obstacles to wide communication set up by his overtly Christian symbolism.

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1. In 'Tell It Out among the Heathen' Nicholson uses this phrase in connection with T.S. Eliot.
 2. Anonymous review in The Listener, 22 July 1943.

At any rate, after Five Rivers a bifurcation in his creative endeavours is clearly perceptible. Specifically religious themes continue to be treated, but this time in verse plays where they can be expressed dialectically in terms of human beings, while the poems concentrate on the natural landscape and man's relationship to it in such a way that, though it is clear that these subjects are of great importance in themselves, one can see in them a religious significance. One might say that, having once used the Cumberland landscape in his long poems as a context for Christian themes, Nicholson can now deal with this landscape by itself in the full confidence that the basic symbols - rock in particular - will operate on the reader without pressure from the poet.

It is with this change of emphasis in mind that I have left until the end of this section what seems to me the finest poem in Five Rivers, 'To the River Duddon'. It was one of the last poems in the volume to be published,¹ and not only does the confident handling of its rangy, unrhymed lines show a far greater technical maturity than the pleasant jog-trot of 'Five Rivers' (to which its title might at first sight make it seem a mere appendix), but its search for a meaning in landscape

1. In The Fortnightly, Feb. 1944, pp.121-2.

goes much deeper than the colourful but random listing of attractions in the earlier poem. 'To the River Duddon' contains a description of the Duddon's course from near Wrynose Pass to where it flows into the estuary on which Nicholson's home town of Millom stands. The fact that the Duddon is the poet's 'home river' helps to explain why he addresses his words directly to it, but the use of the first person (which distinguishes this poem from the other 'local' poems in the volume) indicates the degree of Nicholson's involvement in his subject. The description of the river is itself framed by two attitudes to Wordsworth, the first the Wordsworth of the Duddon Sonnets, 'the dry and yellow edges of a once-green spring', the second 'the old man, inarticulate and humble' who had much to teach his Cumbrian successor. The poem therefore not only describes a river, but outlines a train of thought.

In the second of his Duddon Sonnets Wordsworth, in bardic style, apostrophises the river as

Child of the clouds! Remote from every taint
Of sordid industry thy lot is cast.

Nicholson quotes part of this and comments pungently:

But you and I know better, Duddon lass.¹

Nicholson's condensation of Wordsworth's thirty-four sonnets into an unbroken thirty-two line sentence which follows out all the twists and turns of the river is made in a similarly ironic spirit: the images are slightly comic and deliberately tilt at Wordsworth's elevated diction. Yet they betray, in their vigour and accuracy, no less of a love for the Duddon than the older poet felt:

Past Cockley Beck Farm and on to Birks Bridge,
 Where the rocks stride about like legs in armour,²
 And the steel birches buckle and bounce in the wind
 With a crinkle of silver foil in the crisp of the leaves;
 On then to Seathwaite, where like a steam-navvy
 You shovel and slash your way through the gorge
 By Wallabarrow Crag, broader now
 From becks that flow out of black upland tarns
 Or ooze through golden saxifrage and the roots of rowans;
 Next Ulpha, where a stone dropped from the bridge
 Swims like a tadpole down thirty feet of water
 Between steep skirting-boards of rock.

But Wordsworth, Nicholson realises, was more than

...a middle-aged Rydal landlord
 With a doting sister and a pension on the Civil List;³

1. Nicholson has omitted the word 'lass' from this line in the version of the poem which appears in Selected Poems (1966). The result is less dialectal and more dignified, but lacks the bite and freshness of the original.
2. A particularly apt simile: the rocks, rubbed smooth by the water, resemble legs encased in greaves.
3. Selected Poems (1966) amends this last phrase to 'a government sinecure'.

he was more than a poet in retirement who wrote sonnets intended as a guidebook,¹ on which Nicholson's description is a kind of mock-attack. Wordsworth was able to see beneath the changing appearance of landscape an underlying permanence; he 'knew that eternity flows in a mountain beck'. Elsewhere, Nicholson makes it quite clear that the admiration expressed in the later part of 'To the River Duddon' is for Wordsworth's appreciation of nature as a solid geological reality, not just a delight for the eye:

It was not the beauty of nature which was Wordsworth's prime concern - not the beauty but the fact, not the spectacle but the objective reality behind the spectacle... He loved his lakes and mountains not just for what they looked like, but for what they were... Wordsworth's mountains were always real mountains.²

It is on this reality that Nicholson's own poems were now to concentrate. By the intensity of his concentration he was able to make plain not only his own love for his region but his belief that

Christianity is one of the most materialist of religions. It holds that matter matters.³

1. Vide Wordsworth, Guide to the Lakes, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1951, p.43.
2. Nicholson, 'Millom Delivered', The Listener, 24 Jan. 1952, p.139.
3. 'Tell It Out among the Heathen', p.34.

II

Nicholson's second collection of poems, Rock Face, was published in 1948. It was smaller than Five Rivers, consisting of no more than forty poems; yet, as far as I have been able to discover, it reprints all Nicholson's work of the previous four years, with the exception of 'Lullaby',¹ written for Enrica Garnier. This poem was presumably omitted for personal reasons. One's impression from the volume's comparatively small size is that the great exuberance evident in Five Rivers had flagged later, and that this flagging had been accompanied by a wish not to repeat either the mistakes or the successes of the earlier book. The solidity of its title, Rock Face, is misleading; the title poem itself is short and almost inconsequential, and the collection as a whole displays a diffuseness of purpose which suggests that it may most easily be labelled 'transitional'. Certainly it proved considerably less popular than its wartime predecessor, though partly this had to do with a predictable post-war decline in the public

1. 'Lullaby', New Statesman, 28 Sept. 1946. See Chapter Two, p.63.

appetite for poetry; in 1949 Nicholson wrote to George Every that

...it doesn't look as if the first edition of Rock Face has sold out after all. I believe the sales of poetry are getting smaller and smaller and are now almost the same as they were before the war.¹

Reviewers' opinions of Rock Face varied considerably. The range can be demonstrated by two quotations. The Times Literary Supplement said it contained 'a dozen poems...that confirm [Nicholson] as one of the most talented poets of the post-Auden generation';² The Listener, unwillingly severe, felt that

...two or three perfect poems and a scattering of fine images do not rescue from dullness what should have been an outstanding book.³

Both these quotations, however, have one thing in common: the reviewers restrict their praise to a small selection of the poems in the whole volume. To see Rock Face in meaningful relation to the two collections which frame it involves a similar selectiveness in the poems one discusses. This does

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1. Letter to George Every, 5 June 1949.
 2. Review of Rock Face, Times Literary Supplement, 8 May 1948.
 3. Review of Rock Face, The Listener, 9 Sept. 1948.

less of an injustice to the neglected poems than might be supposed. A characteristic of the volume is the number of poems in it which seem to spring from purely random impulses, unlinked either to any intellectual content or any particular prompting 'occasion'. One feels, simply, a shortage of subject matter akin to that revealed in Philip Larkin's first volume The North Ship.¹ A quarter of the poems in Rock Face include the word 'song' in their titles, and a complete survey of these poems would be no more than a catalogue of meaningless approval and equally meaningless censure. 'Snow Song', for instance, has a pleasant limpidity:

Lay the yellow jasmine
 On the blue snow;
 Let the berries of the yew
 Fall through white shadow,
 Pitting the skin
 As raindrops do.

'A Second Song at Night', on the other hand, is simply a striking of rhetorical attitudes:

Brighter than sun or moon
 With peedling, comet eyes
 The night bends down,
 Bragging her pole-black charms,
 And the mad body lies
 With Nothing in its arms.²

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1. Philip Larkin, The North Ship, Fortune Press, 1945; Faber and Faber, 1966.
 2. The words 'peedle' and 'bragging' occur, in similar close juxtaposition but to better purpose, in 'Ravenglass Railway Station' (The Pot Geranium, p.29).

But the point about both poems is their lack of any special identifying characteristics; like the group of lyrical poems to which they belong, they could, one feels, easily have been written by someone else. The same thing can be said of the use in nine poems in the volume of the 'poetic' exclamation 'Oh!', as in this example from 'Above Ullswater':

Oh but you
 To whom the angels speak in colours,¹
 Was the silence singing, and the shining air
 Snowy with angels' feathers?

The exclamation seems to be used merely to inject some 'feeling' into the lines, which have that quality of poetical rapture which one associates with the neo-Romantic movement of the nineteen-forties.² The sense, in this whole group of lyrical poems, of a person speaking is largely an illusion. What is really behind them is a poet too conscious that he is writing poetry.

Evidence for such a view is, I think, furnished by 'The Candle', which is the unique example in Nicholson's entire work of a poem about poetry. When it was first published³ it carried a footnote to the effect that '...the theme and imagery of this

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1. The person referred to here is the poetess Kathleen Raine.
 2. See The White Horseman, ed. J.F. Hendry and Henry Treece, Routledge, 1941. This particular manner is reflected in 'Poem for Epiphany', Five Rivers, p.56.
 3. In Penguin New Writing No.30 (1947).

poem were suggested to me by Miss Kathleen Raine.' When it was reprinted in Rock Face the extent of Kathleen Raine's influence was stated as being the wording of the first line and the imagery of the first stanza:

Poetry is not an end.
 The flame is where the candle turns
 To smoke, solid to air,
 Life to death, or say,
 To that which still is life in another way.
 The flame is not an aim,
 Nor the brightest light
 Any justification for its burning.

The initial statement (which is made less metaphorically in a poem written two years later, 'On My Thirty-Fifth Birthday') seems a not inaccurate description of Nicholson's attitude to poetry. What he seems to be asserting is a hostility to any 'art for art's sake' view of it. But when in the second stanza the idea is elaborated in terms of the non-equivalence of 'love' and 'the beloved' what emerges is a vague search for the abstraction 'poetry' as something apart from the created poem. The final lines suggest that the writing of poetry is a process of self-discovery:

The flame is the poem,
 And the light shines little time,
 And the poet follows the rhyme into the darkness
 And learns there his new unspoken name.

The commonplace here - that a poet cannot, when he begins to write, entirely predict what he will create - is unobjectionable. But whether or not the theory put forward in the poem itself is true is hardly the point. This particular poem is no more than a verbal feeling-one's way¹ (though in that sense it can be said to act out its idea); it is not a rounded poem in its own right. And whereas the influence of Kathleen Raine's thought can be positively felt in Rock Face in Nicholson's concern with a fundamental image such as that of rock, in this poem the influence of her rather abstract style on Nicholson has the effect of turning him away from his more usual concern with poetry as a way of expressing in words the objective world which the eye can perceive.

His more characteristic attitude is expressed in a poem of 1952 entitled 'The Poet Rejects an Occasion for a Poem'.² This begins with a set of visual images - a frequent opening for a Nicholson poem. But when these images turn into a free

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1. This is especially apparent in the interrupted and incomplete syntax of the middle of stanza two.
 2. Times Literary Supplement, 5 Dec. 1952. This was not reprinted in The Pot Geranium (1954); one suspects that the reason for this was that the poem has a negative subject - that of not writing about something. If this surmise is correct, the poem's omission is very significant of Nicholson's attitude to poetry.

fantasia of the imagination Nicholson feels obliged to state where his real interest lies:

And I, lying on my bed thinking of love
 And littler things,
 Watch while every image brings
 Metaphors and meanings,
 Hints of a new significance,
 The music underneath the dance -
 Yet always scan askance
 These stereoscopic plane-on-plane explainings,
 Contended more with the flat real-ness of
 Clouds through the window.

It is in fact when he sticks closest to this 'flat real-ness' that Nicholson is most able to express its underlying significance.¹ What may be called the transcendental method of Kathleen Raine does not come naturally to him, however much he may share, in his constant use of rock-imagery, the view she once expressed thus:

The ever-recurring forms of nature mirror eternal reality; the never-recurring productions of human history reflect only fallen man, and are therefore not suitable to become a symbolic vocabulary for the kind of poetry I have attempted to write.²

A better poem than 'The Candle' is 'St. Luke's Summer',

1. In this connection, cf. a remark Nicholson once made in a review of Kathleen Raine's volume The Hollow Hill (1965) for the Church Times: "It is when she works hardest on the temporal appearance of things that, for me, her imagery most compellingly conveys more than a temporal significance".
2. Kathleen Raine, Introduction to Collected Poems, Hamish Hamilton, 1956, pp.xiv-xv.

where an adroit selection of images from the visible world enables Nicholson to establish a relationship between the declension of autumn and the hibernation of the poetic faculty. This cannot just be called a poem about poetry. Though the last lines state that

...while dead leaves clog the eyes
Never-predicted poetry is sown...

one feels that the conclusion emerges from the description of natural processes that has preceded it. One can enjoy the description for its own sake, without feeling that a parallel is being forced. The poet's consciousness of his calling is subsumed in the man's loving reaction to the world around him, and the equivalence of sound and sense in the fourth line of stanza two is particularly admirable:

Beside the trellis of the bowling green
The poppy shakes its pepper-box of seed;
Groundsel feathers flutter down;
Roses exhausted by the thrust of summer
Lose grip and fall; the wire is twined with weed.

It will be noticed that the last lines of 'St. Luke's Summer', quoted earlier, can be taken without strain on three different levels. Nicholson is talking about the poetic process, the way in which the subconscious assimilates experiences even though 'the fancy' seems 'run to seed and dry as stone'; at

the same time under the surface of 'brown October days' the natural world is also moving to spring; and the final image of 'sowing' has a religious overtone, suggesting that the birth of poetry and the rebirth of nature are both part of a larger pattern. The image, in fact, is broadly one of resurrection. Endings of this type are found in quite a number of poems in Rock Face - for example, in 'Autumn', 'Early March', 'To a Child before Birth', 'The Crocus', and even, though with a slightly different slant, in 'A Street in Cumberland' and in the poem 'Rock Face' itself. This prevalence is symptomatic of a striking difference between Rock Face and Five Rivers, a difference which leads one to take the word 'transitional' less in its negative implication of unsettledness of style and content and more in its positive suggestion of poems moving towards a new kind of expression. The difference has been neatly indicated by Howard Sergeant:

... Nicholson is now giving far less attention to the superficial aspects and more to the intrinsic values of Christianity... his material is better assimilated...As a result, his work not only shows a greater depth of thought and imaginative quality, but is more authentic in expressing the Christian interpretation of life through his own poetic experience.¹

1. Howard Sergeant, Review of Rock Face, Poetry Quarterly, date unknown, p.105.

The only poem in Rock Face which can be called religious in a narrow sense (the kind of poem that perhaps only a practising Christian could write because only he would be aware of the context of the ecclesiastical year in which it is placed) is a poem for Lady Day¹ entitled 'The Burning Rose', but this, unlike many of the religious poems in Five Rivers, operates entirely by means of imagery drawn from the natural world, and the precise Christian application has to be inferred. There are, however, two Biblical poems in the volume. The first, 'Tyros', based on Ezekiel xxvii, uses the same basic pattern as the earlier 'Babylon', that of ships departing from an island, trading among 'favouring oceans', and arriving finally at a city which has been destroyed. Apart from its more complex time-scheme, which is confusing enough to make the poem less successful than 'Babylon', 'Tyros' indeed seems a re-working of the earlier poem; it even ends in exactly the same way, with a direct quotation of Ezekiel xxvii, 32:

...What city is like Tyros,
Like the destroyed in the midst of the sea?

'Naaman', however, is a new development of the familiar genre.

1. It is so subtitled. (Rock Face, p.20).

It takes the story of Naaman's cure by Elisha,¹ but puts it into the form of a dramatic monologue spoken by Naaman before he steps into the waters of the Jordan - here described in terms of a Cumberland beck. In the downrightness of its language, and its implication of a second person present beyond the frame of the poem, it clearly anticipates Nicholson's fuller treatment of the theme in his play Birth by Drowning a decade later:²

...Are not the lowland streams
Wider and purer and cleaner? Would not the tap
Give a better lather than this rocky gutter? I was a fool
To come - let me be fully a fool.
Let the old man have his way, and I'll return
With a bitter shell of scorn to guard my pain.
It's slippery here. The water's in my boots.
Damn boots and water. Come, boy, give me a towel.

The interest in dramatic monologue and technical experiment is again evident in 'Caedmon',³ which, in that it is based on the history of the early Church in the North of England, can be called, at least in its origins, a religious poem. Lines like

The sun sets, and the night rises like a sea-mist,
And the fog is in the bones of the drowned

1. II Kings v, 11-14.
2. 'Naaman' first appeared in The Welsh Review, Vol.V, No.1, March 1946, p.29. Birth by Drowning (Faber, 1960) was begun in the mid-fifties.
3. It may be relevant to Nicholson's interest in Caedmon that an early poem by Kathleen Raine ends with a reference to 'the Northumbrian boy who could not write'. Vide Kathleen Raine, 'The Hands', Stone and Flower, PL, Nicholson and Watson, 1943, p.65.

have also something of the 'magical' atmosphere of the more Celtic poems in Five Rivers.¹ But Nicholson has used the historical setting of the Caedmon story in the seventh century as an excuse to write his poem in an approximation of Anglo-Saxon metre and thus indulge quite legitimately the taste for alliteration which is displayed throughout his poetry, sometimes with harmful effects. Here, however, it imparts vigour and a tang of authentic barbarity to the poem:

...Here fare far out
 Mariners and marauders, foragers and fishermen,
 Tearing their treasure from the teeth of the waves, from
 the gullet of the gaping shores -
 Over the heaped and heaving hills they return to the
 wistful harbours,
 The freeman's blood and the sea's salt frozen on the gold.²

Caedmon sets his own circumscribed life against this 'heroic' picture, and one begins to feel that the poem is a sort of apologia for Nicholson himself, aware of ill-health, limited horizons, the lack of a university education, yet aware of the value of his religious faith and his poet's craft:

But never have I ventured forth, neither on the Northern
 tides,
 Nor more than a shin's depth down the steep and staggering
 shore;

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1. 'Tyros' also has this quality. Its conclusion recalls legends of a lost Atlantis.
 2. One might compare this passage with the speeches of Vikar, the Viking pirate, in Prophecy to the Wind (1949) - though Vikar is also a Shavian deflation of saga-like heroics.

the Estuary' is able to communicate its view of man precisely because its rendering of the natural landscape in which he is placed is so convincing in its own right. Nicholson adapts the local fact of the crossing of the Kent, Leven and Duddon estuaries in earlier centuries into an allegory of Man's moral choices, but the estuary itself functions in the poem in three ways: it is real, and thus involves the reader almost physically in the careful steps which must be taken to cross it safely; it is the natural context in which man is tried and found wanting; but it is also symbolic of the moral choice itself, in that the firm sand of reason all too soon changes into the dangerous quicksand of uncertainty and mistake.

'Across the Estuary' had been anticipated by a very fine poem in Five Rivers entitled 'Askam Unvisited'.¹ Here, by first creating for the reader the reality of Askam, distant from Millom 'not twenty miles by road nor twenty minutes in the train', Nicholson is able to use his wish to visit the small decayed town across the Duddon estuary as a symbol of all the 'choices that lie/ Like a spreading maze' before man, whose life,

1. The title of this is clearly modelled on Wordsworth's 'Yarrow Unvisited', as is the title of its sequel 'Askam Visited' on 'Yarrow Visited'. Like Wordsworth, Nicholson uses the same poetic form for his two poems (though it is a different form from Wordsworth's). Nicholson included these two Wordsworth poems (but not the third, 'Yarrow Revisited') in his Wordsworth: An Introduction and Selection, Phoenix House, 1949.

even at its simplest, is a continual set of decisions:

...whether to go or stay,
Whether to speak or be silent, whether to raise an eye
To an eye, a hand to a hand, turn this or that way.

The poet decides at this time not to go, to leave this matter, like others, unsettled.

Without their trail of consequence pointing to a final trial. It might reasonably be said that 'Across the Estuary' is the 'final trial' pointed to here, and what it reveals is that man's choice, as a fallen creature, is not between good and evil, but only between 'wrong and less wrong'.

The poem, like the longer poems at the end of Five Rivers, is divided into four sections, but the fact that the metre of the first and last sections is the same (a sort of very free iambic pentameter which Nicholson was frequently to use in the poems of The Pot Geranium) underlines the basic sameness of their setting, and gives the poem a neat circularity of construction.¹ Section One appears at first to be pure description of the estuary at the turn of the tide:

1. This is enhanced by the omission, in Selected Poems (1966) of Section Two. The reason for its omission is probably that it seemed too obviously a 'key' to the poem, a sort of footnote worked into the text. But without it the poem has to rely more exclusively on its symbolism and is as a result a trifle harder to grasp.

Here, under the canvas of the fog,
 Is only sand, and the dead, purple turf,
 And gulleys in the mud where now the water
 Thrusts flabby fingers. The wild geese
 Feed beneath the mist, grey and still as sheep,
 And cormorants curl black question-marks
 Above the threshold of the sea.

But the image of fog, and the absence from view of either bank of the estuary, have a sinister quality which the 'question mark' metaphor is perhaps designed to emphasise, and with the phrase 'here is the track' we become clearly aware, because of the human being whose presence is implied, of the dangers of the scene. And soon it is obvious that it is his predicament which the foregoing description is designed to highlight. His steps miss the marked track, and the lines which show him trying to find it again have the same immediacy as was evident in the pre-war poem 'No Man's Land':

But now - where is the track? Where are the ruts? The broom
 Skulks back into the dark, and every footstep,
 Dug deep in mud, draws water through the heels.
 Each step goes wrong. Here, forward - deep, the sand
 Shifts under foot like scree. Backward - deeper.
 Stand still then - squids of sand
 Wrap suckers round my feet.

The section ends with the traveller stranded as the tide rises.

Now that the reader is involved (and the human fear of quicksand is sufficiently general to make it likely that the

reader will be sharply concerned, as if he himself were literally in the traveller's shoes), Nicholson in Section II begins to hint at the moral significance in the poem. He is, in fact, not talking about the old days when travellers crossed the sands on foot or by cart, but about something contemporary:

It is not the eyes of the past
That stare through the mist,
But the eyes that belong to now.

In Section III he returns to the traveller, but it is the traveller's thoughts he is now dealing with, and by the use of the first person he is able to explore the moral 'meaning' of the traveller's predicament, which is also that of himself and that of all men. The turning aside from the marked track is now a symbol of man's mistaken choices contingent on his fallen state. It is therefore futile to ask where and when the mistake was made, since the mistake is now part of the human condition. Though the causes of man's moral dilemma lie in the past, and though 'the past is forgiven', each man carries in himself a moral obligation in the present which because of Original Sin he is unable completely to fulfil:

It is not then but now
That tightens like mist about me:
Not how I came
But where I am,
Not what I was,
Nor how I grew
From that to this,
But merely
My being I.

I have stated more overtly than does the poem itself the Christian meaning of this third section. Nicholson himself, in bare lines which suggest the stripping off in time of trial of the protecting layers of human personality, wisely refrains from using obviously Christian images, so that one can if one wishes see the section simply as that instant recapitulation of one's life said to accompany drowning, or as man's sense of a guilt or inadequacy to which he cannot assign a specific cause. The last section returns to the physical scene, but this time all is covered by the tide and

There is no sign of traveller on the flat waters.¹

It is a world in which

The ineluctable choice of wrong and less wrong
Is forgotten or deferred.

This ambiguous phrase allows the reader to see the end of the poem as a picture of either a post-human world or of the non-human world before the Fall.

In 'Across the Estuary' Nicholson makes very effective use of his local background, both in a historical and a pictorial way, but the poem cannot be called primarily a regional one, and

1. Cf. Norman Nicholson, The Lakers (1955), p.85. Perhaps it was from some such story as this that Nicholson's poem derived.

its relevance is not even physically limited to the landscape which it describes. In fact, one of the biggest surprises in Rock Face, if one comes to it after reading Five Rivers (or even perusing its contents page), is the complete absence from the later volume of regional poems, or at least of the kind of regional poems found so frequently in the earlier volume: poems which attempt to capture the essence of a particular place, either by visual sketching, or the listing of significant historical details. Of a small group of occasional poems which seem to be by-products of Nicholson's work on critical or topographical books¹ 'Thomas Gray in Patterdale' suggests an explanation for this change in emphasis. The poem begins by describing a Lakeland landscape - Helvellyn seen from the southern end of Ullswater - as Gray would have seen it through his Claude-glass. In his chapter on Gray in The Lakers (1955) Nicholson speaks at greater length of the falsification which such a device² produced:

The primary effect of the glass was to
reduce the landscape to the size of a postcard,
so that the shape, balance and perspective

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1. The poems are 'Cowper' and 'The Tame Hare' (Nicholson's book on Cowper was published by John Lehmann in 1951) and 'Thomas Gray in Patterdale' (The Lakers, finally published by Robert Hale in 1955, was originally commissioned by John Lehmann in 1949).
 2. In The Lakers (p.53) Nicholson quotes William Mason's description of this as 'a plano-convex mirror, of about four inches in diameter, on a black foil, and bound up like a pocket-book'. It was sometimes 'tinted to give the classical golden glow of Claude'.

could be seen at a glance...it deflated and simplified the scene. Detail was lost; movement, except on the scale of a large storm, was scarcely perceptible; and the whole smell and taste and feel of a place were bled away till it became merely a design under glass, a dead world, indeed a world that had never lived.¹

Having seen the landscape thus neatly, Gray is shown as becoming aware that such a view is incomplete. He realises that he himself is 'part of a landscape that I cannot view'. The 'picturesque' attitude places man in too arrogant a relationship to the world, a relationship which implies self-deception. The breathlessness of the poem's last lines convey a wish to break the aloof pose, a sense that man belongs to the world of nature:

What if I listen? What if I learn?
 What if I break the glass and turn
 And face the objective lake and see
 The wide-eyed stranger skyline look at me?

Whether this volte-face was possible for Gray is uncertain.² Gray in this poem is certainly a surrogate for Nicholson himself. The idea that man is as much observed as

1. the Lakers (1955), pp.53-4.

2. For Nicholson's opinion, see The Lakers, p.56.

observer may well explain the impersonality of the poems I wish now to discuss, which, when they present man at all, present him in terms of natural objects or as involved in natural processes. A further quotation, germane to the repudiation of 'the picturesque' contained in 'Thomas Gray in Patterdale', helps also to explain why in these poems an attempt is made, not to capture the spirit of place by pictorial composition in words, but to look beneath the surface to its bare bones so starkly revealed in the last line of 'To the River Duddon':

'View' is a term I do not like. A view is something which takes place in the eye, in the brain. It is an accident, created merely by the position in which the beholder happens to be, merely by the geometrical relationship between the eye and a number of external objects. And I would rather tell you about the rocks which made up that view. For all of it could be explained in terms of the rocks, and of the forces which had worked on them.¹

It is clear that the total impression made by the poems which compose Nicholson's second volume differs from that created by the strong local tang of Five Rivers. Kathleen Raine, on seeing the collection before publication, suggested Rock Face as a suitable title for it. Nicholson accepted the

1. Norman Nicholson, 'Millom Delivered', The Listener, 24 Jan. 1952, p.139.

suggestion, but the poem he was prompted to write as a result is unlike the work of Kathleen Raine herself. Rock Face as a title suggests a monolithic expanse like a cliff, at any rate something elemental, but the poem 'Rock Face' rather punctures this expectation. The face referred to is a shape resembling a human face which Nicholson sees in a quarry:

....brow and nose and eyes
 Cleft in a stare of ten-year old surprise,
 With slate lids slid backward, grass and plantain
 Tufted in ear and nostril, and an ooze
 Like drip from marble mouth that spews
 Into the carved trough of a city fountain.

There is a little more to the poem, however, than this rather whimsical anthropomorphising of nature. The rock of the quarry is later carted away to be used as building material, and what interests Nicholson is the way in which, distortedly, the lineaments of the original rock can still be traced in the object which is made of it by man:

The rock face, temple, mouth and all,
 Peers bleakly at me from this dry-stone wall.

The idea was worked out more explicitly a few years later in 'Millom Old Quarry',¹ but 'Rock Face' already shows Nicholson's sense of the permanence of natural forms despite the uses to

1. The Pot Geranium (1954), pp.11-12.

which nature's raw-materials are put, and the strong link which exists for him between man and his environment. But the actual tone of the poem is one of understatement; the movement from rock face in quarry to rock face in wall has almost the effect of a conceit, and the quietness with which the poem's point is made is greatly akin to the reticent but witty poems of Andrew Young, whose work Nicholson first read in the January 1938 number of New Verse. A look at Andrew Young's poem 'The Haystack' shows a similarity not only of idea but of phrasing:

Too dense to have a door,
Window or fireplace or floor,
They saw this cottage up,
Huge bricks of grass, clover and buttercup
Carting to byre and stable,
Where cow and horse will eat wall, roof and gable.¹

Somewhat similar to 'Rock Face' in its idea is 'A Street in Cumberland'. This describes the way in which the past, in the form of a 200-year old farm - itself built of quarried rock - survives visibly into the present even though

...the rest of the street was shunted firm
Against it when the town was built on the mosses.

1. Collected Poems of Andrew Young, Jonathan Cape, 1950, p.24. Nicholson contributed a chapter to Andrew Young: Prospect of a Poet, ed. Leonard Clark, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957, pp.61-8. In it he quotes 'The Haystack' and says of it: 'This...poem... shows clearly one important aspect of Canon Young's vision. However fanciful his images may be, he does not lose sight of the plain fact behind them'.

Here again it is the continuity of rock, which survives the superficial changes brought about by man, that basically attracts Nicholson's imagination. The farm, which stands in a street in Millom just round the corner from the poet's own, yearns back even beyond its earlier days of isolation to the time when it was yet-unquarried rock:

Yet a dream
 Grips at the house when the roofs are asleep,
 True to the loins of the rock that bred it. When the slag
 Is puddled across the clouds, and curlews fly
 Above the chimneys, the walls thrust like a crag
 Through the dark tide of haematite in the night sky.

Technically the poem is something of an oddity. It starts in a quite neat iambic rhythm, but later on certain of the factual details refuse to accommodate themselves to this, and the resulting effect jars:

Come round to the back and you will find
 The old, uncovered walls - slate bosses
 Two foot by two, with cobble-ducks for gable end.

Similarly, although an abab quatrain rhyme-scheme is used throughout, the sentences continually run beyond the line-endings, as though they were bursting out of ill-fitting clothing. The total impression is of an attempt to use speech rhythms, but also of a lack of the confidence which would allow them to carve out their own metrical patterns.

Images of winter occur again and again throughout Rock Face, adding to the effect of bleakness already created by the elemental subject-matter of many of the poems. Both national and local reviewers compared Nicholson to the Finnish composer Sibelius,¹ and indeed the ending of 'Frost Flowers' testifies to the strong effect apparently exerted on his imagination by the cold climate and barer outlines of the North:

So in the winter frost fronds rise
 Across the pupils of my eyes,
 For the live skull's a flower pot
 That's nurtured more by cold than heat,²
 And the mind's saxifrages grow
 To stringent coaxing of the snow.
 Turn, then, the face to the cold north,
 To the green sky and the white earth...

The bleakest of all the poems in Rock Face is 'The Land Under the Ice', which describes the coming of the Ice Age to Cumberland and its shaping of the landscape into its present form.³ The poem is in three sections and displays a mythopoeic impulse

1. Cf. Whitehaven News, 1 April 1948. Giles Romilly, in the New Statesman, 24 April 1948, called Nicholson 'a Sibelian figure'. Paul Dehn (Time and Tide, 1 May 1948) commented that Nicholson was 'a Keats who has cried "O for a beaker full of the cold North!!" and drunk deeply'.
2. In a letter to George Every (4 March, probably 1951), Nicholson said: 'It's in winter that my imagination turns on the town, the streets and the people. In spring it starts to walk about, like me'.
3. Cf. Portrait of the Lakes (1963), pp.47-8. See also Cumberland and Westmorland (Robert Hale, 1949), pp.42-3.

similar to that which animates the long Biblical poems at the end of Five Rivers, but the myth seems to be concerned not with man but with the history of his physical environment. Kathleen Raine called the poem (which, along with 'Silecroft Shore', she strongly approved of) 'a kind of winter Georgic',¹ but this is a misleading description. The 'Statesman', who is the only 'human' figure in the poem, is not a realistic Cumbrian farmer but a sort of Methusaleh who survives the 'ten thousand years' of the Ice Age and in Section Three returns to 'a landscape unfamiliar, yet his own'. He seems to represent Man (as a creature dependent on Nature), but he is far more abstraction than human being. His final invocation has a rhetorical nobility rather than any personal warmth:

O in the white night of the bone I've heard
 The senile north gods howling long and high;
 The wind-god, shrieking like a migrant bird
 That drills the carbon blackness of the sky.²

In that it follows the sequence of the geological process which is its subject-matter the poem has a rudimentary narrative

1. Kathleen Raine, Review of Rock Face, New English Review, Jan. 1949.
2. The language of this, and of the poem as a whole, recalls Roy Campbell, particularly in his poem 'The Albatross', which uses the same stanza form. (Roy Campbell, Adamastor, Faber, 1932, pp. 49-53).

movement, but it does not seem to develop any idea and its use of rather static quatrains tends to turn it into a series of set pieces. One may approve the descriptive sharpness and metaphorical inventiveness of individual lines and stanzas, but the intrinsic remoteness of the subject prevents one from becoming imaginatively involved with the poem as a whole.

Nicholson seems unable to devise for his impersonal material a sufficiently contemporary form of expression. A stanza like the following is symptomatic of the poem's rather archaic style:

The Statesman from the dalehead herds the sheep,
Gimmer and lambs, to summer heaf;
And when the scraggy oats are ripe,
By walls of purple cobble piles the sheaf.

The technical dialect words for 'young ewe' and 'fell-pasture', and even the tart colloquialism of 'scraggy' are unable to overcome the Augustan last line and the rather stiff inversions.¹

The old-fashioned language and the rigid stanza form may perhaps be intended as an apt reflection of the distance in time of the Ice Age, but if this is so, the intention misfires. When he later deals with geological raw-material in 'The Seven Rocks'

1. The last four quatrains of the poem inevitably recall the end of Gray's Elegy in a Country Churchyard. Ironically, this reduces the human application they purport to convey.

Nicholson's free and varied mode of presentation persuades one of the human relevance of what is presented. In 'The Land Under the Ice' poetic diction¹ only underlines thematic remoteness.

An American reviewer of Five Rivers pointed out what was for him a limitation of Nicholson's poetry:

...the poetry of nature focussing as it must on gigantic forces and overwhelming spectacles, often tends to lose the human element.²

This is hardly a very appropriate comment to make on Nicholson's first volume, but it takes on aptness and penetration when applied to his second. 'The Land Under the Ice' illustrates precisely this danger, and the reason lies partly in the fact that its description is too external and, indeed, is not really description at all. Instead it is an attempt to render in poetic terms things which, though they can be read about, can be less easily apprehended by the imagination. The last poem in Rock Face, 'Silecroft Shore', is able at least in some

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1. 'The Megaliths' and 'Horoscope' run similarly to rhetoric. Significantly enough, they also employ the stanza of Gray's Elegy.
 2. James E. Schevill, Poetry (Chicago), Feb. 1946.

degree to enlist the reader's sympathy because it is a meditation, rather than a narrative. One is aware of a man thinking, and of the strong current of feeling which exists between him and the natural objects which he contemplates. Kathleen Raine has identified very sensitively the reaction produced by 'Silecroft Shore':

...one senses that Norman Nicholson often feels himself to be a living particle of the natural world, a kind of mysticism of the bones.¹

She goes on to describe the poem itself as 'a sort of apotheosis of man into nature, or nature into man'.

The poem is in five sections. The shore at Silecroft faces the Irish Sea, some four miles from Millom; the incident from which the poem takes its origin is presented in Section Two. The poet walks along the shingly shore and picks up a pebble, whose appearance and history he describes with minute particularity:

An indigo mud-stone, from Skiddaw or Black Combe,
 Snapped off the rocks and carried to the sea
 In the pockets of the ice, its sides planed flat
 To long unequal rhomboids; then
 Shaken daily in the dice-box of the surf,
 Hammered, filed and sandpapered, its roughnesses are rounded,
 And what was once a chip. a sliver of slate,

1. Review of Rock Face, New English Review, Jan. 1949.

Becomes a whole, self-axelled and self-bounded,
 Grained like a bird's egg and simple as a raindrop,
 A molecule of beauty.

It is easy, however, to see that the development of the pebble has a human relevance: the pebble is like an individual, born of a larger body (society or parent) and moulded by environment and experience until he too acknowledges 'no way/ Other of being than this'.

The reader is quietly prompted into accepting the pebble on the symbolic as well as the literal level by the first section of the poem, which in hypnotic two-stress lines rings the changes on the poem's two basic terms: stone and bone. The lines seem to feel their way forward through a series of non-logical equations to the idea of the interpenetration and interdependence of human and geological life on which the poem is based:

Stone is the earth's
 Cool skeleton,
 And bone the rock
 That flesh builds on.

Sections Three and Four follow on naturally from this premiss that man is connected to the earth on which he lives, and describe geological processes anthropomorphically through metaphor. Section Three deals with erosion, but it is impossible

to distinguish the mountain landscape from the stretched-out man whom the first stanza presents:

I lie along the axis of the world.
 My feet are the poles; the ice
 Chisels my shins; my arms are curled
 About the tropics where the mid-ribs splice
 The continents together. Naked - though
 Shaggy with larches at the fork -
 I seem, and feel the cold scurf snow
 On hair as black as heather in the dark.
 And hidden armpits of the mountains.

Throughout the section man and landscape either blend or interlace, and the process of erosion in nature, which leads to the building up of new strata, is symbolic of the breaking down and building up of human society throughout history, and of human life, death and resurrection. The last two stanzas, which describe fossilisation and stratification, transmit with memorable wedding of sound to meaning the sense of the slow progress of prehistoric time (which on the human level represents the rise and fall of generations and races):

Now brown about my brow settles the mud;
 The ordovician creatures crawl;
 Across the delta corals spread,
 Blooming like rhododendrons; fern and shell
 Are stamped in sand like heads on coins. Oh, now
 Heavy the years, the mud; the rain
 Fills, drop by drop, a neapless sea,
 And centuries fall slowly, grain by grain.

Section Four is about petrification, an aspect of the building up process in nature. With a musical sense of the need for variation, Nicholson presents this not in narrative but in lyric terms:

An old man sat in a waterfall
 And the water dripped through his hair;
 His voice was green as a sea-pie's call:
 'Come weeds, and turf my skull,
 For my hair is loosed by the bite of the beck, -
 Soon my head will be bare;
 I'll have no pride at all!

The verse itself has a water-like fluency, but the mythical 'fancy' is solidly founded on geological fact. 'The old stone man' sits in a stream 'by the limestone wall'; the limestone impregnates the water with calcium which appears to petrify objects left in it.

The last section returns to the introspective mood and the rocking rhythm of the first, but develops the idea of memory which has been implicit in the previous sections. The poet's interest in natural processes is more than an academic one. It is as if in observing rock and stone he has been harking back to an earlier existence of himself,¹ as if

1. Cf. Jacquetta Hawkes, A Land (Cresset Press 1953), Pelican Edn. 1959, p.39: 'As in the physical being the foetus recapitulates episodes in the history of life, so each individual consciousness, that most fleeting manifestation, carries beneath it, far out of reach of normal memory, episodes in the history of consciousness back to its remotest origins'.

he were now the furthest point of an evolutionary progression that began with rock, with which he still feels a sense of kinship. Man is in himself the sum of natural history, and his memories and dreams reach back into the remote geological past:

Memory flows
Cool round the bone,
Glazing the white
Like porcelain. Gaze
On the youthful bone,
That bending spine
And rotting teeth
Made in a cradle.
And the bone says:
'It is not I
That bears the daisy head
But the limestone generations of the dead'.

The end of the poem abandons logic, allegory, symbolism in favour of a yearning that is almost mystical. A 'poem about geology' has become, it seems, a religious nostalgia for a sort of lost Eden:

Oh! cobble on the shore
Can you not remember
What you were before
The valleys were brought low?
Can you not forget
What it is to never know
Rock turning slowly
Back into rock
Long to-days ago?

Strangely moving as these lines are, they reveal a

sensibility unlikely to be shared by a great number of readers. The underlying theme of much of Rock Face - that rock is the skeleton on which not only the earth but human life is built - may well strike a reader as the kind of truth which is so fundamental that the bare expression of it seems irrelevant to life as he lives it from day to day. It must be admitted that there is a certain monotony about Rock Face as a whole, whatever the merits of individual poems.¹ One may perhaps say that, in abandoning the surface regionalism and explicitly religious themes of Five Rivers, Nicholson has dug if anything too deeply into 'thirty thousand feet of solid Cumberland'.² Giles Romilly, though he made it crudely, made a true point when he said:

If Mr. Nicholson would...dry off some part
of the estuary mud and the river-bed slime,
and venture for once towards a built-up area,
I believe that there might be cause to be glad.³

In discovering, in his third volume The Pot Geranium, the poetic potential of his home town of Millom, Nicholson does exactly this.

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1. See review of Rock Face, Times Literary Supplement, 8 May 1948.
 2. 'To the River Duddon', Five Rivers, p.17.
 3. Giles Romilly, Review of Rock Face, New Statesman, 24 April 1948, p.340.

III

The Pot Geranium was published in 1954. With the exception of some half-dozen poems¹ this volume reprints all Nicholson had written in the six years since Rock Face. The resultant comparatively small total of forty-two poems is not necessarily to be explained by a diminution of poetic energy:² in 1950 Nicholson published a book on H.G. Wells,³ in 1951 a book on William Cowper,⁴ and during most of 1952 he was at work on his third play A Match for the Devil. It may well be, however, that there had occurred in him a sharpening of that part of the poet's critical faculty which decides not that a poem already written falls short of the necessary standard, but that a particular idea or verbal impulse is not worth following

1. The poems are 'Gravel' (Tribune, 22 July 1949), 'Lines Addressed to the Wise Men of Borrowdale' (Time and Tide, 12 Nov. 1949), 'Waking' (British Weekly, 18 Jan. 1951), 'The Footballer' (New Statesman, 27 Jan. 1951), 'When that Aprille' (Time and Tide, 28 April 1951), 'The Poet Rejects an Occasion for a Poem' (Times Literary Supplement, 5 Dec. 1952).
2. There would be some truth, however, in this explanation. Referring in a letter to George Every (9 Oct. 1949) to the composition of 'a sort of Nicholsonian Yardley Oak' [presumably the poem 'The Oak Tree'] and to his beginning 'The Pot Geranium', Nicholson said: 'I've felt a stirring of poetry now and again lately'.
3. Norman Nicholson, H.G. Wells, Arthur Barker, 1950.
4. Norman Nicholson, William Cowper, John Lehmann, 1951.

up. The short poem 'On My Thirty-Fifth Birthday' (1949) furnishes a rare insight into Nicholson's mind at this time and gives a number of clues about the type of poem he was interested in writing. Three quotations will illustrate how apt it is as a commentary on The Pot Geranium as a whole.

Nicholson first asserts that:

There is no time now for words
Unless the words have meaning; no time for poetry,
Unless the poem has a purpose.

'Meaning' and 'purpose' are of course not synonymous. It would be futile to enquire the 'purpose' of such poems as 'Weather Ear', 'Rain', or 'On Duddon Marsh'. Nicholson once remarked in connection with the last poem that poetry can be as well as mean:¹ a cup can be made for use, but it can also be put on the mantelpiece to be looked at. It may perhaps be said that there is such a thing as a poem's own organic 'purpose', but where Nicholson is writing, in The Pot Geranium, with this kind of purpose to the forefront he is careful to express himself with economy and a new plainⁿness of language. It does not seem that the words are simply generating themselves. But the truth of

1. Cf. Archibald MacLeish, 'Ars Poetica': 'A poem should not mean/ But be'. The difference of Nicholson's emphasis is the point here.

Nicholson's assertion about the other kind of 'purpose' is borne out by the way in which many of the poems in his third volume do seem concerned with making a point, either about life in general, or about the particular slant on life obtained by living in a small town. That his poetic 'cups', however beautifully fashioned, are mostly made to drink out of is clearly indicated by an article he wrote in 1962:

The didactic and the hortatory are among the strongest of the impulses which impel men into rhythm, and it is no accident that of all 'forms' of prose the sermon is about the closest to the poem. I think it is quite ridiculous to rank as inevitably inferior those poets who have 'a palpable design upon us'. A man who has no design upon me is a man, on the whole, who is not interested in me and I can hardly be blamed for not being interested in him.¹

In the second stanza of 'On My Thirty-Fifth Birthday' Nicholson adds that:

There is no time for love,
But love of the world in the one.

His treatment of Millom as a microcosm of society in general is closely linked with this idea. And the poem's conclusion,

1. Norman Nicholson, Answer to a Questionnaire on Modern Poetry, The London Magazine, Vol.1, No.11, Feb.1962.

that there is

No time for time
But only for eternity...

can be read as a further explanation of his emphasis, not on what differentiates one place from another, but on what they have in common. It obviously indicates, also, the religious substratum of Nicholson's thinking, which enables him to see all places, all temporal phenomena, in relation to the eternal truths which, for him, give them their meaning and their purpose. In the words of 'On Being a Provincial', the broadcast talk which grew naturally out of conclusions already reached by many of the poems in The Pot Geranium:

...in the geography of the timeless world,
the world that does not change, all...
places are equidistant from their true
capital, and even the metropolis is no more
than one of heaven's provincial towns.¹

In contrast to what had happened in the case of Rock Face, where the title was almost an afterthought, The Pot Geranium existed not only as a poem, but as an intended title, long before the volume which was named after it. The poem itself was begun on 8 October 1949, and on the following day Nicholson said in a letter to George Every that he had written

1. 'On Being a Provincial', The Listener, 12 Aug. 1954, p.249.

...the opening of a poem which I hope will finish up about a kite and a potted geranium, though at present it's all about roofs. THE POTTED GERANIUM might make a good title for my next volume.¹

Without at this stage looking closely at the poem itself one may point out how well such a title sums up the general difference of this third volume from the two preceding ones. Five Rivers and Rock Face both suggest more of an involvement with the world of nature than with the world of man. The Pot Geranium also suggests nature, but on a smaller scale and one more amenable, perhaps, to the human view. Though the 'pot' derives ultimately from the natural world, its context is firmly domestic, and the action of putting the geranium in the pot is one which can stand neatly for the bringing of nature into an easily-grasped relationship with man.

In the same year as the poem 'The Pot Geranium' was begun Nicholson wrote at some length about the kind of imagery he uses. For him images derive from 'the world around me', that is, from external objects rather than from 'subjective sources, from

1. Letter to George Every, 9 Oct. 1949. The later slight change of the title was felicitous, removing the unfortunate overtones of 'potted meat', 'potted shrimps', etc.

dreams, myths, and the subconscious'.¹ This statement would not be completely true of the poetry Nicholson wrote before 1948, but as an indication of his direction after Rock Face it is broadly accurate and goes a long way towards explaining the vein of 'commonsensicality' which characterises his work from the late nineteen-forties onward. Having established the firm footing his imagery has in the external world, he goes on to explain that, for him, 'an object has meaning in three ways'.² It means something simply as an object, shaped according to natural laws; it has a relationship with man; and it has an ultimate meaning which 'contains all the others', its meaning to God, who created it. In Nicholson's poetry of this period it can be said that all three 'meanings' - natural, human and religious - are found in varying degrees; but the one he chooses to emphasise, and the one which is the imaginative centre of most of the poems in The Pot Geranium, is the second, the human one;

Having got to know my object, it is then
necessary to transpose it into an image,

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1. Norman Nicholson, 'The Image in My Poetry', Orpheus, Vol. 2 (John Lehmann, 1949), p.122.
 2. Ibid.

for in a poem written by one human being
to be read by others, an object must have
a human meaning.¹

This 'human meaning' is perhaps most obviously present in the poem 'From Walney Island', which might almost be a demonstration of Nicholson's statements about imagery, in that it shows in its own development the transformation of a world which is at first merely seen into a world which, when once its human relevance has been appreciated, is felt and understood. The poem begins with a description of Barrow-in-Furness observed from Walney Island:

An oily fog
Smudges the mud-mark till the screes of slag
Seem floating on the water. Smoke and fog
Wash over crane and derrick, and chimney stacks
Ripple and ruck in the suck and swim of the air
Like fossil trunks of trees in a drowned forest.
Away in the docks the unlaunched hulls of ships
Seem sunk already, lying on the swash bed
With barnacles and algae.

The tendency of this passage to proliferate into metaphor may at first be explained as a visual distortion promoted by the 'smoke and fog', but the second section presents it as the effect of the uncontrolled workings of the 'fancy' which

1. Norman Nicholson, 'The Image in My Poetry', (1949), p.122.

....flashes about an abstract
Underwater world of shapes and shadows,
Where men are only movement, where fire and furnace
Are only highlights, lines and angles.

The word 'only' reveals the poet's judgement on the pictorial view which his fancy creates, and makes one realise that the scene has been 'set up' in order to be demolished by the latter half of the poem. As the tide ebbs, the poet notices

A dripping rib of concrete, half bridge, half causeway,
With neither curb nor handrail,
A foot above the water.

Just as the presence of a human figure gives scale to a photograph of mountains, so this object suddenly makes sense of the landscape in which it occurs. It becomes an image of man which unlocks the emotional response, the sense of relevance, which the poet's 'insulated eye' had been unable to find in the previously 'private landscape':

And like a stone
Thrown through a window pane, the path
Smashes the panorama, pricking the pattern, bringing back
A human meaning to the scene. Shadows
Are walls again, angles revert to roofs,
And roofs and walls relate themselves to men.
The hunger of a hundred thousand lives
Aches into brick and iron, the pain
Of generations in continual childbirth
Throbs through the squirming smoke, and love and need
Run molten into the cold moulds of time.

The combination of simple language and strong feeling makes a significant contrast with the poem's earlier elaboration of

sight- and sound-patterns: even the final metaphor derives its justification, not from 'rhetoric', but from the existence of Barrow Steelworks.

It was not, however, 'From Walney Island' which Nicholson had in mind when he was writing 'The Image in my Poetry', but his long poem 'The Seven Rocks'. Following his habit, established in Five Rivers and Rock Face, of printing his longest poems at the end of the volume, he reserves 'The Seven Rocks' as the finale of The Pot Geranium, and it is tempting to the critic to follow suit by presenting this poem as the culmination of Nicholson's poetic activity up to 1954. To do so would involve, however, a twofold tacit inaccuracy, by distorting its position in the sequence of Nicholson's work, and in so doing suggesting a preoccupation with inanimate subject matter at a date when, in fact, his emphasis on this had lessened. It is noteworthy that, though Selected Poems (1966) extends no further forward than The Pot Geranium of 1954, Nicholson does not place 'The Seven Rocks' at the end of it.

'The Seven Rocks' is actually the earliest of the poems collected in The Pot Geranium. It was first published in December 1948,¹ and would have appeared in Rock Face, had not

1. In Horizon (ed. Cyril Connolly), Vol. XVIII, No.108, Dec.1948.

Nicholson withdrawn it in order to make some revisions suggested to him by Cyril Connolly. Next to 'The Holy Mountain' 'The Seven Rocks' is Nicholson's longest poem, and in the sense that its subject is very unusual it may reasonably be considered his most ambitious one. As one reviewer said:

...poets of nature are common but poets of geology are rare indeed.¹

But were 'The Seven Rocks' only a geological descriptive piece its relevance would be very limited. Only a poet interested in scientific fact could have written it, but for Nicholson there is no essential division between science and poetry:

Science, in fact, instead of destroying my conception of the world enriches and clarifies it, and it is when I have turned to science to help me to understand the world around me that I have found much of the material of my poetry.²

'The Seven Rocks' functions on the literal level, but it is also an allegory for the Seven Cardinal Virtues: Faith, Hope, Charity, Fortitude, Prudence, Justice and Temperance. It is important to point out that, for Nicholson at least, there is nothing forced about this parallel - over many years of

1. Anonymous review of The Pot Geranium, TLS, 5 Nov.1954. p.702.
 2. 'The Image in My Poetry', p.122.

observation of the mountains of the Lake District he had come to think of rocks in something like human terms.¹ To take a simple example: in Section III ('Coniston Flag') Nicholson mentions 'Kirkby Roundheads', which are a kind of roofing slate found in the Furness area of North Lancashire. The overtone of Charity here is not difficult to perceive, and in fact Nicholson once said that

...there is to me an inevitable connection between human charity and the rocks that give shelter in the form of roofing slate.²

The interpenetration of the human (or religious) and the natural, which Nicholson tries to communicate in 'The Seven Rocks', may be seen worked out discursively in a paragraph from 'The Image in My Poetry'. Because of its valuable indication of the state of mind which lies behind the poem I shall quote it in full:

As I write I can look out of my window to Black Combe, the great, humped fell which dominates the southern coast of Cumberland. It is bare and grey, with a bleaching of snow. Below it, on the low volcanic hills at its foot, the bracken is turning brown and the larch woods are turning yellow as

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1. Vide Cumberland and Westmorland (1949), p.24: 'The Silurian rocks as a whole are not very assertive'. Section III of 'The Seven Rocks' presents Charity in the guise of Silurian rock, and one recalls the Pauline description of Charity which 'vaunteth not itself' and 'is not puffed up'.
 2. Letter to the writer, 8 March 1957.

if a stirred sediment¹ were rising from the roots. Except for the larches, it is precisely what a man might have seen standing on this spot at any time in the last 2,000 years or more. But between me and the fells are the roofs of the town, chimneys, skylights, aerials, backyard doors and back streets with, behind, the railway station and the Primitive Methodist Chapel which is now a bakery.² At first it may seem that these do not belong to the landscape, and can be explained only in human terms, but this is not so. Instead, I recognize in the slates of the roofs, the purple-grey rock of Kirkby Moor on the other side of the Duddon Estuary; in the slate of the walls, the Silurian rock of the low hills above the town; in the walls of the station goods yard, the sandstone which runs below the soil from here to St. Bees; and in the ticket-office and waiting-room, the red granite of Eskdale. None of these rocks has lost its essential nature because it is now used for a human purpose - they are all still clearly related to the landscape. So, also, is the wood of the telegraph poles, the iron of pipes and spouts, and if my knowledge and imagination were adequate, I should be able to see the entire scene - roads, tarmac, motor-cars, tin-cans, women's clothes - as related to and deriving from the material world about them. They are all part of one immense biological and geological process, of which man, too, is a part.³

Nicholson's problem in 'The Seven Rocks' was that of judging how far he should make explicit its allegorical design. Though the title itself has remained the same in the poem's three

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1. This image occurs in 'The Seven Rocks', Section I, l.9.
 2. Vide 'The Pot Geranium', ll.6-7.
 3. 'The Image in My Poetry', pp.122-3.

appearances, in 1948, 1954, and 1966 (in Selected Poems), the subheadings accompanying it have undergone considerable changes. When it was published in Horizon, the poem bore the simple sub-title 'Diversions on a Ground'; the pun here implied both the poem's subject, rock, and its division into seven sections, of varying, quasi-musical, form. The 'movements' were actually prompted by one of Bach's Suites for unaccompanied 'cello. It was thought by some of Nicholson's friends that this method of titling did not make the allegory sufficiently clear. When, therefore, the poem was published in The Pot Geranium the names of the virtues were printed underneath the title. This in its turn had the disadvantage that the poem was read with too conscious an eye on the allegorical interpretation, so that it was possible for one reviewer, irked by what seemed to him a lack of relationship between literal and allegorical levels, to say that

...the virtues symbolised by the 'Seven Rocks'...are curiously unrelated to their rockiness, their veins, clefts, slabs, silts, or whatever.¹

Nicholson gradually came to feel that he had 'made a mistake

1. Review of The Pot Geranium, The Listener, 11 Nov.1954.

in printing the names of the virtues at the head of the poem',¹ and when he reprinted 'The Seven Rocks' in Selected Poems (1966) he omitted the names of the virtues, the epigraph from Dante, and the sectional subheadings which indicated the geological period to which each rock belonged. This last emendation has the effect of making it impossible for anyone lacking a prior knowledge of geology to recognise the sequence of sections from the older rock-formation (Ordovician) to the newer (Permian). As this chronological forward movement parallels a cyclical progress in the poem from winter through the year to autumn, the omission of the geological guideline seems rather a pity. The epigraph from Dante's Purgatorio, in that it was quoted in Italian, may have seemed to Nicholson, on reflection, to be uncharacteristic, and alien from the Lakeland context, but it serves in The Pot Geranium the useful purpose of hinting at a natural parallel between the process of rock-layering and the movement of water which is one of the forces which determine that process:

We had to climb now through a rocky slit
Which ran from side to side in many a swerve
As runs the wave in onset and retreat.²

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1. Letter to the writer, 8 March 1957.
 2. Dante, Purgatorio, Canto X, ll.7-9. (Dorothy Sayers's translation).

Whether one agrees with the latest version of the title or not, it is clear that Nicholson's intention now is that the poem should first be read as a description of the various rocks, and that the 'human meaning' should emerge from the description without the prompting of any external indications other than the mention of each virtue in its respective section. Though Nicholson's present intention is understandable, it is impossible, however, to dismiss from one's mind the more openly allegorical purpose avowed by the presentation of the poem in The Pot Geranium; and it is in fact highly unlikely that Nicholson's purpose, even now, would be satisfied by a reading which ignored the allegorical level. Though it would be a mistake to see the rocks of the poem simply as symbols, with no life of their own, it would be equally mistaken, and arid, to see in the poem no more than a versified piece of geological surveying.

The poem not only presents the rocks 'in the order of their geological antiquity',¹ it moves gradually through the seasons of the year. This over-all design enables one to grasp the passing of time not just as a geological abstraction only to

1. Nicholson's note, The Pot Geranium, p.69.

be apprehended intellectually, but in terms that can be related more immediately to human experience. The double pattern also links together the cyclical processes of the contemporary visible world and the immensely longer, constantly-repeated processes of stratification, volcanic explosion and denudation which have through millennia built up this landscape into its present shape. The final section of the poem completes the picture of geological and seasonal time by relating it to the human dimension which gives the poem its real relevance. The autumn setting calls up thoughts of human life, decay and death, and makes a second reading of the poem a more meaningful experience than the first. One suspects that it is the poem's culmination in autumn and in obvious human connotations which has determined the pattern of the poem as a whole; it was inevitable that, in order to reach its conclusion, the poem should begin in winter.

Section I, then, starts with a snow-landscape, and this device produces both a feeling of gravity and a sense of suspense, which are alike underlined by the context of evening and the slow, iambic-based lines:

Night falls white as lime; the sky,
 Floury with cloud, reflects the rising glow
 Of the cumulus of earth. Only

The seaward side of crags, the under-eaves
 Of trees, west-looking windows, gates and gables
 Unfrilled by snow, hold darkness still;
 Elsewhere, the frost precipitates
 The once dissolved, dry dregs of day.

The last image not only suggests the idea that snow prolongs light, it also introduces the poem's geological theme. Frost is an agent of erosion, and precipitation is one of the processes by which sedimentary rocks are laid down.¹ The landscape with which Nicholson is here concerned is that of Black Combe, the mountain which rises behind Millom, and his equation of the Skiddaw Slate of which it is composed, and Faith, is presumably made because, to him, the oldest rock is a fit symbol for the fundamental Christian virtue:

Here the river of time in a delta spread
 The bulged and buckled mud that heaves us firm
 As faith above the misty minutes.²

The section ends on a note of expectancy: just as the colour

1. It must be admitted, however, that the image is not altogether successful: on the literal level it is rather obscure, and one feels that Nicholson is trying to cram too much meaning into it. For precipitation, vide Jacquetta Hawkes: A Land (Pelican Edition, 1959), p.20. This book (originally published by the Cresset Press, 1951) is very valuable as an indication of the geological excitement which must have prompted the writing of 'The Seven Rocks', and helps greatly towards an understanding of the poem's geological basis. Jacquetta Hawkes occasionally quotes from Nicholson's poetry, and in fact her purpose, 'to evoke...an entity, the land of Britain, in which past and present, nature, man and art appear all in one piece' (Pelican Edn., Preface), is closely akin to Nicholson's in many of his poems.
2. Cf. Cumberland and Westmorland (1949), p.14.

white sums up the whole spectrum of the rainbow, so winter is both the end of one year and the matrix out of which the variety of the next will emerge. The final image conveys a momentary stasis which holds within it the inevitability of future movement, of development and change:

The snow
 Holds the colour of the seasons
 Spinning into white, and time is frozen
 To a long, shining icicle of light.

With Section II, the icicle starts immediately to melt, not only in terms of the description itself, of time moving forward and the rocks appearing from beneath their covering of snow, but, with a musical sense of appropriateness, in the metre - short, nervous lines whose rhythm acts out what the words themselves say:

The skin of the snow
 Breaks and wriggles
 From the napes of the fells
 Like white snakes;
 And blue as gentians
 The smooth crags shoot
 From green sepals
 Of grass and moss.

The first stanza, in its linking of rock with vegetable indications of growth, is very effective, but the section as a whole is the weakest in the poem because the connection between

description and allegory is not convincingly rendered in terms of a two-level imagery. The second stanza, after the visual and rhythmical sharpness of the first, is flaccid and over-abstract. One feels that the landscape and the virtue Hope of which it is supposed to be a paradigm are essentially separate. A forcing of the allegorical parallel occurs also in Section VI. It is not certain in what sense the mining of coal can be taken as a doing of justice, nor is it clear whether the 'justice' is done to nature or to man. The liveliness of the ballad metre serves, however, to distract one from the essentially factitious connection between 'Maryport Coal' and the virtue it is supposed to symbolise.

The three central sections of the poem are set in the context of Spring. Section III is in octosyllabic couplets, and its subject is Coniston Flag, which is a stone used for paving-slabs and roofing-slates. What Nicholson actually describes is a quarry, its exposed strata seen first as a sort of museum of geological history:

Tipped with purple at the lip,
 Hellebore-green the strata dip
 And undulate like tracks of snails
 Written in silver on blue walls.
 Centuries of river mud
 Are combed in stone as grain in wood.¹

1. Cf. 'Egremont' (Five Rivers, p.9), Stanza Five: 'Centuries of feudal weight/ Have made men stoop towards their feet'. It is interesting to see how the recurrence of the octosyllabic couplet has brought with it a recurrence of pattern and phrasing.

But quarries, though they interest Nicholson greatly for their own sake,¹ and for the sense of the past which they transmit, are also a symbol of the connection between man and the landscape. Out of the rock come his houses, his roofs, and his walls, and in this sense Coniston Flag is an appropriate symbol for Charity:

With Kirkby Roundheads on the roof
 Purple as polyanthus, proof
 Against the flocking, mid-March weather,
 When the wind's wing and the gull's feather
 Fly screaming off the sea together.

Section IV ('Eskdale Granite') uses the same metre as the first and last sections of the poem, and thus appears to form, to use an architectural metaphor, the poem's central arch.² A sense of rising is conveyed by the syntax which, by a threefold repetition of the word 'above' in the first sentence, seems to be striving upwards:

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1. In Cumberland and Westmorland (1949), p.18, he says: 'How often as a lad I longed for a house with a quarry in the back garden'. See also 'Millom Old Quarry' (The Pot Geranium, pp. 11-12) and 'Rock Face'.
 2. The landscape described is that of Muncaster Fell, which rises beside the valley of the River Mite above Ravenglass, and this location of the section (halfway between Black Combe in Section I and St. Bees' Head in Section VII) adds credence to the view of it as the 'central arch' of the poem.

Above the salty mire where yellow flags
 Unwrap in the late upland-lambing spring;
 Above the collar of crags
 The granite pate breaks bare to the sky
 Through a tonsure of bracken and bilberry.

The comparison with fortitude is presumably made because of the bareness of the rock, and it gains force from the way in which the eye, slowly and with effort, is led by the syntax higher and higher until it is focused on a fell-top described in terms of a weatherbeaten human face. The expanded last line emphasises the feeling of strength and achievement, the enduring quality of rock and, within his more limited time-scale, of man:

The eyes are hollow pots, the ears
 Clustered with carbuncles, and in the evening
 The warts of stone glow red as pencil ore¹
 Polished to a jewel, and the bronze brow wears
 Green fortitude like verdigris beneath a sleet of years.

Section V is in two parts, each describing an aspect of Mountain Limestone. The first presents it in terms of the 'millions of sea-creatures' whose 'skeletal remains'² have made it up; it is as if Nicholson were compressing together two widely-separated geological eras:

Out of their shells the sea-beasts creep
 And eels un-reel from holes;

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1. A semi-precious form of the mineral haematite.
 2. Cumberland and Westmorland (1949), p.31.

With eyes of stone they stare and weep
 Green stalactites of tears;¹
 On sea-washed caves of years
 The temporal tide reclines and rolls...

From this he goes on to show the odd resemblance between limestone forms and shapes from the world of animate nature, thus suggesting a common pattern; inherent in the static rock is the movement of pre-historic seas and the continuing growth of vegetation:

Where flinty clints are scraped bone-bare
 A whale's ribs glint in the sun.²
 Coral has built bright islands there,
 And birch and juniper fin the fell,
 Dark as a trawling under-wave...

It is in limestone that iron-ore is found, and in the second part of Section V Nicholson moves to Hodbarrow Point on the Duddon estuary and brings out explicitly the connection between the rock and the virtue of Prudence which it symbolises for him. Prudence had been hinted at in the first part by the phrase 'miser mussels'; here it is seen as a hoarding by the 'sea-beast bone' of a kind of 'buried treasure', deposited throughout years of

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1. The image here is an unconscious repetition (and, in Nicholson's view, improvement) of the phrase 'The coursed rabbit weeps icicles of tears' which occurs in 'Michaelmas' (Five Rivers, p.50).
 2. This metaphor is easier to grasp if one looks at the photograph of limestone clints between pp.38-9 of Cumberland and Westmorland (1949). Page thirty-five of the same volume, which describes limestone formations at Grange-over-Sands on the Kent estuary, provides a helpful gloss on this section of 'The Seven Rocks' and prompts one to a sense of the common origin in the natural world of much of the poetry of Nicholson and much of the sculpture of Henry Moore.

geological time. The sense of time passing is vividly conveyed by the repetition of words and the heavy stresses:

Drop by drop the ore
 Drips, drips from the shore
 Through hollow ribs of rock
 Where skeleton fingers lock
 Over the paunch of gold
 Bladders and blebs of old
 Distilled, filtered gold,
 As a new penny bright
 And red as haematite.

It was from the iron-ore of Hodbarrow Mines that the Victorian prosperity of Millom sprang, and Nicholson presents man's digging of the rock, and his establishment of iron-mines, in imagery which suggests his debt to nature and his likeness to estuary birds which dig with their beaks in the sand for food:

Long-shank diviners stand
 Prodding and probing the land,
 And steel nebs bore
 Down to the hoard of ore;
 The coffers of the rock
 Spring open at the shock,
 And a new life is built upon
 The buried treasure of the bone.

The transition from 'buried treasure' to the coal-mining of Section VI ('Maryport Coal') is a very straightforward one. Appropriately, the section is set in summer to convey both the warmth of coal when it is used for fires and the semi-tropical climate which obtained during the Upper Carboniferous period

when the Coal Measures were formed. Because the Coal Measures of Cumberland lie underneath much of what was once Inglewood Forest, Nicholson has cast this section in the form of a Border Ballad,¹ which serves as an exuberant, lyrical interlude between the tight lines and stanzas of 'Mountain Limestone' and the grave iambs of the poem's conclusion. Like the ballads used as parts of the long poems in Five Rivers, this one renders its subject in the form of a myth. The presentation of coal as a buried sun which man digs up and turns again to fire seems a plausibly fanciful way of showing how man draws his resources from nature:

They dragged deep in the froned sea,
 Deep in the rocking land;
 They hooked the sun at the etb. of the green
 And cast it on the sand.
 And buds and bells and spikes of flame
 Flowered from the black bones' side;
 And the seed of the sun burned back to the sun
 On the greenwood tide.

Throughout the first six sections of the poem rock is

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1. Inglewood Forest was famous for outlaws, and it is on a ballad about three of these, Adam Bell, Clym of the Clough and William of Cloudesley, that the section is modelled. Part of this ballad is quoted in Cumberland and Westmorland (1949), p.57. The first two lines: 'Mery it was in the grene foreste/ Amonge the leves grene' are clearly the prototype of Section VI, Stanza Three.

described, and a human interpretation offered, without the explicit presence of the poet except as an eye which observes. In the seventh and last section, 'St. Bees Sandstone', Nicholson allows himself to come forward in the first person, as if to make quite clear the connection between the landscape and the man who sees it. As the poem began on a winter evening, so it concludes on an evening in autumn, and the sole use of 'I' in the second line makes us aware of the presence in the landscape of the human figure which gives it scale and meaning. The poet's physical presence adds more feeling to the description, and the section reads as an elegiac meditation, a summing-up. Autumn is an appropriate seasonal setting for the red of the sandstone, whose colour recalls falling leaves, but of course it is also autumn which gives the elegiac flavour. The gradual erosion of the sandstone is a natural symbol for the dying of the year and the death of the human individual:

Across red slabs of rock
 I gaze down at the architectural sea. Now
 The same sea re-fingers back to sand
 That which was made from sand.¹

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1. In Horizon (1948) these lines read: 'Across red slabs of rock/ I gaze down at the element that made them -/ The architectural sea. Now/ The same sea re-fingers back to sand/ That which it made from sand'. Geological accuracy is behind the changes. In a letter to George Every (c. April 1949) Nicholson said: '...Janet [Adam Smith] pointed out a mistake in The Seven Rocks - she said, quite rightly, that sandstone is not formed by the sea, but in sandy deserts. And I've had to act on her criticism!'

simultaneously in language which is dignified and moving without abandoning concreteness Section VII of 'The Seven Rocks' is one of Nicholson's finest pieces of writing. Indeed, the poem by and large is a remarkably successful example of his ability to see in regional material a universal significance. It is certainly Nicholson's most effective long poem; it demonstrates a new-found freedom and muscularity of language, a felicity of imagery, and an over-all sense of musical structure which enables one to follow the main theme through all its 'diversions' and varying angles of approach. But, partly because of its sheer size, partly because it is the earliest of the poems included in The Pot Geranium, and partly because it places man in what is still, for most people, a context of inanimate nature, it is a poem on its own, though its controlled handling of language and of rhythm place it firmly with the poems of The Pot Geranium rather than with those of Rock Face. It is in its last section's use of the first person, perhaps, that one finds the really significant link with the poems most characteristic of the third volume, poems no less universal in their application but more personal in their expression and intimately local in feeling.

Nicholson has never, in his poetry, been unaware of

Cumberland as a whole, but what distinguishes The Pot Geranium from his other volumes is the special importance attached by it to his home town of Millom. Millom is not referred to by name in either Five Rivers or Rock Face. This is not to say that it is entirely absent. The 'street in Cumberland' is in fact a Millom street, and it is recognisably Millom market-clock around which the swifts 'wire their screaming spirals' in 'For St. James, 1943'. But while in the two earlier volumes Millom is certainly present as a context, it cannot quite be called the subject of a poem, and Nicholson's personal involvement with his birthplace is indicated only once, when in 'Askam Visited'¹ he refers to it as 'the iron town which is my home'. Rock Face can be said to deal with the invisible substratum of Cumberland, while Five Rivers chooses to try to capture the spirit of other places in the county than Nicholson's home town. One might perhaps attempt to explain this by the analogy that it is easier to describe a person one has only recently met than it is to describe one's parents: it is certainly unlikely that Nicholson would have thought it appropriate to depict Millom in as sweeping a way as he did

1. Five Rivers, p.30.

Whitehaven. But as Nicholson's poetry developed, so, it seems, did an interest in what was closest to him; it may be simply that as his work became better known and more favourably commented on he grew more confident that his immediate environment would be of interest to people outside it. Certainly he was able in 1952 to say that

If a man wants to see things 'strange, rich and rare', he should cross not to the other side of the world, but to the other side of his own street. Familiarity breeds blindness rather than contempt, and nothing has more power to surprise us than the familiar looked at for the first time.¹

In dealing with Millom, however, Nicholson, instead of narrowing the relevance of his poems, paradoxically enlarges it. The general effect of his description in the poem 'Five Rivers' is to show the reader those characteristics which give Cumberland its particular quality and one's reaction to it is 'this is what Cumberland is like'. His presentation of Millom, its people, its houses, its speech, is even more local in its concern for detail, but one finally responds not only by saying 'this is Millom' but by feeling 'this is the world'. From

1. 'Millom Delivered', The Listener, 24 Jan. 1952.

description of one town Nicholson moves to conclusions which apply anywhere:

...this preoccupation with what is local, this sense of belonging to a small, separate, ingrown, almost hermetically sealed community, has always been the experience of the vast majority. So that it is precisely here, in our intense concern with what is close to us, that we most resemble the people of other countries and other times. It is precisely here, rather than in any vague internationalism of outlook, that we can most readily sympathise with the rest of the world.¹

It is in fact this awareness of his own town as a microcosm that enables Nicholson to describe it in so much detail: the universal conclusion justifies the 'intense concern with what is close'. A poem like 'Ravenglass Railway Station'² lists detail after local detail in the manner of 'Five Rivers', but these distinguishing marks of one particular place are drawn together at the end in a way that makes them more than just a catalogue. Beneath them all is the awareness of rootedness which any place could provoke:

But here
In the fog-sodden fields, under the rain-eaten
Dish-clout of the dykes, among the wrack and rubble

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1. 'On Being a Provincial', The Listener, 12 Aug. 1954, p.248.
 2. The Pot Geranium, pp.29-30.

Of the gull-rummaged estuary, or hidden behind
 The one-eyed wink of the ticket-seller's window - here
 Is the root of a race, clamped tight to the rock,
 Wringing from the earth its few last drops of green
 Long years after the one-tall trunk is down.

The realisation that much of his subject matter lay in his home town could perhaps only strike Nicholson when he was able not only to accept the fact of his own physical limitations due to ill-health, but also to get beyond acceptance to a feeling that, in essentials, he was not limited at all. One can infer from a letter to George Every of about 1951 that some such mental process had been going on:

...I've had the best spell of health in the last 8-10 months since 1942. Whether I can ever be as active as I was, say, in 1938-40, is doubtful, though. I have to accept the fact that to some extent I'm a different person - 10 years older for one thing...But still, I have hopes that I'm moving into a new phase. But I still get most completely knocked out by any form of excitement. An hour's lively conversation will leave me quite wacked-out all the next day. Yet I can walk a mile or a mile and a half and feel no effect after a good rest.

The limits are narrow enough, but there is a certain buoyancy in this extract, a willingness to accept things as they are and make the most of them. 'The Pot Geranium', begun in 1949 and finally published in 1953, is the poetic rendering of

Nicholson's imaginative transcendence of his limitations and of his coming to terms with the town in which he was to continue to live.

The freshness and vigour of the poem's opening are noteworthy. The scene is set in brisk lines which proclaim their emancipation from the dictates of a preconceived metre (Nicholson's aim in fact was to produce 'good speech' rather than 'verse') and are able confidently to accommodate both metaphorical expression and a colloquial straightforwardness:

Green slated gables clasp the stem of the hill
 In the lemony autumn sun; an acid wind
 Dissolves the leaf-stalks of back-garden trees,
 And chimneys with their fires unlit
 Seem yet to puff a yellow smoke of poplars.
 Freestone is brown as bark, and the model bakery
 That once was a Primitive Methodist Chapel
 Lifts its cornice against the sky.

Looking from his window, Nicholson sees riding high in the air a box kite. This is a descriptive detail which has the symbolic force of human aspiration, yet also represents a freedom of activity from which the poet, in the confinement of his bedroom, is debarred. The ensuing description seems to telescope the present and the period in the early nineteen-thirties when Nicholson spent fifteen months in bed in his New Forest sanatorium:

The ceiling
 Slopes over like a tent, and white walls
 Wrap themselves around me, leaving only
 A flap for the light to blow through. Thighs and spine
 Are clamped to the mattress and looping strings
 Twine round my chest and hold me. I feel the air
 Move on my face like spiders, see the light
 Slide across the plaster; but wind and sun
 Are mine no longer, nor have I kite to claim them,
 Or string to fish the clouds.

But what the poet does have is his pot-geranium, and the sight of this makes him realise that his limitations are only of the surface. Just as the apparently staid window-box plant

Contains the pattern, the prod and pulse of life
 Complete as the Nile or the Niger...

so he too, despite the restraints imposed on him by illness, is the sum of all life and therefore does not need 'to stretch for the straining kite'. By extension, the image of the pot geranium stands also for Millom, itself a microcosm of the larger world. The poem's conclusion is a trifle hyperbolic, yet the hyperbole represents a real truth: travel is not necessary when the imagination can grasp the universal implications of the ordinary:

My ways are circumscribed, confined as a limpet
 To one small radius of rock; yet
 I eat the equator, breathe the sky, and carry
 The great white sun in the dirt of my finger-nails.¹

1. The 'limpet', as an image of limitation, is found also in 'Millom Old Quarry', 'Whitehaven', and in William Cowper (1951), p.137.

'The Pot Geranium' is, though in no pejorative sense, a self-conscious poem. Nicholson is both justifying himself and justifying the value of his local experience. Having done this, he can go on in 'Millom Old Quarry'¹ to look more specifically at Millom itself and reproduce something of its townsfolk's way of talking. The first stanza is a deliberate attempt to let local speech find utterance in a poem. Though it is not mainly Nicholson who speaks, his composing of such a stanza in itself indicates his wish to proclaim himself a Millom man instead of, more generally, a Cumberland poet:

'They dug ten streets from that there hole', he said,
 'Hard on five hundred houses'. He nodded
 Down the set of the quarry and spat in the water
 Making a moorhen cock her head
 As if a fish had leaped. 'Half the new town
 'Came out of yonder - King Street, Queen Street, all
 'The houses round the green as far as the slagbank,
 'And Market Street, too, from the Crown allotments
 'Up to the Station Yard'. - 'But Market Street's
 'Brown freestone', I said. 'Nobbut the facings;
 'We called them the Khaki Houses in the Boer War,
 'But they're Cumberland slate at the back'.²

This matter-of-fact description prompts the poet to reflect

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1. The proofs of this poem for the third collection gave the title simply as 'Millom'.
 2. When reciting this poem (at poetry-readings and on the record The Poet Speaks, Argo Records RG 452) Nicholson gives this stanza a clear dialectal inflection.

on the connection between the rock from which the houses came and the human lives which those houses contained:

So much that woman's blood gave sense and shape to
Hacked from this dynamited combe.

Just as, in 'Fossils', he says 'the rock is alive in our bone', so in 'Millom Old Quarry' his imagination links the life of men with that of primitive organisms. What begins as a physical description of Millom ends as a universal picture of human growth and decay:

I saw the town's black generations
Packed in their caves of rock, as mussel or limpet
Washed by the tidal sky; then swept, shovelled
Back in the quarry again, a landslip of lintels
Blocking the gape of the tarn.

Whereas in 'Rock Face' and 'A Street in Cumberland' the angle of vision had revealed the permanence of natural forms when they were adapted to a human use, in 'Millom Old Quarry' it emphasises the permanence of the human element even when the houses return to the rock from which they were dug. In 'The Shape of Clouds' the relationship of man and nature is similarly presented with the stress on the human aspect, though in terms of direct statement rather than image or conceit:

Every breath we draw
Modifies the sky, adjusts
Temperature and pressure,

Shapes and directs the clouds,
 And the warm draught from a kitchen fire
 Stirs its spoon among the stars.

Despite the visual origin of so much of Nicholson's poetry and despite his very real interest in surface detail, in this regional group of poems in The Pot Geranium Nicholson is basically concerned with what is beneath the surface, for it is this which gives the surface its human relevance. The title poem suggests that, whatever this 'something' is, it is the same for all places - a fundamental likeness, the sense of which enables a poet like James Kirkup to say:

Remember, no men are foreign, and no countries strange.¹
 This urge to penetrate the surface of a place, not to reach the rock beneath, but to reach something which, from the viewpoint of the short individual life, is even deeper, is nowhere more apparent than in Nicholson's poem 'Old Main Street, Holborn Hill, Millom', published in 1952.² This begins with a picture of the street at night seen as a stage set, all its local individuality rubbed out by the darkness:

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1. James Kirkup, 'Choric Stanzas', A Spring Journey, Oxford University Press, 1954, p.81.
 2. In the Times Literary Supplement, 15 Feb. 1952.

A property staircase leans
 Against a door that's a palace or a pub
 As the plot demands, and hessian walls hang slack
 In the dim wash of the street-lamps.

What one expects after this 'scene-painting' is an assertion that by day the street appears in its true colours - a conclusion not unlike, for instance, that of 'From Walney Island'. Instead Nicholson says that neither by night nor day does one see a place as it really is:

This shadow-play, this make-believe,
 Has no intention to deceive;
 When memory or morning restores the daytime order
 To the Plough Inn, the garage, the Institute,
 The Spiritualist Room, the licensed grocer's - then
 What the full sun reveals is no
 More real, more solid than this.

A place's visual appearance is not the point. Both day and night offer only approximations of 'the truth beneath it all', which is as apprehensible to a blind man as to one with sight. For the truth, like the blind man's understanding which comes by touching, is a feeling: it is inside, not outside. Before a place means anything, there must be a human love which can understand it, and the last lines of the poem act out, in their diminishing lengths, the process by which appearance is pared down until the 'something underneath' is revealed:

Shape and appearance burst and branch and fade;
 Clock-time and season fluctuate and fall
 Like an organic river pouring from above,

And fingers touch the truth beneath it all:
 Beneath the shape, the wall, beneath the wall, the stone,
 Beneath the stone, the idea of a stone,
 Beneath the idea, the love.

The fundamental reality - something subjective rather than objective - which here is given the name of 'love' is defined less emotionally, in 'On Being a Provincial', as the idea of home. In the sense that every place is 'home' to someone, all places are alike:

Imagine two people at two different points on the surface of a huge globe, a globe as big as the moon, and think of all the enormous area over which they can wander and yet never find one another. Yet if each of them were to drive a shaft perpendicularly beneath his feet, then, no matter where the two started, they would meet at a common centre. That common centre, in the earthly life of all people and all nations, is home.¹

Nicholson's love for his home town is very clear from his poetry. Except briefly, to record talks for the BBC studios in Manchester, or to give poetry-readings, usually in other parts of the North of England, he rarely leaves it. In 1952 he described Millom as

...a place that seems to belong to me like
 an outer layer of clothing, so that anywhere
 else I feel not properly dressed.²

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1. 'On Being a Provincial', The Listener, 12 Aug.1954, p.249.
 2. Norman Nicholson, 'Millom Delivered', The Listener, 24 Jan.1952, p.138.

For him to see Millom as a microcosm of the world is not, perhaps, a great challenge to his imagination. One might even suspect his universal conclusions to be a convenient cover for an indulgence in a narrow local patriotism. When, therefore, he writes about another place (and for him to do this is exceptional, unless that place be one in the Lake District) one looks at the result with particular care to see whether his notion of the underlying likeness of all places can be reached from an initially alien starting-point. It is a reassuring indication of his consistency and sincerity that in the poem 'Near Widnes'¹ he can in fact do so. His first reaction is, however, an honest provincial puzzlement: 'All this is foreign as London'. To a Cumbrian, the landscape has a disorientating lack of contour, and his prejudice against it is amusingly expressed in the last phrase:

A row
 Of lombardy poplars, and beyond and over
 A landscape flat as a council survey: no
 Elevation, square fields painted on paper,
 Ruled roads and hedges; here and there
 A pithead or a crane or a bare tree

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1. First published in the Times Literary Supplement, 23 May, 1952. The poem was written in about March 1952, after Nicholson had visited Widnes to stay with the family of two girls he had met at Coniston. (Letters to George Every, 7 Oct. 1951, 13 March 1952, 27 March 1952).

Pencilled like a symbol. The poplars switch their branches,
 Flicking the cobwebs from the clouds, embarrassed still,
unreconciled
 To feeling Lancashire about their roots.

Yet just as the rock and the 'love' unite all places, so does
 the 'familiar wind' which blows the same way everywhere,

- wind that,
 Mingling marsh and mountain in the same mist,
 Pours out one single syphoning of brine
 From Windermere to Wigan.¹

The alliteration helps to swing the emphasis on to what
 places have in common; and what this is is here defined,
 lightly, in religious terms. The 'cosmopolitan air' admits
 no boundaries and

All language sounds alike
 To birds and God - all dialect, local names,
 Pet-nouns and proverbs.

Nicholson's initial sense of strangeness in the Lancashire
 landscape constitutes a kind of tacit admission that a visitor's
 reaction to Millom may permissibly be the same, but his final
 acceptance of Widnes also implies that the reader of his poems
 about Millom should be able in his turn to participate in their
 conclusions.

The reference to God in 'Near Widnes', like Nicholson's

1. Nicholson uses a similar alliterative phrase in 'On Being a
 Provincial': '...there is nothing much to choose between life
 in London or in Land's End, in Westminster or in Wigan'.

description, in 'On Being a Provincial', of London as 'one of heaven's provincial towns', is a reminder that Nicholson is a poet whose religious beliefs provide the foundation for his attitude to the world around him. His regional poems in The Pot Geranium are fairly obviously the poems of a religious man. No doubt because by this time he had found himself able to engage his whole personality in his local subject matter (an engagement made easier because he had developed a poetic language closer to that of everyday speech) there are very few poems in The Pot Geranium which express religious attitudes in isolation. 'For All Sorts and Conditions' is really the sole example of this kind of poem, and it is less a poem than a rather forced extempore prayer. 'For the Bicentenary of Isaac Watts' is only a 'religious poem' in the sense that its subject is a hymn-writer whom Nicholson greatly admires both as a fellow-Christian and as a skilful Christian poet; and the only specifically religious element in 'Footnote to Genesis II, 19, 20' is its Biblical title. Of the remaining three poems printed together in this very diverse group, 'Innocents' Day'¹ is a dramatic monologue spoken by Herod in justification

1. Originally entitled, in the proofs, '29/12/1'.

of the Massacre of the Innocents. It reads like an extract from an unwritten play, and its essentially prose rhythm and syntax, as well as its tone, recall the reasoned excuses for their killing of Thomas à Becket given by the four Knights at the end of Murder in the Cathedral.¹ Speaking of how his poems originate, Nicholson said in 1964 that:

Very frequently I am given a line, which is sometimes the first line, but quite frequently the last.²

'Innocents' Day' is a rare exception to this rule, as it began not with a 'given' line but with a rhythm, of lines each leaning over heavily at the end on to a strong stress on the first word of the next. The rhythm suggested a man using in self-justification an argument which basically he did not believe in, and the poem built on the bones of the rhythm a characterisation of Herod as a man with an uneasy conscience, trying to bluster things out. As with 'Naaman' the poem suggests someone listening, unseen by the reader, and is as much a product of Nicholson the dramatist as of Nicholson the poet:

If this child had
Lived, they'd have started the same blind trek, prospecting
In sand for their own footsteps. Yes,

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1. T.S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral (Faber, 1935), Third Edition, 1937, pp.77-84.
 2. Interview with Peter Orr, 3 April 1964. Printed in The Poet Speaks, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, pp.157-8.

something of the sort, dealing with the boyhood?¹

One sees clearly here Nicholson's wish to link his local context and his religious interests. Of this projected series, however, only two poems were written. An incident in the Apocalyptic Gospels where Christ fashioned clay birds and breathed life into them prompted the poem 'A Garden Enclosed',² but the local description in this seems to have little energy (except the rather factitious energy of stanza two), and the references to the 'bright knees' of the Holy Child who 'eena-meena-mumbles' words have an embarrassingly false naïveté. Far more successful is the earlier³ poem of the two, 'A Turn for the Better', which records 'the incident of the world standing still at the Nativity'.⁴ Nicholson indeed himself thinks it the best of his shorter religious poems. It stems from the phrase 'Now I Joseph was walking and I walked not'

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1. Letter to George Every, 12 Jan. 1951.
 2. The title is a quotation from the Song of Solomon, iv.12.
 3. 'A Garden Enclosed' was published in Time and Tide, 9 Dec.1951. 'A Turn for the Better' appeared in Poetry (London), Summer 1951, and was certainly written by early May of that year. It was included in the Contemporary Arts exhibition of Twentieth Century Poetry at the 1951 Festival of Britain.
 4. Letter to George Every, 9 May 1951.

in the Apocryphal Book of James or Protevangelium, but the Joseph of the poem is Nicholson himself, walking among the Millom allotments, and it is this localisation, with all its confidence in the meaningfulness to the loving eye of the most ordinary details, which gives the metaphysical vision of the latter part of the poem its strength and conviction. The poem's mysticism, its glimpse of the eternal, is firmly rooted in the particularities of the physical world:

The clouds were mauve as a crocus, peeling back petals,
 And a sparse pollen of snow came parping down¹
 On the bare ground and green-house groins and dun
 Tight-head crysanthemums crumpled by the frost.
 The cock in the hen-run blustered to its perch
 On the lid of the swill bucket, rattled its red
 At the fluttering flakes, levered its throat open -
 And not a croak creaked out.

All movement, of snow, of drifting dead leaf, of 'workmen on the electric cable track' is arrested, to emphasise the momentousness of Christmas morning. By a rapid telescoping of time - expressed characteristically in terms of geological process, here reversed - Nicholson returns to the world before the Year One, to 'that minute' when the temporal was intersected

1. 'Parping' is a specifically Millom expression, whose rather sardonic inflection it is almost impossible to define in standard English.

by the eternal:

The tree grew down
 Into its sapling self, the sapling into the seed.
 Cobbles of wall and slate of rafters
 Were cleft and stratified again as rock,
 And the rock un-weathered itself a cloud-height higher,
 And the sea flowed over it. A brand-new now
 Stretched on either hand to then and someday,
 Might have and perhaps.

In the last lines, the expectant fixity is broken; the image of 'shillings' returns us to the present, but the present is now transfigured in the light of the meaning given to it by Christ's birth. The 'shillings' are not just a simile for the snow, but an everyday symbol of the immense value of the Nativity. The temporal, once pierced by the eternal, is itself given an eternal dimension, and the simple, short phrase reserved for the end of the poem strikes with a poignancy and force gained from its contrast with the longer abstract line which immediately precedes it and the imaginative glimpse of centuries of human and natural life which are its context:

Then suddenly the cock
 Coughed up its crow, the robin skittered off,
 And the snow fell like a million pound of shillings.
 And out in the beginning always of the world
 I heard the cry of a child.

The Pot Geranium contains a new and at first sight unusual category of poems in Nicholson's work. This category, consisting

of six poems,¹ may most conveniently be called astronomical, though astronomy is less the subject of these poems than the impulse behind them. On reflection, it is not really strange that a poet so aware of the rock foundations of this world should have become interested in the other worlds in the distant heavens, nor that one so responsive to the immanence of divinity in the earthly should have extended his imagination to 'the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained'. Nicholson's own valuation of these poems is attested by his reprinting of five of them in Selected Poems (1966).²

'The Motion of the Earth' is most closely linked with the regional poems of the volume. It starts from the idea that the brightness of daylight inevitably changes to darkness as the earth moves, but uses this idea not as a symbol of the decay inherent in change, but of the way in which, unseen by us, the context in which we live is constantly altering; the implication is that if we could realise this imaginatively

1. They are 'The Motion of the Earth', 'Gathering Sticks on Sunday', 'The Unseen Centre', 'The Undiscovered Planet', 'The Expanding Universe' and 'The Outer Planet'. They are printed consecutively on pp.35-42 of The Pot Geranium.
2. The one omitted is 'The Outer Planet'. This was an occasional piece, written for the Patronal Festival of St. Matthew's Church, Northampton; though it has a number of phrases good in themselves, or significantly related to his other work (notably ll.15-18), Nicholson now thinks poorly of it.

of pointing out the dangers to man of living in an atomic age. Just as the man in the moon, according to folklore, was banished there for breaking the Sabbath, so, it is implied, may man's impious pursuit of atomic power lead him to the destruction of his own world. The other 'astronomical' poems are, even more pointedly, religious allegories. 'The Unseen Centre' compares the moon which

...never sees the world
Round which she circles backward...

with human beings who

...do not know
The unseen centre round which our bodies go.

The poem's imagery is in fact the perfunctory disguise for a sermon on man's ignorance of, or indifference to, God. 'The Expanding Universe' simply imagines the darkness of infinity turning itself inside out and becoming a blinding light. Again, it is not the astronomical facts from which it starts that are the real subject - the poem is a reworking of the idea of man's not being able to see God face to face without being blinded.

Nicholson's favourite among these poems, 'The Undiscovered Planet', expresses itself more subtly. There is a real attempt, if a brief one, to convey imaginatively the look of the planet:

...landscape of lead
 Whose purple voes and valleys are ¹
 Lit faintly by a sun
 No nearer than a measurable star.

The way in which the poem's theme recalls the actual discovery of the planet Pluto helps to remove the suspicion (merited by the two poems mentioned previously) that astronomy is merely being used as a text, and the conclusion is general enough to apply to whatever aspect of life one wishes:

...only
 The errantry of Saturn, the wry
 Retarding of Uranus, speak
 Of the pull beyond the pattern:
 The unknown is shown
 Only by a bend in the known.

One presumes it is a religious meaning which Nicholson has in mind: the apprehension of God through a mystical transformation, a 'bending', of everyday reality. But the conclusion suggests aptly the way in which many of Nicholson's more characteristic poems work, by taking the 'known' and giving it a slight twist (as in 'A Turn for the Better' and 'The Pot Geranium') so that a new dimension appears. There have been no more poems with astronomy as their basis since this group in The Pot Geranium²,

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1. The word 'voe' is sufficiently unusual to convey the remoteness of the planet, yet its use to describe small bays and creeks particularly in the Shetlands helps to relate the poem at least to a world the reader may know.
 2. There is one exception: a religious occasional poem entitled 'Christmas Carol for the First Man in the Moon' (House Beautiful, Dec. 1959) which simply uses 'astronomy' (or, more specifically, space-exploration) to give contemporaneity to the familiar subject of the boundlessness of Divine Love.

rather a continued interest in the writing of poems which base their conclusions firmly on realistically-rendered local experiences.

'A bend in the known' can also be achieved by taking a phrase and exploring it until it yields a deeper meaning.

Talking about his methods of composition Nicholson said in 1964:

...I think probably, more often than not, the poem has to discover itself as it is being written. I think the most profitable stimulus for poems, since I have not been writing them very frequently, has been the 'remark': mind you, that remark may have been one which I have remembered from twenty years ago; I usually manage to give it to somebody else who didn't say it, put it in a different situation and, in fact, use one phrase to collect a number of memories from various experiences and turn them into one.¹

I cannot think of any one single poem of Nicholson's to which this description would apply as a whole, but in the fallow period from 1954 to 1964 he did write two poems based on remarks, 'The Affirming Blasphemy' (1954), where the remark is stated in an epigraph and the poem is a gloss on it, and 'Old Man at a Cricket Match' (1956) where it is quoted and turned this way and that in the poem itself. In the burst of poetry

1. Interview with Peter Orr, printed in The Poet Speaks, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, p.158.

which started in 1965 there are three such poems, 'A Local Preacher's Goodbye', 'The Riddle', and 'Have You Been to London?', and many are based, if not precisely on remarks, then certainly on personal memories of childhood and youth which are both recreated and, in the process, transformed into something neither merely personal nor merely historical. The first examples of 'remark' poems are found in The Pot Geranium, and are worth examining because they inaugurate a type of poetry in which Nicholson is currently still very interested.

A comparison of two of them¹ reveals some of the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. 'Five Minutes' starts from the local phrase meaning 'to have a nap', and gives it a twist by ending on the death soon afterwards of the man who uses it. The result is a simple irony of situation, with no particular significance. The poem is no more than an anecdote:

'I'm having fine minutes', he said,
 Fitting the shelter of the cobble wall
 Over his shoulders like cape. His head
 Was wrapped in a cap as green
 As the lichened stone he sat on. The winter wind

1. The other one, 'Young Him', seems to suggest that to avoid using his name gives the boy of the title an advantage over his friends. But the conclusion, that as a result he is 'younger than us by fifty million years', seems forced and obscure.

Whined in the ashes like a saw,
 And thorn and briar shook their red
 Badges of hip and haw;
 The fields were white with smoke of blowing lime;
 Rusty iron brackets of sorrel stood
 In grass grey as the whiskers round an old dog's nose.
 'Just five minutes', he said;
 And the next day I heard that he was dead,
 Having five minutes to the end of time.

The point of the poem - a sort of pun - lies entirely in the first three and last three lines. The intervening nature description provides a context, and is not displeasingly colourful and whimsical, but it contributes nothing essential to the poem; the visual details do not modify the poem's basic juxtaposition of incidents. In a word, the imagery is decorative, not functional, and one may therefore call the poem a failure. 'Rising Five' has a similar pattern, but partly because the imagery is integrated with the theme it is successful.¹ What starts out as a simple childish statement is investigated with such thoroughness that it ends as a symbol of man's dangerous tendency to miss the present by thinking too much on the future:

'I'm rising five', he said,
 'Not four', and little coils of hair
 Un-clicked themselves upon his head.

1. Of those of his poems which he has read in public, Nicholson has found this the most popular. It is also, in its smooth blending of form and content, his own favourite.

His spectacles, brimful of eyes to stare
 At me and the meadow, reflected cones of light
 Above his toffee-buckled cheeks. He's been alive
 Fifty-six months or perhaps a week more;
not four,
 But rising five.¹

The imagery here is not only functional because the 'toffee-buckled cheeks' will recur in a modified form later on, but because the phrase 'brimful of eyes' suggests man's appetite for experience, and the 'un-clicking' of the boy's tightly-curved hair links him with the spring activity of nature which is described in the next stanza. Just as the child is growing, so the seasons recur and move on. The description is not just a context, but a parallel. The alliteration and internal rhyming underline the purposeful energy of nature and reinforce the sense of a continuous process

Around him in the field the cells of spring
 Bubbled and doubled; buds unbuttoned; shoot
 And stem shook out the creases from their frills,
 And every tree was swilled with green.
 It was the season after blossoming,
 Before the forming of the fruit;
not May,
 But rising June.

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1. The boy in the poem was the son of Michael Roberts, and the incident occurred in 1942, when Nicholson visited Roberts's wife, Janet Adam Smith, and her children, who were staying at Penrith in Westmorland. Out of that visit came also the poem 'For Hokey and Henrietta' (Five Rivers, p.34).

as its subject the justification to the reader of the value of provincial experience, its matter-of-fact imagery and the colloquial phrase which it examines clearly derive from that experience, and the process by which both are developed into a conclusion which has general application bears out Nicholson's description of the provincial writer as one whose function is

...to remind us of that which is timeless;
to remind us, in a changing world, of that
which does not change or changes only very
slowly.¹

In my selection of poems for detailed comment from The Pot Geranium I have tended to emphasise those which use local material with a more or less conscious intention to draw out of it a universal meaning. It seems to me that the years during which many of the poems of the third volume were written were for Nicholson a time when he needed to reassure himself that the subject matter immediately available in a small town could be made significant for a larger public.² This need has, I

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1. 'On Being a Provincial', The Listener, 12 Aug. 1954, p.249.
 2. Behind the provincial writer's need to feel that his experience is of literary value lies the equally strong need of the man in poor health to feel he is not cut off from his fellows. Both needs are involved in the conclusion of 'The Pot Geranium'; the second is particularly suggested by this statement from 'Near Widnes': 'The air/ Carries chlorine or fungus or the smell of heather,/ Visits the diseased lung or the whole,/ Takes tone in throats, vibrates on tongue and larynx/ With the same words everyways'. Can one perhaps discern in these lines a note of relief?

think, been convincingly fulfilled, perhaps because he has brought to his task a mature poetic technique. This involves an ability to use rhymed verse-forms only when they are appropriate, a controlled spareness in his employment of alliteration,¹ vigorous handling of speech rhythms, and a greater economy of imagery, so that one is struck as much by metaphorical or symbolic aptness as by freshness of visual observation. The Pot Geranium is thus a technical climax in Nicholson's work. Many of the poems in the volume, however, though their technical accomplishment is no less, do not make any overt claim on universality but are simply content to deal with the material which Nicholson finds about him. One thinks here of 'Rain', 'Winter by the Ironworks', and 'On Duddon Marsh'. Most of Nicholson's most recent poems, springing from provincial or personal experience and often returning to his childhood and

1. The conscious pruning of this is evident from the mss. of some of the poems in the volume. L.11 of 'Winter at the Ironworks' originally read 'Build slagmen, grubble and grope'; l.11 of 'The Boathouse, Bank Ground, Coniston' read 'And the planks cluck and clank on the swell'; l. 14 of 'Scarf Gap, Buttermere' read 'These, in the shock and shuffle of the world'; l.7 of 'The Oak Tree' read 'A chafing and charm...'. In all these cases, the printed text is a great improvement. It is true that 'The Orphan' has far too much mechanical alliteration, but Nicholson's intention was to drop this poem from the volume; it was the good opinion of T.S. Eliot and Anne Ridler which kept it in.

youth for their inspiration, have a similar lack of self-consciousness. It seems that, thematically, The Pot Geranium represents a kind of watershed in Nicholson's work, as if, having originally been content with his region (in Five Rivers and, in part, in Rock Face) he needed to demonstrate explicitly and perhaps self-defensively his awareness of the outside world of which his region was a part. It may well be that his present confidence in dealing with material drawn now not just from his own area but also from his own past life would not have been achieved without an earlier, deliberate evaluation of the wider relevance of such material. Certainly the existence of 'The Pot Geranium' suggests that the nineteen-forties had been to some extent a period of poetic self-examination.

As Nicholson's newest poetry is so very recent, however, I shall defer consideration of it until Chapter Six. My intention in the next chapter is to go backwards in time and examine the plays which have run parallel with his poetry throughout his career. As I have already pointed out, a number of his poems, like 'The Raven' and 'Naaman', are connected with actual plays, and others, like 'Innocents' Day', suggest unwritten ones. But many other poems have overtones of the dramatic in

a wider sense. The use of the word 'we' in the last stanza of 'Rising Five', for instance, constitutes an appeal for the reader's emotional participation, and Nicholson's description of the provincial writer, in its implication that he himself is never unaware of a basic imagery shared by himself and those among whom he lives, suggests the same wish to reach an audience as is manifested by the existence of his plays:

The material which he uses, the basic imagery and background of his work, is such that the people around him would recognise, such that in their own way they would find exciting and significant and relevant to their lives. The subjects he describes, the scenes, the symbols which appear in his work, have all gone in and out of the minds of his fellows like air in and out of their lungs, taking a new meaning from their thoughts, taking a new vitality from their energies.¹

1. 'On Being a Provincial', The Listener, 12 Aug. 1954, p.248.

CHAPTER FIVE

Norman Nicholson published his first play, The Old Man of the Mountains, in 1946. His most recent has been Birth by Drowning (1960). At almost equal intervals between them appeared Prophecy to the Wind (1950) and A Match for the Devil (1955). All four plays exemplify Nicholson's twin concerns with religion and his native region; each is either derived from Old Testament characters and incidents, or set recognisably in Cumberland, or both. All have been performed, with varying degrees of success, on a number of occasions and in a number of places, including the United States, and The Old Man of the Mountains has been translated into Welsh,¹ Danish² and Dutch.³

Writing about poetic drama in the American magazine Theatre Arts, Nicholson indicated one of his reasons for turning to the writing of plays:

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1. Hen Wr y Myndd, translated by Cynan, Llyfrau'r Dryw, Llandebie, n.d.
 2. Performed in 1954 as Den Gamle Mand fra Bjergene.
 3. De Profeet uit de Bergen, trans. Ted Logeman, Boekencentrum N.V., 's-Gravenhage 1961.

Only through the stage...can [the poet] be sure that any but a very small public will hear his poetry...If the poet can speak through the stage...he may find that he has a larger audience, and, what is more important, a less specialized audience, less restricted to one class or society.¹

What Nicholson meant by a 'larger audience' is made clear by another article, published in England a little later:

If the modern poetic drama addresses itself to that public which reads poetry, it will become weak and etiolated and will never develop into the drama which the theatre so badly needs.²

What was needed, in fact, was a poetic drama which would appeal not merely to the pre-conditioned 'poetry lover', but to the 'ordinary playgoer'.³

Nicholson did not mean by 'larger audience' the audience of the metropolitan, commercial theatre. It was purely accidental that The Old Man of the Mountains was first performed even in so small a London theatre as the Mercury,

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1. Norman Nicholson, 'The Abandoned Muse', Theatre Arts, New York, Aug.-Sept. 1948, p.70.
 2. Norman Nicholson, 'The Poet Needs an Audience', Orpheus I, Ed. John Lehmann, c. 1949.
 3. See Kenneth Muir, 'Verse and Prose', Contemporary Theatre, (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 4), Edward Arnold 1962, p.105.

and that A Match for the Devil was presented during the 1953 Edinburgh Festival. The audience which he had in mind, usually, when writing his plays was that to be found in 'small towns and villages...ordinary lower-middle-class people in Church Halls and Methodist Sunday Schools':¹ an audience less sophisticated, more willing, perhaps, to accept plays with an undisguised religious subject. To say this may seem to be to contradict Nicholson's desire, quoted earlier, for an audience 'less restricted to one class or society', but for Nicholson there is no contradiction. In 1960 he was ready to assert that:

...though a church audience may seem to be a specialized audience, it is very likely to include men and women of wider range in class, education and intellectual awareness than would be found in the audience at a commercial theatre.²

There are at least two reasons why Nicholson should have thought instinctively of this kind of local audience. The first lies in the limited awareness of a man living in a small industrial town, who had little experience of the broad spectrum

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1. Letter to the writer, 11 Feb. 1965.
 2. Norman Nicholson, 'Modern Verse Drama and the Folk-Tradition', Critical Quarterly, Summer 1960.

of class-behaviour to be observed in a large city. What he did not know, he could hardly write about; as he once said in a letter:

I couldn't possibly approach the domestic drama, or the high-life comedy of [The] Cocktail Party.¹

These limitations, however, were balanced by something more positive. Nicholson's first experiences of the theatre in Millom had given him a sense of the rapport between actors and audience possible when those on the stage are personally known to those in the body of the hall, where, in effect, the audience collaborates in, and partly creates, the enactment on the stage. In Provincial Pleasures Nicholson describes how 'between the ages of six and sixteen I missed none of the annual productions' of the Millom Amateur Operatic Society:

These annual events...took on a significance far beyond their artistic merit. In spite, often, of fluffed lines, delayed entries, shoddy scenery, behind-stage jealousies, there was created an imaginative whole, a transfiguration of the crudest common denominator of desires. Shop-girls and typists, all of them known to everyone by their Christian names, flicking their flounces, flashing their bare legs, gathered

1. Letter to George Every, 4 March, year not given but probably 1951.

about themselves something of the mystery of Botticelli's graces. The show had become a ritual.¹

In 1960 Nicholson hinted unconsciously at the influence such performances had had on his own plays. Mentioning the libretto of Peter Grimes written by a fellow-author from Millom, Montague Slater, he recommends the reader to 'note particularly the use of the chorus at the beginning of the first act and at the end of the last' as this use, together with other aspects of its construction, shows the libretto's indebtedness to 'the annual performances of the local amateur operatic society which were the only form of dramatic entertainment that Slater could see in his own town'.² The same connection might be said to exist between the beginnings and endings of The Old Man of the Mountains and Birth by Drowning and those Millom operetta presentations.

The idea of 'ritual' leads one to the second reason why Nicholson thought in terms of a local audience. For him the ritual element provided a link between the Amateur Operatic Movement and the 'old Folk plays',³ the Miracles and Moralities,

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1. Provincial Pleasures (1959), pp.65-6.
 2. 'Modern Verse Drama and the Folk-Tradition' (1960).
 3. Ibid.

of the Middle Ages. Such plays, he wrote in 1960, were

...the supreme example in English of drama which is played not so much before the audience as for it, on its behalf, in its stead.¹

Though the Miracles and Moralities had disappeared at the time of the Reformation,

...the psychological or social need which gave rise to these ritual plays still remains, especially where people are joined together by a local patriotism or a shared purpose or belief.²

It was on this basis of 'shared purpose or belief', which was likelier to be felt by small groups of people than by the heterogeneous audiences of the London commercial theatre, that the revival of verse drama in the nineteen-thirties was built. The 'shared belief' could be political: the Group Theatre, founded in 1935 and directed by Rupert Doone, presented such plays as Spender's Trial of a Judge (1938) and Auden and Isherwood's The Dog Beneath the Skin (1935) and The Ascent of F6 (1936) 'for an audience of leftist radicals and (it was

1. 'Modern Verse Drama and the Folk-Tradition' (1960).

2. Ibid.

hoped) of common people who might be attracted by their political propaganda'.¹ To a greater extent, the 'shared belief' was the Christian faith, and it is now necessary to say something about the revival of specifically Christian verse-drama, to which (though to say this is in no way to impugn their individuality) Nicholson's plays belong and without which it is unlikely that they would have come into being.

It would be otiose here to survey the whole of the subject. This has, in any case, been done amply elsewhere.² Certain ideas, patterns, and names, however, need to be established, without knowledge of which a detailed study of Nicholson's plays would be too allusive. For my purpose the first significant date is 1928. In this year John Masefield's play The Coming of Christ was successfully performed at Canterbury Cathedral. The play had been commissioned by G.K.A. Bell, then Dean of Canterbury, and its success led to

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1. Joseph Warren Beach, The Making of the Auden Canon, University of Minnesota Press, 1957, p.223.
 2. See especially Gerald Weales, Religion in Modern English Drama, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961, and William V. Spanos, The Christian Tradition in Modern British Verse Drama, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1967.

two far-reaching decisions. The first was the inauguration, in 1929, of the Canterbury Festival. This was to provide the incentive for the writing and performance of a number of religious plays in verse: the most important, T.S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral, in 1935, followed by Charles Williams's Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury in 1936, and Dorothy Sayers's The Zeal of Thy House in 1937.¹ Murder in the Cathedral has remained the acknowledged masterpiece of twentieth-century religious drama, and the power of Eliot's poetic language together with the prestige of his literary reputation perhaps contributed more than any other factor to establish the right of religious plays to be taken seriously, so that in 1944 one writer could say that

...the religious drama is fuller of life at this moment than ever before. It has won the respect of the theatre as well as of the Church. There is still plenty of prejudice to overcome, and there are many managers who would not consider a religious play for their theatres. But there is plenty of good-will among many leading members of the profession and the public. Any religious play of the first rank could now emulate the success of Murder in the Cathedral.²

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1. For a complete list of Canterbury Festival productions, see Spanos, op.cit., pp. 339-42.
 2. E. Martin Browne, 'Drama as the Expression of Religion', Christian News-Letter No.208, May 17, 1944, Supplement, p.12.

The other decision, also taken in 1929, was to found the Religious Drama Society, under the presidency of Bell, who by this time had become Bishop of Chichester. The object of the Society, embodied in a statement printed in each issue of its journal, Christian Drama, was

... To foster the art of drama as a means of religious expression and to assist the production of plays which explore and interpret the Christian view of life.

Such an aim had in mind the production of plays not in the commercial theatre but in churches, parish halls, and schools. To implement it, in 1930 Bishop Bell appointed - the first such appointment made in England - a Director of Religious Drama for his diocese. He chose for the post E. Martin Browne, an actor who had made his début at the Regent Theatre in 1927.

It would not be an exaggeration to call Bishop Bell the originator of modern Christian drama in England. It was he, at any rate, who provided the opportunity for it. That the opportunity was realised was due to those who wrote the actual plays. But the invaluable catalyst in this process was E. Martin Browne, whose name continually recurs in any study of modern Christian drama. His importance as the

adviser, the stimulator, and, in two senses, the producer, of Christian dramatists is attested by Eliot's acknowledgement, in the printed version of Murder in the Cathedral, of his help with the play, and by the dedication to him, by Norman Nicholson and Anne Ridler, of their plays The Old Man of the Mountains and The Shadow Factory. In addition, Eliot's first religious 'play', the pageant The Rock (1934), was written in collaboration with him. His function as Religious Drama Director for Chichester was to give advice about play-production in parishes, and in order to raise the standard of this he also ran the Chichester Diocesan Players, a semi-professional group. Like Canterbury, Chichester had a Festival, the play for this being in 1937 Christopher Fry's The Boy with a Cart. Fry's use in this play of a chorus made up of 'The People of South England' was obviously suggested by Eliot's 'Chorus of Women of Canterbury' in Murder in the Cathedral.

In 1938 Browne became honorary director of the Religious Drama Society, and in the following year he established the Pilgrim Players. The Pilgrim Players were composed of two professional groups: one, with Browne as its Artistic Director, was based on Canterbury; the other, the Oxford Pilgrims, was

directed by Ruth Spalding. The leading playwright for the latter group was Charles Williams, who wrote for it in 1939 The House by the Stable and The Death of Good Fortune, and in 1941 Grab and Grace.¹ At first the Pilgrim Players acted in Kent, but later gave various tours, including one in 1942 to Scotland, during which they performed in schools, churches, village halls, prisons, and air-raid shelters during the period of the blitz. It is unlikely that the audiences they played to were very different from those which had enjoyed the productions of the Millom Amateur Operatic Society in Nicholson's youth. The fact that the actors themselves were paid no more than army privates² suggests - their acting skill apart - more an atmosphere of dedicated amateurs than one of professional drama as the term is usually understood. It was for a tour of such audiences by the Pilgrim Players that Nicholson's first play was originally commissioned by E. Martin Browne during the latter years of the war,³ and his fourth play

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1. The last-named play was not actually produced at that time. See Anne Ridler, Introduction to Seed of Adam and Other Plays by Charles Williams, O.U.P., 1948, p.x.
 2. See Gerald Weales, op.cit., Ch. VI, pp.107-121.
 3. Norman Nicholson, letter to the writer, 11 Feb. 1965.

Birth by Drowning was commissioned some twelve years later by Pamela Keily, who was a member of the Pilgrim Players until she left it in 1942 to become Religious Drama Advisor to the Council of Christian Communities in Sheffield - an appointment which can be said to stem from Bishop Bell's decision to appoint E. Martin Browne to Chichester in 1930.

Three things emerge from this brief survey of two decades of Christian verse-drama. The first is the sense of the Christian drama's being a 'small world'. By this phrase I do not imply inbredness or lack of importance, but the way in which a number of writers of diverse stature and style were brought together by a common belief in the value of Christian subject-matter and the efficacy of poetry as a dramatic medium. The interrelationship of places and events, and the personal connections of both poet and poet and of poet and actor-director suggest less a simple forward 'development' than a spreading-out in many directions, as in a spider's web, from a central point, the centre being taken as Bell's original decision to establish a Festival at Canterbury. Behind the decision there was doubtless a feeling, experienced by Bell

and others, that the time was ripe for a return, after 'nearly three hundred years',¹ to a Christian poetic drama. Given Nicholson's religious beliefs, given the vivid language of his poetry, and given his admiration for and sympathy with T.S. Eliot, it is not difficult to see how the man who had collaborated with Eliot on The Rock would have approached the young Cumbrian poet for a play.

The second point that emerges is the kind of audience for whom the plays I have mentioned were written - Festival audiences or audiences in church halls. Such audiences would consist either of committed Christians or at least of people prepared to extend sympathy to the premisses of Christian belief: audiences, that is, akin in these respects to those of the Middle Ages, 'for' whom, rather than just 'before' whom, plays were performed. E. Martin Browne, whose advisory work in the diocese of Chichester had brought him into contact with much amateur Christian drama which was no more than 'pious platitudes delivered in pious attitudes',² spoke glowingly

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1. The Spectator remarked, in a review of Murder in the Cathedral (1935) quoted on that book's dust-cover, that Eliot had 'reanimated a literary form which in England has been dead or dormant for nearly three hundred years'.
 2. E. Martin Browne, 'Drama as the Expression of Religion', Christian News-Letter No.208 (1944), p.8

of the rapport between actors and audiences engendered even by plays of this low standard:

In this drama, actor and audience are one. Nowhere else, except perhaps in the drama of the Left, is this fundamental condition of true drama fulfilled.¹

It was this kind of drama, founded on the shared beliefs of audience and writer, and for this specific type of audience that Norman Nicholson was equipped to write. The existence of acting groups already catering to such an audience provided an atmosphere in which his first play was likely to find a welcome.

The last point to be noted about the revival of Christian verse-drama is the simplest, and, in connection with Nicholson, I think the fundamental one. It is that most of the plays I have mentioned were commissioned. The Old Man of the Mountains was also a commissioned play, and without the strong guarantee of performance implied by a commission I feel very doubtful whether Nicholson, a man in precarious health and therefore in a precarious financial position, could have taken the risk of

1. E. Martin Browne, 'Drama as the Expression of Religion', Christian News-Letter No.208 (1944), p.8.

embarking on such a lengthy venture.¹ That such a view is more than conjecture is supported by a statement Nicholson made in 1953, after the Edinburgh Festival production of

A Match for the Devil:

It takes me 8-10 months to write a play,
and I can't give up all my time with no
hope of reward.²

My description of Nicholson's life in Chapter Two ought to put this sentence in its proper perspective and remove from it any pejorative suggestion of a mercenary motive. A man in Nicholson's unusual position of having to rely for a living almost solely on his writing would have needed to consider other criteria as well as the artistic in determining how to deploy his talents. The reason why Nicholson wrote plays - to enlarge his audience - is without doubt genuine. It also chimed with the contemporary enthusiasm for poetic drama.

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1. In a letter to George Every of 24 Feb. 1938 Nicholson described a play entitled The Light of the World which was performed by enthusiastic Millom amateurs. Though the performances were 'very well carried out', the play itself 'consisted of about a dozen absolutely lifeless tableaux, with the dialogue in atrocious blank verse' and it was 'impossible to imagine anyone going to see it but very pious elders of the church and friends of the performers'. I have, however, found no evidence to suggest that at this stage he himself was concerned to remedy the situation.
 2. Letter to George Every, 7 Sept. 1953.

But it was the initial, enabling fact of being asked to write a play which put him in a position where he could seriously reflect on drama as a personal means of expression.

These contextual preliminaries to a discussion of Nicholson's actual plays would be incomplete without some indication of the verse plays he read in his formative years, and particularly of the relationship between his ideas and practice and those of T.S. Eliot. Two plays may be specifically mentioned. In 1938 he had been lent by Canon Samuel Taylor a copy of Dorothy Sayers's Canterbury Festival play of the previous year, The Zeal of Thy House. This he had not liked,¹ perhaps because of the archaism of some of its blank verse, but one aspect of it may have influenced him unconsciously later. Dorothy Sayers's play functions on one level simply as the story of the building of Canterbury Cathedral by William of Sens; but it is given a second 'supernatural' level by the presence, as observers and commentators, of the angels Michael, Raphael, Gabriel and Cassiel. At one

1. In a letter to George Every of 3 May 1938 he spoke of the play's 'rather pedantic irreverence', which seems a rather prim reaction.

point Gabriel intervenes in the action by whispering into the ear of the sleepy Father Ernulphus the name of the architect for whom he should vote, this action suggesting the prompting of God's will in human affairs. One may see a similar method at work when Elijah repeats the words of the Raven who acts as God's messenger,¹ and in Elisha's colloquy with the mountain echoes at the end of Birth by Drowning.² What, basically, may have been suggested to Nicholson by The Zeal of Thy House was the idea of a play which could present a naturalistic story but in a way that would indicate the presence of God behind the human characters; whereas the more abstract and allegorical method of Charles Williams, whom Nicholson admired, was alien to him.

The other play was Andrew Young's Nicodemus (1937),³ which George Every lent Nicholson in the spring of 1938. In

1. The Old Man of the Mountains, Third Impression (Revised), Faber 1950, p.23.
2. Birth by Drowning, Faber 1960, p.63.
3. Reprinted in Collected Poems of Andrew Young, Jonathan Cape, 1950, pp.129-174. The rhythm and language of this 'Mystery' display a kinship with the later poetry of Edwin Muir (see especially John's speech at the bottom of p.137).

its presentation of characters who are constantly aware of God as an influence in their lives, so that there cannot be said to be any separation between human and divine levels, it may well have indicated to Nicholson that a play could succeed without needing to be sophisticated, particularly as its language is both simple and moving. At any rate he thought it 'direct and good', and called the verse 'fresh and often exhilarating'.¹ Even a short extract illustrates these qualities, and shows also how speakable the verse is:

Look at the stars;
 Though small they jostle in the sky for room,
 Shining so bright, they drop down through the air;
 Are they not born again? Look at the street;
 The stones are nestling down to their hard sleep,
 Stone nudging neighbour stone, whispering 'Friend,
 Are we not born tonight?'²

Canon Young's play certainly relates closely to a description Nicholson gave in the late 'forties of some of the ingredients needed in a verse-play:

1. Letter to George Every, 3 May 1938.
2. Nicodemus, Collected Poems of Andrew Young (1950), p.142.

...[the dramatist] must be prepared...to make his words intelligible at the speed at which the listener receives them,¹ and he must provide enough of action, plot and character to keep the whole of the audience entertained and interested even if the deeper significance of his symbolism is missed by some of them, even, perhaps, by most.²

This description would also, on the whole, fit the plays of T.S. Eliot. It was Eliot who had the strongest influence on Nicholson, but the Eliot of Murder in the Cathedral rather than the later plays. Murder in the Cathedral exemplified - particularly in the sharp, colourful imagery and the urgent rhythms of the chorus - what was for Nicholson the most important ingredient of verse drama, vitality of language. The use of a chorus in itself emphasised the ritual nature of the play's subject and its author's wish that the audience should participate in the action, and the device was used by Nicholson in The Old Man of the Mountains in the form of the Raven and the Beck, and in Birth by Drowning by the employment

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1. A prescription not always adhered to by, for instance, Christopher Fry.
 2. 'The Poet Needs an Audience', Orpheus I, ed. John Lehmann, c. 1949. The naturalistic slanting of this last statement is emphasised in a letter to George Every of 20 May 1938 in which Nicholson approves the subconscious effect of the symbolism in Yeats's play The Herne's Egg (1938).

as speaking characters of the Three Fells. Perhaps the most important aspect of Murder in the Cathedral for Nicholson was its return to the tradition of the Morality Play and its unashamed treatment of a religious theme. For Nicholson, Murder in the Cathedral was a play which 'opened vast new territories'.¹ For Eliot himself, it was a 'dead end',² and the aim which he set himself later to achieve - roughly, the communication of Christian ideas, disguised as drawing-room comedy, to 'the ordinary, unbelieving and half-believing audience of the commercial theatre',³ - took him into a world where Nicholson, however much he admired the later plays for other reasons, could not follow. A remark he made after seeing the Edinburgh Festival production of The Confidential Clerk in 1953 indicates very sharply how much more at home he felt with an overt presentation of religious themes. He called the play 'an electric radiator disguised as a coal fire' and added that

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1. Norman Nicholson, 'T.S. Eliot: Poet and True Christian. An Obituary Tribute', Church Times, 8 Jan. 1965.
 2. T.S. Eliot, Poetry and Drama, Faber, 1951, p.23.
 3. Nicholson, op.cit.

...what really worried me was that the characters seemed much more remote than Becket in his temptations.¹

The nature of the commercial audience for whom he later chose to write involved Eliot not only in the need to disguise his Christian ideas but also in a watering-down of his poetic language until, as he said of The Cocktail Party, 'it is perhaps an open question whether there is any poetry in the play at all'.² Whether Eliot's decision to supply a kind of verse which would not obtrude itself as such on the ear was, in his circumstances, the correct one, is not the question here. Writing in Cumberland, Nicholson felt his own case to be very different and expressed it in words which are almost

1. Letter to George Every, 7 Sept. 1953. A similar view is expressed by T.R. Barnes in 'Shaw and the London Theatre', The Modern Age, Pelican Guide to English Literature No.7, p.220: 'In Murder in the Cathedral the poet was...playing a traditional role; his gifts served a cause and commended beliefs which he shared with his audience, and this situation seems to have liberated energies which have given the play strength enough to dominate an audience in a public theatre, a greater strength, it seems to me, than is exhibited in any of the plays which use the convention of drawing-room comedy'.
2. Eliot, Poetry and Drama (1951), p.32.

a paraphrase of J.M. Synge:¹

...up and down the world, away from cities,
there are still people who speak with
something of the old vitality and splendour.
Behind the speech of country folk lies
the imagery of the seasons; behind that
of miners lies the rock; behind that of
sailors lies the sea. Among such people
the poet should be able to find a language,
capable of the power of rhetoric and the
decoration of imagery, which would yet be
in touch with the essential experience of
every man and woman in his audience.²

It was among such people that Nicholson set his version of
Elijah's struggle with Ahab, and not only did he feel that
his local experience provided him with a natural source of poetic
speech but he also believed that his kind of audience would
be able to accept it without strain. That his belief was
not without foundation may be realised from the fact that he
expressed it after The Old Man of the Mountains had already
been performed in playhouses from Newcastle-on-Tyne to Manchester:

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1. Cf. Synge, Preface to The Playboy of the Western World (1907):
'...in countries where the imagination of the people, and the
language that they use, is rich and living, it is possible for
a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same
time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in
a comprehensive and natural form'. Nicholson had read Synge,
and admired his dramatic language. (Letter to the writer,
10 Feb.1969).
 2. Norman Nicholson, 'The Abandoned Muse', Theatre Arts, New
York, Aug.-Sept. 1948, p.70.

I cannot speak for London, for I know little of the London theatre, but I have sat with many Northern audiences, and I feel that these people will not be afraid of poetry nor embarrassed by it if the poet will speak in a language which they can understand, and which belongs to the life they know.¹

1. 'The Poet Needs an Audience', Orpheus I, ed. John Lehmann, c. 1949.

I

It would appear that the writing of The Old Man of the Mountains involved Nicholson in considerable work. By the time the first draft was completed in August 1944 the play had 'an entirely new and livelier opening',¹ which differentiated it from an earlier version read by George Every, and Part II had been recast because E. Martin Browne, who had been Nicholson's sole guide on 'structural and technical matters', was not satisfied with it. Discussion of the play is complicated by the existence of two divergent texts, the edition of 1946 and that of 1950. Performance revealed certain dramatic flaws, notably an anti-climactic third act,² which Nicholson was quick to remedy, but the first impression of the play had sold out so fast that a second impression, also printed in 1946, was unable to incorporate changes already made. Not until 1950 was a revised edition published,

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1. Letter to George Every, 1 Sept. 1944.
 2. This was commented on by The Times, 14 Sept. 1945, Daily Telegraph, 15 Sept. 1945, and The Times Literary Supplement, 11 May 1946.

though the new version of the play was acted in Manchester in 1947.¹ The revised edition, however, seems to have gone unnoticed. Raymond Williams commented in 1952 on Eliot's influence in the play, using as his example an Interlude speech by the Raven which Nicholson had by this time completely eliminated from the text.² In discussing the play, I shall refer to the 1950 text, but where necessary indicate the nature of Nicholson's alterations.

Originally the play was intended to be taken on tour by the Pilgrim Players. In 1945, however, came a change of plan when E. Martin Browne determined to put on a season of 'New Plays by Poets' at the Mercury Theatre in Notting Hill Gate. Murder in the Cathedral had had a year's run at this theatre from November 1935 onwards, and Robert Speaight, who had played Becket at that time, was associated with Browne in the new venture. Among the plays presented were Anne Ridler's The Shadow Factory, Ronald Duncan's This Way to the Tomb,

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1. Presented by the Unnamed Society at the Whitworth Theatre.
 2. Raymond Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Eliot, Chatto and Windus, 1952, p.257. Williams in his Foreword says that most of the book 'was written between September 1947 and April 1948, but it has since been revised, and in certain cases, brought up to date.'

a now-forgotten play by G.C. Horobin called Tangent,¹ and, later in the season, Christopher Fry's A Phoenix Too Frequent. It was Nicholson's play, however, which was chosen to inaugurate the season - a significant indication of Browne's belief in its effectiveness - and it was first performed on September 13, 1945, with Robert Speaight in the part of Elijah, and Martin Browne, in addition to producing, as the Raven.

Prior to the beginning of the season of verse plays Browne devoted some time to publicising it. An 'introductory luncheon'² was given on August 24, at which he spoke of his aim 'to bring [poetry and drama] together again',³ and on August 5 The Observer published a long discussion between Martin Browne and Ivor Brown in which one of Nicholson's most frequently-quoted speeches from the play⁴ was put forward as

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1. Horobin is referred to on a 1945 Mercury Theatre programme as 'Manager for New Mercury Ltd.' The Mercury Players collaborated with the Pilgrim Players in the productions.
 2. See Manchester Guardian, 24 Aug. 1945.
 3. Part of a description on the back of the programme printed for the Mercury presentation of The Old Man of the Mountains, Sept. 1945.
 4. The Old Man of the Mountains, Faber 1950, p.77. (Elijah's speech).

an example of what the season had to offer. This was certainly an encouraging atmosphere for Nicholson to make his dramatic début in, and there is little doubt that the shop-window which the Mercury Theatre offered him had much to do with the later popularity of The Old Man of the Mountains with dramatic groups up and down the country. Most of the play's reviews were favourable, and its publication drew from the poet Henry Reed a particularly enthusiastic appreciation.¹

A writer in Poetry Review was by no means being double-edged in his approval when he said that

It is, unless we are being unduly optimistic, ideally a play for village domestic groups, and we can think of no better setting for it than the barns and greens of our English hamlets.²

The Mercury Theatre was, one feels, exactly right for Nicholson's play: it gave the playwright himself the advantage of a London production without the possible risk of his play's seeming too unsophisticated for the ordinary audience of the large commercial theatre. For the Mercury Theatre was

1. Henry Reed, The Listener, 11 April 1946.

2. Poetry Review, April/May 1946, p.142.

very small. It had originally been a Nonconformist School, and was adapted as a theatre in 1935 by Ashley Dukes, its main purpose being to serve as the headquarters of the Ballet Rambert, which was directed by Dukes's wife. There were only 130 seats, so that its box-office takings rarely averaged more than £40 per week.¹ It was, in effect, not very different from the kind of theatre for which Nicholson had originally intended his play. A brief description by Robert Speaight of his experience of the Mercury at the time of the production of Murder in the Cathedral indicates its limitations, but these very limitations suggest its possibilities as a theatre for poetry and as a theatre sufficiently intimate in feeling to create a link between actors and audience:

Even if we had used scenery, there was no space to fly it in; but the stage had a wide, curving apron, and although the theatre was so small it somehow did not inhibit the large-scale acting and speech which the play demanded.²

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1. This made it necessary for CEMA (Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts), with which the Pilgrim Players had had close ties since Autumn 1943, to subsidise the Mercury Season.
 2. Robert Speaight, 'With Becket in Murder in the Cathedral', T.S. Eliot: The Man and His Work, ed. Allen Tate, Chatto and Windus, 1967, p.185.

The main character of The Old Man of the Mountains (the 'old man' of the title) is Elijah, and the play is founded on the incidents in his life described in I Kings xvii-xviii: the prophecy of drought in Samaria, the miracle of the bin of flour and the cruse of oil, Elijah's healing of the Widow's son, his challenge to the idolater Ahab, and the final return of the rain. A careful comparison of the play with its source reveals many minor points in the Bible story which are also made use of (like the information that Obadiah once hid and protected a hundred persecuted prophets)¹ and a number of verbal parallels.

To the story as outlined in the Bible, however, Nicholson had added the flesh of characterization and motive by making Elijah (who in the Bible simply does what God tells him) into a man half-commanding, half-querulous, whose relationship with God is attended by doubts and self-reproach. It may be that Nicholson felt that a totally arrogant prophet would be less acceptable to a modern audience than a man who at times showed ordinary human weakness. Certainly, despite a comment

1. I Kings xviii, vv.3-4. (Cf. The Old Man, p.44.)

in the Church Times that Nicholson had reduced Elijah from 'a major to a minor prophet',¹ the effect of the change is to render him a more sympathetic and interesting character. Similarly Ahab is humanised from the rather wooden Bible figure (who convenes the prophets of Baal without demur in I Kings xviii, v.20) into a man partly oppressive, partly inventive, and partly defied by his 'subjects', and one whose threatening rant seems to be a disguise for his own disquiet at Elijah's challenge. The character of Obadiah, the governor of Ahab's house in the Bible, his tenant in the play, is expanded so that he becomes a figure who stands awkwardly between the morality of Elijah and the expediency of Ahab. The widow and her son are given names, Ruth and Ben, and their story, instead of being, as in the Bible, simply an episode, is linked closely with the later struggle between the views of Elijah and those of Ahab. Ruth's reactions are a kind of barometer of alternating belief and doubt as she is affected by changing circumstances - indeed she might be said

1. Review of The Old Man, Church Times, 18 April 1946.

to represent the limited spiritual norm of the ordinary decent person - and Ben moves from being an example of Elijah's miraculous powers to being, in his innocent, unshakeable faith, an example to Elijah. To round out the play's presentation of a community, Nicholson invents the characters of David, Rebecca and Martha.

But, despite invention and elaboration, Nicholson cannot be said to tamper with the Bible story; what he adds has clearly been carefully calculated to dovetail with it.¹ The only omission is the Bible description of the struggle between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, an omission made partly, one supposes, because the consuming by fire of Elijah's offering would not have been easy to render on the stage, and partly, perhaps, because its sequel - namely Elijah's slaughter of the prophets - would only have emphasised the remoter, barbaric elements of the story and thus reduced its contemporary relevance. Indeed, the first version's many explicit references to Baal were all removed from the 1950

1. For instance, Elijah's variable relationship with God in Nicholson's play is based on the way in which he seems to be made to wait some time (I Kings xviii, vv.41-45) for the rain he has so confidently forecast.

edition.

What Nicholson, however, makes no attempt to gloss over is the three miracles of the Old Testament story: the bringing back to life of Ben, the continual replenishing of the flour and (in Nicholson's version) the milk, and the coming of the rain. Only the last can be interpreted if one wishes as a natural event. The others are uncompromisingly miraculous, and one has to face the now unfashionable fact that Nicholson, and many perhaps in the audience for whom he wrote, found no difficulty in accepting them. The fundamentalist logic of their retention is clear enough: if, as Obadiah says in the Interlude, 'this is the land of the one omnipotent God', then God cannot be less than omnipotent in the modern world also. The miracles, of course, have their dramatic effectiveness, and that is no doubt one reason why they are retained in the play, but one feels that such an explanation would, for Nicholson, sidestep the more important issue of their reality.¹ Some indication

1. One might profitably compare, here, Nicholson's poem 'The Burning Bush', Five Rivers, p.44.

of Nicholson's attitude to the euphemisms of rationalism is given - significantly in prose - in a sequence of speeches by Ahab, who is looking back on his recent experiences on Mount Carmel:

I felt at the time that we were being allowed to share an experience, a revelation, if you like, of -- not of the supernatural, that's a word I never cared for -- but of the supernormal. But, now I look back on it, what was it? ...When I came to the cairns I heard a great buzzing and blowing in my ears... But climbing three thousand feet would give anyone a headache. Then I felt a sudden trembling in my legs...
But what could I expect when I'd romped up the fellside right on top of my breakfast?
(pp.58-9)

Ahab stands for materialism in the play; whether he is a true representative of the audience is open to question. I do not feel, at any rate, that unequivocal assent can be given to William V. Spanos's view that

...by asserting the miraculous, Nicholson puts too great a strain on the credulity of the modern secular audience and fails to effect a willing suspension of disbelief on which the contemporary Christian poetic drama must rely to unlock the poetic power of the sacramental action.¹

1. Spanos, The Christian Tradition in Modern British Verse Drama (1967), p.281.

The presence of God behind the play, shown clearly at the outset by the Raven, makes the miracles simply an aspect of the divine will as it is revealed to man. The unsophisticated rural setting of the play is a further aid to their acceptability.

It is in the setting that Nicholson has made his basic departure from the Old Testament story, placing it not in a recreated Samaria but in the Cumberland dales. The Cumberland setting, however, is not just a way of dressing up an old story.¹ It is rather that Nicholson saw in the materialist greed of the modern world a situation for which the struggle of Elijah and Ahab was a suitable paradigm. That the impulse behind Nicholson's use of the Bible story lay primarily in the present rather than in the past is indicated by one of the Raven's speeches to the audience:

You have forgotten that the becks are not made nor bred;
 They are not to be expected nor taken for granted;
 That water is a gift and also rain.
 All this has happened before among the hills of Samaria --
 There was Elijah the prophet and Ahab the ruler,
 There was a greedy and a godless people.

1. It was natural, to Nicholson, though, to think of the Old Testament in terms of his own region. See 'The Comic Prophet', The Listener, 6 Aug. 1953, where he says: 'Elijah laid claim to Black Combe, that huge, bald hump of a fell which stands at the edge of the Lake Mountains just as Mount Carmel stands at the edge of the vale of Megiddo'.

And what of you? Are you not like them?
 Here in a northwest corner of a northwest island
 Is not the story of Samaria enacted again?
 The God of Gold, the God of Power,
 Is not that God acknowledged again in your hearts?
 Therefore Elijah the prophet shall speak once more,
 Here in a northwest corner of a northwest island.
 (p.12)

In effect, however, the play is set in 'a land which is both Samaria and Cumberland':¹ the homely speech of the dalesfolk establishes the latter context, Bible phrases (such as Elijah's 'As the Lord God lives/ Before whom I stand')² and the retention of the original names (even to a passing mention of Jezebel) remind one of the former. Occasionally a certain awkward tension results, as when Elijah says:

You stoke the cows with cake and rotten hay
 And tap off your gallons of milk...and never care
 For the weakling calves, the abortions, the foot-and-mouth
 Slavering from herd to herd (p.21)

and Ahab replies by mentioning 'the Cities of the Plain'.
 But on the whole the dual method works fairly well. In
 'departing' from the Old Testament setting Nicholson has not

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1. Nicholson, programme note for performance of play at the Newcastle People's Theatre, July 20-27, 1946.
 2. Quoted from I Kings xvii, v.1.

after all moved very far, as both the Cumberland dales and Old Testament Palestine have in common an 'essentially rural and agricultural' economy.¹

The play's central theme is a universal Christian one: the opposition of the true God and false gods, with Elijah and Ahab respectively as their champions. One may also see in it a more 'inward' theme. It is not only Ahab whose pride is reduced, it is also Elijah who realises that the relationship with God is not simple - the prophet has his own kind of pride and makes his own mistakes. The solution of the play is not a simple victory for Elijah. When Ahab is led to see life in a proper perspective, he too can have something to offer, and it is for Elijah then to 'roll up his sleeves and get to work like anyone else'.²

The presentation of Elijah as a Cumbrian statesman-farmer³ and Ahab as a rich, grasping landowner of the dales enables

1. Nicholson, letter to the writer, 11 Feb. 1965.
2. Nicholson, programme note for Newcastle performance, 1946.
3. That is, a hill, or sheep, farmer. Cf. 'Old Tyson' in 'The Bow in the Cloud', Five Rivers, p.81.

Nicholson to sharpen the opposition between them and give it a twentieth-century application by making them stand for two different attitudes to farming, or, to put it in the play's underlying religious terms, two different attitudes to the God-given natural world. After he had met Nicholson in 1938, T.S. Eliot took out for him, anonymously, a subscription to the New English Weekly, edited by Philip Mairet.¹ Nicholson was much influenced by this magazine's agrarian policies, which, based on the principle of Social Credit, spoke out strongly against such things as water-pollution, dustbowl-farming, wholesale land-devastation through indiscriminate tree-felling, and as my previous quotation illustrates, too mercenary an attitude to productivity in farm animals. All these evils are attacked in The Old Man of the Mountains, and what Nicholson meant by Baal (who is frequently referred to in the 1946 edition) is elucidated with some indignation in the programme note for the 1946 production of the play in Newcastle:

1. Nicholson gave this information in a conversation with the writer.

In Nicholson's play the drought is a direct result of man's ruthless, misguided attempts to make a quick profit out of the land, attempts which we see Ahab making from the start when he sends David to chop down Ruth's ash tree for timber, and proposes a sort of farmers' co-operative to force up the market price of eggs and indeed all other farm produce. He expounds his philosophy of farming in a speech whose sequence of harsh verbs is intended to act as an unconscious self-condemnation. There is, however, an element of puppetry here. Ahab is short-sighted, but not really a fool, and one feels that, if not prompted by the author, he would not speak in quite such an over-emphatic way. Nicholson intrudes a little too much in order to make a point already made by the Raven:

We must see that the land is made to pay...
 Dig chemicals in your soil, comb the fields
 Till the last ear of corn is hooked from the grain;
 Make your beasts earn their keep, squeeze the last pint
 Of milk from the cows, and work your horses
 Till they are only fit for the knacker's yard. (p.19)

In such an atmosphere, where only Ruth says that 'money's not everything' (p.14), it is not very surprising that Elijah should doubt his status as a prophet. He feels cut off, and

without a firm faith his life as a sheep-farmer has no meaning for him:

The Lord has turned his back.
Ahab has the power, and Ahab derides my words.
My farm is left desolate, my sheep
Wander untended among the ghylls. (p.27)

His words are moving, but they are also defeatist: it is Elijah who has decided to leave his farm.¹ Yet the Raven, whose voice he has earlier echoed in prophesying drought (p.23), still visits him, and in a sort of mime gives him food and tells him to sleep

....while the sun
Winds its rope round the summer, drawing tighter the knot
Till the land is strangled with heat.

While he sleeps the voice of the Beck, which stands in the play for the 'unreasoning, unthinking state of nature herself',² acts out its own drying-up, in lines which recall Part V of

The Waste Land:

We are the voices
Of the beck
Only a last

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1. Cf. Elijah's earlier speech, pp.24-5.
 2. Nicholson, programme note to Newcastle performance, 1946.

Trickle, a last
 Dribble, only
 A spatter of mud
 On the dry
 Rubble
 Only a last
 Drip, drip,
 A last
 last
 drop
 then
 stop. (pp.27-8)

The slowing-down lines are meant to indicate the passing of months, and Elijah's sleep allows the play to modulate into colloquial prose. When he wakes and goes as previously instructed to Ruth's house he speaks not even like a prophet who doubts himself but simply like an ordinary man with a habit of down-to-earth simile:

Hello, Ruth. I wonder if I could trouble you for a glass of water. I'm feeling as dry as a haddock. (p.28)

The purpose of this sort of language is not to belittle the Old Testament figure of Elijah, nor does the contrast with his previous mode of expression betray a lack of unity in Nicholson's rendering of his character. Its point is that 'a prophet is only an instrument',¹ and when God is not using him, or when

1. Nicholson, programme note for Newcastle performance, 1946.

he is not fully aware of his prophetic function, he is just like his neighbours. The remainder of Act I presents these two aspects of Elijah. Though, prompted by the Raven, he says as if in his sleep

The bin of flour shall not waste, nor the jug of milk
be empty,

he reacts to the miracle with a kind of bewilderment, and the episode is treated semi-comically. When, however, with dramatic suddenness Ruth enters with the news that Ben is dead, Elijah is transformed. No longer waiting for God to prompt him he acts masterfully, taking the event as a punishment visited on him for his doubts and a challenge to his own ability to 'stand alone' in his 'own perplexity'.¹ The suspense inherent in the bringing of Ben back to life is prolonged not simply to make the most of its dramatic effect, but more importantly to body forth the inner struggle of Elijah to re-establish contact with the God whom he feels he has betrayed:

Let not thy wrath fall upon this lad.
I own that I have failed Thee, that I have doubted Thy voice.

1. Raven's speech, p.26.

mine and I will see through them'.¹

The rest of the play must be indicated more summarily. Though Elijah may be said to have regained his faith, Act II demonstrates that no sudden conversion is possible for Ahab. Indeed, though Elijah is reconciled to Ahab at the end of the play, Nicholson avoids the temptation to present Ahab himself as a changed man. All that in fact happens is that Ahab's practicality is accorded by Elijah a place in the scheme of things once God has been shown to be master of that scheme. Ahab himself may be reasonably called a materialist to the end. Almost his last speech shows clearly a kind of emphasis which he cannot avoid:

No, you brought the rain,
I grant you that. Whether it was God or your prayers
Or the blind chance of a summer thunderstorm
I cannot tell. But the rain came - that's what matters.
(p.79)

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1. The importance of Ben in the play has a personal reason behind it. In 'The Second Chance' (The Listener, 5 Sept. 1963, p.334), Nicholson said: 'I have often been tempted to associate myself with Lazarus, and the centurion's servant, and the widow's son in the story of Elijah - with all those who have been miraculously healed or renewed or brought back to life'. Nicholson's unexpected recovery at the sanatorium in Linford may also suggest one reason why he is able to present miracles in The Old Man of the Mountains without feeling the need to explain them away.

It is at this point of the play, in the Interlude and in Act III, that the difference between the text of 1946 and that of 1950 really appears. In the 1946 version the Interlude consisted of a single 47-line speech by the Raven which described man's misuse of nature in contemporary terms and the destruction that resulted from the damming of valleys and the malicious burning of crops. Act III was then set entirely on Mount Carmel, and its first eight pages presented the struggle of God and Baal. The 1950 version excised the Raven's speech, which is not only very Eliot-esque towards the end but displays Nicholson underlining the 'moral' of his story by unnecessarily widening its context. Instead, the Interlude is set, in stylised fashion, on Mount Carmel, and consists of two speeches (transferred from the 1946 Act II), the first a description by Obadiah of the elemental mountain landscape where

The plain geometry of the stone grants not a crack
For the myths to hide in...

the second Elijah's prayer to God to declare his power. Act III returns to the village, the scene of Acts I and II, and the action on Carmel, where Elijah has spoken of hearing

'the sound/ Of an abundance of rain',¹ is presented in flashback, through the different impressions given of their experiences by the villagers (p.57). By showing Ahab in violent action, threatening to evict his tenants in order to build a dam, Nicholson contrives a somewhat factitious suspense in order to remedy what critics had considered the monotony of Elijah's waiting, followed as it is by the foregone conclusion of the rain. The effect of these changes is to make the presentation more oblique, in contrast with the straightforward following of the Bible sequence in the original version, and not entirely satisfactory, especially as the first part of the Act now lasts for fourteen pages instead of eight. But the alterations, which include, later, a new emphasis on the waverings of Ruth, do bring about an increased interest which was perhaps dramatically advisable.

At page 67 of the 1950 edition the two versions rejoin, however, and the game of draughts between Elijah and Ben, as they wait for the rain, serves to bring out the contrast

1. I Kings xviii, v. 41. This phrase is spoken by Elijah on Mount Carmel in Act III of the 1946 version, p.60.

between Elijah's nervous fear that his premonitions of rain have played him false and the serene confidence of the boy.¹ When the rain finally comes, growing from 'a cloud no bigger than a man's hand' (p.74) to thunder and lightning and a soaking downpour (p.76), Elijah's relief is evident in the exuberance of his description:

Now Thy words go bumping round the sky
 Like huge empty barrels on the cobbles of the clouds,
 Bursting the water-butts and tipping the gullies
 On the fells and the woodlands and the dale. Now
 The thirsty mouths of the trees are licking their tongues
 Into the wet soil, and grasses suck the rain
 Into their stems, and the great humps of the hills
 Gulp the water like whales and spout it out
 Through the many snouts of springs and fountains.

The play does not end here, however. The rain is more than God's private signal to Elijah that his waiting was not in vain, it is real rain, part of the scheme of nature. Elijah's role as prophet should now be superseded by his occupation of farmer, but Elijah makes the mistake of patronising the practicality of his neighbours, which is juxtaposed ironically with his own high-flown religious contemplation:

1. The relationship between Elijah and Ben anticipates that between Hosea and David in A Match for the Devil (1955).

ELIJAH The women have gone; their hearts are stitched
to their fingers.
Only you and I, Obadiah, who watch the hours
Alone on the fells with the helm wind and the Lord,¹
Know how the shafts of eternity strike to the soul.

OBADIAH Aye, Elijah, I'd like to have a crack. But I'll have
to get along and fix the mill-wheel while the beck's
in flood. (p.81)

The irony is directed against Elijah, not against Obadiah. He is in danger of crediting himself with the miracle of the rain when the Raven enters and deflates his pretensions with the instruction to

Return and seek a liturgy in your labours.

Elijah's last words in the play, when he suddenly recollects the needs of his farm and his sheep, are appropriately in prose, and the play ends, as it began, with the voice of the Beck, now flowing again, and the voice of the Raven, which now expresses God's approval for human beings who, however unconsciously, have become aware of Him and properly related to the world in which they live. The Raven's words of commendation for the virtues of ordinary life and labour have

1. A gloss of the unusual term 'helm wind' is furnished in Cumberland and Westmorland (1949), pp.52-53.

an Eliotesque ring, but the sentiments expressed are deeply characteristic of Nicholson:

In the preoccupations of day by day
They shall find grace and a glint of glory,
And blossom yearly like the damsons.¹

In his article 'The Abandoned Muse' (1948) Nicholson said that though audiences have been conditioned by their experience of prose drama to expect 'a true, or at least plausible, representation of life', within this convention the poet-dramatist is free to 'practice verbal and technical experiments'. The Old Man of the Mountains achieves this blending of convention and experiment by punctuating the naturalistic action with speeches by the Raven which make the religious meaning of the action quite clear, and by using a mixture of prose and verse to indicate what may be called different levels of significance during the course of the play.

Eliot's view is that 'a mixture of prose and verse in the same play is generally to be avoided' except when the

1. These lines originally formed the beginning of the play's final speech, by the Raven. They are now divided from the play's final lines by the rather Joycean speech of the Beck, added in the 1950 edition.

playwright 'wishes to transport the audience violently from one plane of reality to another'.¹ Eliot's exception, however, is not very helpful, as he does not define what he means by 'violently',² nor indicate whether the wish for a specifically violent transition is a prerequisite for the use of the two forms of expression. Nicholson's transitions are on the whole smooth, but they do certainly indicate a change of plane. The use of a mixed form does not simply divide characters into those who speak verse and those who speak prose. Elijah in his prophet-role speaks in verse, but is also a countryman with a countryman's speech. Similarly, characters like Rebecca, Ruth and Obadiah speak colloquially of dale-affairs among themselves, but when they are caught up in the religious dialectic of the play they speak in verse. Only the Raven and the Beck speak exclusively in verse, the Beck because it stands for inanimate nature for which a stylised onomatopaeic expression is most appropriate,

1. Poetry and Drama (1951), pp.13-14.

2. i.e. How violent is 'violent'?

and the Raven because, as voice of the Divine Will, he exists on the same plane throughout the play. The only character who speaks solely in prose is Ben, perhaps because Nicholson felt that verse would sound unnatural in the mouth of a boy, perhaps because he did not wish to run the risk of sentimentality by underlining Ben's position as a 'Wordsworthian' child who is closer to God than his elders.

Eliot's objection to the use of both verse and prose stemmed from his feeling that audiences needed to be lulled into accepting verse, so that 'to introduce prose dialogue would only be to distract their attention from the play itself to the medium of its expression'.¹ Nicholson not only disagreed with this tentative approach to verse² but also felt that, at any rate in colourfulness, there was little difference between the prose and the verse which he offered in

The Old Man of the Mountains:

...my country or small town colloquialisms
are so near to poetry that I think they
fit very well into a verse play, while my

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1. Poetry and Drama (1951), p.15.
 2. In a letter to the writer (11 Feb.1965) he said: 'Unlike Eliot, I feel that there is no harm in letting the audience know that the play is in verse'.

poetic flights (especially Elijah himself) are near enough to Methodist local preaching for the older fashioned audience...to feel at home with them.¹

If one agrees to define 'poetry', along Syngean lines, as speech which is 'as fully flavoured as a nut or an apple',² one may to some extent agree with Nicholson's first assertion. The prose of the play does have considerable zest and often adds a useful leaven of comedy. A certain amount of dialect ('owt', 'champion', 'have a crack', 'fratching') and the use of similes drawn from local experience (like Ben's 'I'm as full as a black pudding' and Martha's description of Elijah as 'obstinate as a tup') help to root the action in a specific place and so give particular relevance to a universal theme.³ Sometimes, however, the local effects can be overdone. A pseudo-proverbial expression like Martha's 'If £5 notes were as common as trees I'd buy myself a fish and chip shop' (p.14), though sardonic in its context, makes the tactical

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1. Letter to the writer, 11 Feb. 1965.
 2. J.M. Synge, Preface to The Playboy of the Western World (1907).
 3. One may compare the use of colloquial language in the Medieval plays of the 'Wakefield Master', for example the Second Shepherds' Play. See The Wakefield Mystery Plays, ed. Martial Rose, Evans, 1961, p.198.

error of defining in too limited a way the kind of audience at which the play is aimed, and David's allusion to Elijah, 'If Old Moore yonder had kept his gob shut it'd have been a gay sight better for everyone' (p.66), is too crude a bid for a cheap laugh.

The main reason, I feel, for the employment of both verse and prose in the play is to allow its twin aspects - Old Testament story and Cumberland setting - to be presented credibly side by side without either of them blurring too much at the edges. It is significant that in his fourth and very similar play Birth by Drowning Nicholson reverts to this approach, whereas in its predecessor A Match for the Devil, where setting and story are both Old Testament, he uses verse alone as his medium. A verse convention is appropriate for the higher level of action derived directly from the Bible story, whereas the dalesfolk would sound stilted if, for ordinary purposes, they spoke other than a believable everyday prose. Elijah, speaking both, acts as the unifying bridge between the two languages. Without its prose, the play would lack the local flavour which gives the religious theme its application; without the explicit moral statements of

I've dug till my shoulders ache and there's not a drop
 Nor a hint of water in the bitter rocks -
 All as dry as a badger's backside.

But perhaps the most interesting function of the verse, and one with which, as it displays a fundamental aspect of the play's theme, a discussion of The Old Man of the Mountains may fittingly conclude, is to be found at the beginning of Act III, in a passage added in the 1950 edition. It is too long to quote in full, but it consists of a sequence of three speeches in which Martha, Ruth and Obadiah describe their experiences on Mount Carmel when Elijah prayed to God for fire. Apart from the speeches of the Beck, this sequence is the only purely lyrical use of verse in the play. Each speech begins with a variation of the same phrase, and this device gives the sequence something of the unity of a single poem.¹ The imagery used by the three characters is derived from their ordinary experience of the natural world, but what they are gropingly trying to communicate by it is a supernatural, spiritual experience:

It was not what I saw,
 But what I heard. A great wind rose,
 Roaring down on the plain like a stormy sea

1. The idea of this sequence of speeches, though not their language, may have been influenced by the 'choral' passages in Eliot's The Family Reunion.

Or a luggage train at a distance. Not a grass stirred
 Nor the dust moved on the rocks. There was no breeze
 On my brow, and my hair was as stiff as wire,
 But the wind whirled round me, screaming like a seagull,
 Whipped and herded like a pack of hounds -
 Yet a wisp of sheep's wool caught on the hooks of the crags
 Lay all the while as still as a dog-whelk shell.

The point is that Nicholson has given this speech, and the two that follow it, not to Elijah, but to three ordinary characters who usually express themselves in prose. The change from prose to verse indicates their translation for a while to a different level of experience in which, without losing their identity, they come nearer to the divine meaning behind their existence. The verse of the play communicates in varying degrees 'the intersection of the timeless with time', and by choosing to express one of the most pointed moments of this awareness through the agency of everyday characters Nicholson manages to suggest what the end of the play makes directly explicit, that it is in terms of limited human beings and day-to-day life that God makes himself known in the world.

II

Henry Reed concluded his favourable review of The Old Man of the Mountains with the hope that, nevertheless,

Mr. Nicholson will soon attempt a play with a plot of his own invention.¹

Nicholson's second play, Prophecy to the Wind (1950), fulfils this hope; it is the only one of his plays not derived from the Bible, the only one dealing with an apparently secular theme. The play was commissioned in 1947 by the Little Theatre Guild, and its specification - 'a play about a post-atomic age'² - was part of the commission. It may seem strange that a poet like Nicholson, so rooted in a specific area and so little given to subjects of a 'fantasy' kind, should have been asked to write a play of this sort,³ but his response - to set the play, like its predecessor, in Cumberland - was predictable enough. What is more interesting is that he should

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1. The Listener, 11 April 1946.
 2. Nicholson, programme note for performance by Theatre Club, Carlisle, 26 - 30 Jan. 1956.
 3. Some influence, however, may have been exerted on the Guild by the more 'apocalyptic' passages in the long poems of Five Rivers.

have accepted such a commission at all. The only clue to his possible reasons is furnished by a short passage in an article he wrote in the late nineteen-forties:

...while the method of writing to a prescribed audience may be justified theatrically, it is obviously unsatisfactory to the poet himself. He feels that his work is being praised or criticised for the wrong reasons, and that much of his poetry is being misconstrued to fit the preconceptions of others.¹

What this suggests, to put it in the simplest terms, is that Nicholson did not want to be prematurely labelled 'Christian dramatist', that, in fact, he hoped to gain a reputation of a more diversified kind. One may infer, also, that the success of The Old Man of the Mountains, underwritten as it may well have been by the audience's predisposition to accept its Christian basis, perhaps struck him as too easy, and that a more secular subject challenged him to evolve a kind of dramatic poetry unsupported by the overtones of Biblical verse-rhythm and a kind of action which precluded the doctrinally-conditioned response. Whatever the reasons

1. Nicholson, 'The Poet Needs an Audience', Orpheus I, ed. John Lehmann, c. 1949.

which lay behind Nicholson's acceptance of the commission, the writing of such a different kind of play involved a risk which it is to Nicholson's credit that he took. Though the result was not completely satisfactory, the play was vital enough in performance to provoke T.S. Eliot, on leaving the theatre after the play's production in Ealing in April 1949, to remark that Nicholson 'ought to be a very happy man'.¹

Prophecy to the Wind consists of a prologue and four scenes. The prologue serves to establish impressionistically, indeed rather perfunctorily, the idea of an atomic cataclysm, rendered as a universal burning, out of which John, the industrial technician who represents in the play the scientific attitudes of the contemporary world, is projected into the 'future' of the play's four scenes. The impersonal reiterations 'Fire! Fire! Fire!',² the jangling of the bell, and the stylised exchanges between John and the 'voices',³ convey in shorthand

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1. Quoted by Nicholson, Letter to George Every, c. April 1949.
 2. This device may owe something to Louis MacNeice's Out of the Picture (Faber 1937). See p.84, where the chorus reiterates the pattern 'FIRE FIRE FIRE FIRE'.
 3. These exchanges parallel the question and answer method of The Fire Sermon, one of the sources of The Waste Land which Nicholson probably looked up after first reading Eliot. (See The Waste Land III, final lines).

terms the necessary confusion as John is

...whirled away with the draught
Up the chimney of time. 1

As he goes, however, John appeals to the audience to

Hold me, pull me back
To the crux of this burning world.

Just as the premiss of The Old Man of the Mountains - that man has broken God's laws - is stated preacher-wise at the start by the Raven, so here John's urgent rhetorical question

You who sit watching,
Am I not one of you?

invites the audience's immediate involvement by suggesting their identity with him. The prologue, therefore, does more than set the scene; it directs the audience's attention to the possibility that the play is to be about them.

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1. Austin Clarke, in an otherwise favourable review of the play (Irish Times, 1 July 1950), singles out the prologue for obloquy: 'For a moment the audience might mistake catastrophe for the temporary excitement caused by prompt arrival of the fire brigade. Wells, in his fantasy "The Sleeper Awakes", went to considerable trouble to give verisimilitude to his freak of time and, in compliment to his own art, a poet should surely be as ingenious and painstaking as a realistic novelist'. Though I imagine that the Prologue is not easy to render on the stage - and so is open to the risk of unintentional comedy - I cannot agree with Clarke's later suggestion: too careful an explanation of the 'why' of John's projection into the future would have unbalanced the play, which in any case is not intended to answer that question.

The problem with plays (or any form of literature) set in a hypothetical 'future' is to give that future at least the illusion of reality. Nicholson dealt with the problem by making his future a slightly distorted mirror-image of the past, by showing post-atomic life as reverting to an already-known pre-mechanistic culture, that of the Vikings who had originally taken possession of Cumberland:

It seemed to me that if the central civilisation of Europe, Asia and America were to collapse, it might well be in isolated spots like Iceland, the Faeroes and Scandinavia that our race would preserve and reorganise its vitality. So I pictured South Cumberland resettled by a people very like the Vikings of the past, and I availed myself freely of our local Viking associations.¹

The Hallbjorn of the play is named after the man from whom, in Nicholson's view, the Millom settlement of Holborn Hill took its name,² and his brother Ulf after the man who 'left his name to Ullswater and Ulpha'.³ Similarly, much of the

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1. Programme note for Carlisle production, 1956.
 2. Portrait of the Lakes (1963), p.79.
 3. Programme note for Carlisle production, 1956.

play's cultural framework and many of its allusions draw their life from customs and habits made familiar by the Icelandic sagas,¹ and Nicholson's actual language is often reminiscent, both in choice of word and in turn of phrase, of translations of the Sagas. His decision to flesh the future on the bones of the past is sensible, in that this method automatically gives his characters a degree of solidity,² but it carries with it the danger that at certain points - in some of the exchanges between Hallbjorn and Vikar, for instance - the play verges on historical costume-drama and simply sounds archaic.

It is in this 'neo-Viking' world that the rest of the play is acted out: in a simple community whose economic bases are embodied in Ulf, the sheep-farmer, and his brother Hallbjorn, who digs and smelts iron to make the 'ploughs,

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1. See Hallbjorn's speech (p.21) and Vikar's reference to blood-money (p.73).
 2. The indication of similarities between the 'neo-Vikings' of the play and the Vikings of history is not the only method by which Nicholson tries to give solidity to his characters. The 'islanders' recall the Celts, and their memory of former glories (the modern technological age) would in terms of the past be the Celtic memory of Roman colonisation. Like the Celts, the 'islanders' are Christian (p.24); but the parallel must not be pressed too far, otherwise John, 'the man from the past' (p.30), would become a technological Messiah figure - a symbolism which one feels Nicholson would regard not only as irrelevant, but blasphemous.

harrows and scythes' which it needs. As if aware of the danger that the audience may mistake future for past, Nicholson immediately makes it aware of the distortions in the mirror-image. Ulf enters carrying a mud-guard, whose purpose he is ignorant of:

A rare big well-fleshed beast it must have been
That took this blade to skin it. (p.9)

His misunderstanding is further developed comically when he infers from it that

They were a race of giants in those days...

The irony of this, underlined by a statement by Freya that six lambs will not go far among her cousin Vikar and his five companions who are soon expected to arrive, would not have been wasted on an audience living in post-war austerity Britain. Another echo of the past comes when Vikar arrives (p.14) wearing 'an air-raid warden's helmet' which he has picked up in some ruins. The initial effect of both the mud-guard and the helmet is to create in the context a comic incongruity; but not far beneath lurks the implication that the 'race of giants' could not save itself from destruction. It is, however, in a haunting speech by Hallbjorn, describing the

ruins of the former world, that the warning of the play
is really given:

...when you venture inland,
As I did, moving south, in search of tin,
You come across a country where the land
Is dead as slag or cinders. Not even a rat ¹
Lives there; a worm, a snake; not even a bird flies over.
The dust stings the eyes. Drink of the gulleys
And soon you'll vomit rotten flesh and maggots
And die within the hour. For fifty miles
The clouds are the only things that move; the sky
The only thing that changes. And on the rim
Of this wide dyke of death, where life begins
To crawl back like a thrashed dog, the grass
Is black, the bark of the trees is scabbed and blistered,
And buds burst in ulcers of festering green.
This is the land of the people who once were great
And now - (p.23)

From brooding on these evidences of disaster, Hallbjorn has
evolved a quietist view of life in which

Wealth, power, pride and even honour
Are dangers in the dale, (p.22)

and he therefore insists that, if he wishes to marry his daughter
Freya, Vikar shall give up his life of piracy and settle down.

Into this world, dominated by the 'immovable object' which

1. The simile 'as dead as slag' also occurs in the poem
'Gathering Sticks on Sunday' (The Pot Geranium, 1954), whose
theme is akin to that of this play.

is Hallbjorn's pastoral conservatism - a conservatism which is depicted as noble, the fruit of sensitivity and thought, rather than stagnant and cowardly - suddenly bursts John, still in a state of shock, speaking the same short-lined verse as in the prologue, describing the cataclysm and, as before, involving the audience in his own predicament:

Oh you, whom now I see
 But cannot hear or touch,
 Cloud of dead witnesses,
 Floating in the dusk
 Of your exploded world,
 Am I not one of you,
 And do I not belong
 To you and the lifetime of life? ¹ (p.30)

Scene II, relying on the film-cliché of love growing between nurse and patient, shows John and Freya falling in love as they talk of the two different worlds to which they are accustomed. Freya cannot understand John's talk of mine-shafts 'a hundred fathom deep', and is simply jealous of his talk of girls with 'legs in silk/ Smooth as the stems of hyacinths'. One of the imaginative impulses behind the play - Nicholson's awareness of his own immediate surroundings

1. The staccato nostalgia of John's speeches at this point bear close resemblance to the final lines of 'Silecroft Shore' (Rock Face, 1948).

- is suggested by John's memories of his home: he recognises Freya's 'Black Fell' as 'Black Mountain' (which is in fact Black Combe behind Millom) and the landscape he describes is clearly that of Nicholson's own area:

The shore sloped
 Much like this, with the dykes of the dunes
 Blocking the sea from the marshes, the live salt water
 From the dead salt mud. And yonder too
 A wall, bent at the elbow, where the ebb-tide
 Lies in the crook of the arm. (p.35)

When he finally realises that he is actually in his 'own country' he talks of taking Freya 'to the shaft/ Of the old mines where I used to work', and one recognises how Nicholson has been prompted by the side-by-side existence of the derelict Hodbarrow Mines and the activity of Millom Ironworks to imagine a world in which the possible consequences of man's search for knowledge and power are worked out.¹ The really important happening in Scene II, however, is not the growth of a relationship between John and Freya, but John's discovery of an old dynamo. It is this which arouses in him the 'irresistible force' of the scientific impulse:

1. Nicholson commented in 1956, on the programme note to the play's Carlisle production, that with the building of the atomic factory at Calder Hall 'my theme has come to West Cumberland in fact as well as fancy'.

This
 Is the heart of my dead world, ready to beat
 When I put my fingers to the valves. (p.40)

Scene III takes place some time later. It is the longest scene in the play, the one in which John and Hallbjorn arrive at the collision which their opposite views of life make inevitable. The situation is precipitated by Vikar, who is growing tired of waiting for Freya's decision to marry him. Hallbjorn's shock on discovering Freya's wish to marry John provokes John to demonstrate his powers by making the dynamo work to turn a wheel. But when Hallbjorn realises that the power of the dynamo may ultimately lead to the re-creation of a world which has already destroyed itself once, his reaction is instinctive and hostile:

Destruction, boy,
 Lies like disease in man's blood. When he is alone
 And the air blows through his lungs, his breath is wholesome;
 But when he stews and stinks in herds, plague
 Breeds in his bones and blights them.
 But here it shall not come. Here in this dale
 Man shall retain something of his true health - Go,
 Break up your machine. (p.61)

Hallbjorn cannot believe that man can discriminate between the peaceful and the destructive uses of power, and John's assertion that a scientist's interest is only

Knowledge, knowledge
Of how the whole caboodle worked....(p.63)

does not help him since he is compromising his case by shirking the scientist's personal responsibility. Where 'the driving force of nature' is to go 'matters nothing to me'.¹ But the dialectic is by no means carried on in primary black and white: neither John nor Hallbjorn has a monopoly of truth or of the audience's sympathy.

Hallbjorn proposes that if John will destroy the machine he may marry Freya. Freya, who is depicted rather patronisingly as one whose preference for cottage and children makes it hard for her to understand John's inability to go in what he thinks a backward direction, is willing to accept her father's 'solution', but John cannot abandon his scientific pursuits:

...this is mine to deny no more
Than I can deny the need to breathe.

The argument between them issues in Freya's agreeing to leave

1. Further weakenings of John's position are found in his speeches on p.61, which seem, however, to be deliberately 'planted' by Nicholson, and not altogether credible dramatically.

with him, if Hallbjorn will not consent to let them stay and marry. The scene ends with Freya forcibly restrained by her father, while John makes to leave, asserting all the while what seems to Hallbjorn the scientist's too dangerous wish

...to unscrew the watch
Although he knows that he may break it.

Fearing that John will be

...a frond
Of burning bracken thrown in a dry pinewood

if he is let loose on the world, and fearing too, one infers, that his daughter may try to run away to join him, Hallbjorn sends him to Vikar with a dagger, whose purpose John, with a not altogether plausible innocence, does not see. Vikar, in the fashion of the Sagas, understands the tacit message and kills him off-stage.¹

Plainly the play cannot end here. Though Hallbjorn's reasons for resisting scientific knowledge have been amply

1. The use of the dagger as a message has already been prepared for by Hallbjorn's speech to Vikar in Scene III, bottom of p.47.

demonstrated as sincere and understandable, his action in having John killed too brutally upsets the balance created in the audience by the equal weight of the arguments presented. It also creates the expectation that the tension will be resolved in some less negative way. Despite their differences, there is too much in common between Hallbjorn's statement

Man
Is rock made mortal, and within the rock
He finds his immortality (p.52)

and John's description of himself as one for whom

...The slow geological
Chemistry is my craft and study (p.53)

for the audience to feel that Hallbjorn's action is anything but a false step. Though Hallbjorn's volte-face into recriminations against Vikar is a well-worn dramatic device¹ it is not insincere; Hallbjorn, who all along has been presented as a good man, at once sees his ill-judged action as a betrayal of his own integrity:

1. Cf. Third Knight, T.S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral (1935), p.79, and Bolingbroke's repudiation of the murderers of Richard II.

[I] came to this dale seeking a practical peace,
 A not-yet mortgaged conscience.
 And now I have thrown away my right...
 To save blood I've shed blood.

After Hallbjorn's feeble ashamed efforts to hide the truth from Freya, the resolution of the play's dialectical conflict comes in human terms, unexpectedly, yet credibly. Freya is pregnant with John's child:

He is alive
 Still in my body as truly as I myself.
 If you would empty the world of him, then come
 Pour my blood also down the shaft, stain
 The ore redder than it was before. (p.74)

As if to demonstrate that he is not created in the stereotyped image of the Viking, Hallbjorn accepts the child as a person where he would not accept his father as a theorist, and comes round, too late for John, to a more open view of the future:

The future is a sea
 Grey and grimacing, and the child lies
 Naked in a coracle of lath and skin - yet
 Let us push him out on the tide; let the blind current
 Carry him where it will.
 There is death in the sea, but the worst death
 Is to die on the shore the waves have never reached...
 (p.77)

Hallbjorn is prepared to contemplate the possibility that John's child will

...have his father's skill, his curiosity,
 Trying his key in all the world's locks. Mebbe
 He'll find the click of that machine out yonder
 We've not yet broken up. (p.76)

The play ends with a return to the metre of the prologue as Freya addresses the audience and lays on them the moral responsibility for what the future will be:

Yes, you are here,
 You to whom John belonged,
 To whom he spoke, you
 To whom he has returned.
 What do you send for his son?

To resolve the play's problem by means of a child may appear sentimental, but I do not think that it is really so. It is hard to see how the tension between the protagonists' equal impulses - the one to fear and the other to hurry after potentially-destructive but also potentially-beneficial scientific knowledge - could have been satisfactorily resolved except by some such introduction of a third party. The introduction specifically of a child is of particular value to the play's emotional impact. It enables the play to end, not with the dry abstraction of such a phrase as 'the human quest for knowledge should not be stamped out', but with the more deeply human feeling that an unborn child should not be killed.

The conception of the child is, in fact, the natural development of the way in which the ideological clash between Hallbjorn and John has throughout the play been given personal significance by Hallbjorn's love for his daughter, John's love for her, and the character of Freya herself, growing in stature from a hero-worshipping young girl¹ given to frivolous spurts of jealousy to a young woman aware of the responsibilities of love and parentage. The play would certainly be the poorer were it only a disguised tract for the perusal of people scared by the implications of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, though it is clear that post-war fears of atomic power were strongly in Nicholson's mind when he wrote it:

The potential powers of destruction are now so immense, so efficient, that many people feel that only by reducing our level of technological organisation can we hope to survive complete annihilation. Yet the scientist does not want primarily to destroy life, nor even to control it...he wants primarily to know about it. However dangerous science may seem to be, without this basis curiosity about the natural world, this boyish desire

1. This aspect of Freya is apparent in her early attitude to Vikar (pp.13-19).

to find out how things work, any civilisation, though it may be as safe as a rock, would be half-dead in the spirit. The problem for Man is to avoid firing himself from his own gun.¹

I have said that Prophecy to the Wind is an apparently secular play. Yet, though Nicholson has chosen not to bring religious values explicitly into the play, its theme - the proper use of power - is sufficiently close to that of The Old Man of the Mountains for one to suppose an ultimately religious attitude behind it. Hallbjorn, with his distrust of wealth and what may be called his noble conservatism, has a strength reminiscent of Elijah's in his more confident moments,² and there are certainly times when John sounds like a more innocent version of Ahab:

I'll break off flakes of sun, blue cracks of sky
 And hang them in the lobbies of dark woods;
 I'll make black metal burn, and falling water
 Lift ten-ton rocks like billiard balls.
 I'll bring wealth to the dale.

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1. Norman Nicholson, programme note for performance of play, Questors Theatre, Ealing, April 1949.
 2. He resembles Elijah also in his final recognition that science is not necessarily something to be resisted.

The use of John, early in the play, and Freya, at the end, as fingers pointing to the audience is a preacher's device, akin to the sermonising habit of the Raven. Most of all, the play's title, simply by being Biblical, suggests the larger religious context in which the play belongs, though its exact implications are not clear until the whole play has been read. The title is a quotation from Ezekiel xxxvii, v.9:

Then said he unto me, Prophecy unto the wind,
 prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind,
 Thus saith the Lord God; come from the four
 winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain,
 that they may live.

Verses thirteen and fourteen are needed to complete the sequence:

And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I
 have opened your graves, O my people, and
 brought you up out of your graves.
 And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall
 live, and I shall place you in your own land:
 then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken
 it, and performed it, saith the Lord.

On one level, the passage from Ezekiel may indicate Nicholson's own bringing alive, in terms of the play, of a ruined civilisation. On another, the passage describes the action of the play itself: 'these slain' refers to the dead

civilisation, both buildings and people, of the post-war atomic age, and the 'wind' is John's reanimation of the dynamo which can bring back their life. But on yet another level, the passage surely suggests the nature of the future which is left in doubt at the end of the play, a future in which, with an awareness of God, the past knowledge and civilisation may return but be properly organised and controlled.

By creating a fable of his own, however, rather than by using a Biblical story in which divine intervention is possible, Nicholson has produced a play which is more strictly dramatic, more open-ended, than The Old Man of the Mountains. The plot allows more scope for argument and the free interplay of ideas; one is forced to keep revising one's opinions and one's view of the characters, whereas The Old Man sometimes gives the impression of a series of set pieces. And because the ending of Prophecy to the Wind is not laid down in advance by any source, Nicholson has more opportunity to surprise the audience by his resolution of the play's conflict. T.S. Eliot called the play 'a real technical advance',¹

1. Quoted by Nicholson, letter to George Every, c. April 1949.

and Nicholson's own impression of the Ealing performance in 1949 suggests that the conclusion of the play was particularly successful in practice:

This element of surprise - the sudden reversal of fortune, the complete new landscape of significance, which arises in the last act, does most certainly make the play end much more effectively than The Old Man.¹

It is significant that Nicholson uses the term 'reversal of fortune', for Prophecy to the Wind is the only one of Nicholson's plays which could even potentially be called a tragedy. His other plays lack one primary ingredient of tragedy, the death of the central character, and one is in any case aware behind them of an eternal context in which their temporal issues and events, however painful, will find a benevolent outcome. Prophecy to the Wind contains a painful action, the killing of John, which in a physical sense no later possibility of hope can cancel out, and the conclusion of the play is immediately bleak - 'a bare, cold glittering world'. In some technical respects the play conforms closely

1. ~~quoted by~~ Nicholson, letter to George Every, c. April 1949.

to Aristotle's views of tragedy. There are no 'bad' characters, even the pirate Vikar being no worse than he should be, and the struggle in the play is not between good and bad but, as in the Antigone, between two kinds of good. The tone certainly of the latter half of the play is on the whole one of 'high seriousness', and the relationships between the characters are familial ones. Even the killing of John adheres to Greek practice in being reported, not staged.

The play resembles The Old Man of the Mountains in employing both verse and prose, though the play's argument is more closely-knit and the amount of prose is smaller. The same pattern obtains, however, for the use of prose: it is used for moments of lower intensity, but not reserved exclusively for certain characters. Dick and Bessie, the 'islander' thralls, use prose when they are acting in their capacity of servants, but when the affinity of Bessie and John is to be emphasised Bessie uses verse of the kind which John speaks in the prologue. The verse of the play (quite apart from the short, stabbing lines used in the prologue to indicate the present, by John to suggest his sense of strangeness on

arriving in the future, and by Freya at the end to identify herself symbolically with John) is unlike the long lines, Eliotesque or Biblical, common in The Old Man of the Mountains. Instead it fluctuates between iambic pentameters and alliterative, heavily-stressed lines which emphasise the 'Norse' setting, as in this speech of Vikar's:

For years
 I ferreted the northern firths;
 Foraged and fratched and foundered, and all I brought
 Home were wounds and a story...
 So I said goodbye to the midnight ice,
 Turned to the Hebrides and the Celtic lochs,
 And found five Irishmen with heads as fiery
 As any volcano in the vaults of Iceland.
 No more bankrupt buccaneering now -
 My Irishmen can save me all that trouble.
 They can lead to the door that's lightly latched,
 The village worth a visit. (p.18) 1

Prophecy to the Wind was first performed at the Newcastle People's Theatre in January 1949, and again, three months later, at the Questors Theatre, Ealing. As a result of seeing this latter performance, which he was 'very pleased with',² Nicholson determined to speed up the play by

1. Cf. the metre and diction of 'Caedmon' (Rock Face, 1948).

2. Letter to George Every, c. April 1949.

...knocking out odd lines...mostly at the end of the 3rd scene and the end of the fourth, where the three events need to be presented as barely as possible.¹

Reviews of the play as published in 1950 were on the whole favourable, but a very hostile review at the time of the play's Ealing performance, while the actual points it makes are unfair and exaggerated,² indicates a significant weakness of the play in its occasional fluctuations of style. These result partly from the plot, where a modern character is placed in a pseudo-Viking context, so that two types of language are spoken. So much may be dramatically inevitable, but there are less excusable blemishes which could easily have been removed. Such a one is John's speech to Hallbjorn where he says of the dynamo:

That is the brand, the strawberry-shaped birthmark
To prove me legitimate to the rock. (p.53)

The impression here is of a confusion of Shakespeare and Victorian melodrama of mistaken identity, and the use of 'strawberry-shaped birthmark' as a metaphor shows an extreme

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1. Letter to George Every, c. April 1949.
 2. The Times, 8 April 1949. Nicholson's 'manner of speech' is described as 'about as inspiring as a mist creeping in over a slagheap'.

lack of artistic tact, seeming more of a private joke to the audience than a phrase which Hallbjorn would understand. Vikar's jealousy of John's courtship of Freya is expressed in a simile inappropriately borrowed from Shakespeare:

...Have I not watched them, their heads together
Like two cherries on one stalk? (p.46) 1

When the dynamo will not start, John attributes the fact to 'a faulty circuit only' (p.56) - an inversion for which I can see no reason, particularly as it occurs in a short passage of prose. When Vikar defends his killing of John (p.70) he uses the pointless abbreviation 'heritance' instead of the normal word. These instances and others combine to suggest a basic uncertainty in the use of language which The Old Man of the Mountains does not suffer from.

Together with this stylistic maladroitness goes another important weakness: that of uncertainty in the handling of dramatic tone or level. Though the play deals with a fundamentally serious theme, one's total acceptance of this is blurred by Nicholson's excursions into comedy. The flirtations

1. Cf. A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act III, Scene II, ll.208-11.

of Dick and Bessie, Freya's early 'woman's-magazine' emphasis on the hypothetical 'girls' in John's former life and her own immediate and immature determination to marry him,¹ though they help the audience to believe in the 'humanity' of these characters from the future, do so in a way unsuitably reminiscent of provincial domestic manners and thus detract irritatingly from the force of the main theme. Although Vikar is dramatically necessary, as the agent of Hallbjorn's mistake, the stress on the 'unheroic' aspects of his personality - his seasickness, his preference of whisky to wine² - is an irrelevant amusement, indulged in for its own sake to the detriment of the play as a whole. His gift to Freya of a ring with 'part of the finger still inside it' (p.19) is Jacobean drama cheaply parodied, and his final exit,

Therefore, Cousin,
Farewell... (p.76)

is pure melodrama. Luckily, the various lapses grow fewer as the near-tragic conflict of the play gathers momentum.

1. Vide pp. 38-40.
2. Vikar, as a deflation of the conventional Norse warrior, recalls Bluntschli in Shaw's Arms and the Man.

Nicholson's venture into secular drama, with Prophecy to the Wind, proved in the end abortive, though the play itself had sufficient vitality to prompt students of Denison University, Ohio to perform it there in November 1952, and its production at the Minack Cliff Theatre, Porthcurno in 1953 'held the audience enthralled for two hours'.¹ In the July of 1951, after hearing that it was to be produced at the Watergate Theatre, London, Nicholson enigmatically commented that

I feel curiously uninterested, as if, in some way, I didn't quite own the play.²

One can only speculate on the reasons for Nicholson's detachment.³ Whatever they were, the detachment suggests a degree of disenchantment, perhaps a feeling that the play, successful or otherwise, was not truly characteristic of his work. The disenchantment was deepened by the reaction to its performance, in August 1951, at the Watergate Theatre. Even a fairly favourable review spoke of the play's being 'less effective on the

1. Review in West Breton (Truro), 30 July 1953.

2. Letter to George Every, 23 July 1951.

4. It may be significant that, when the present writer received a letter from Nicholson on the subject of his plays (11 Feb. 1965) no mention was made of Prophecy to the Wind.

stage than it was on the printed page',¹ while the Observer, although it admitted 'many flashes of fine poetry', considered the plot 'clumsily contrived' and likely to do 'the cause of today's poetic drama little service'.² Nicholson may have been already nervous of the London reaction, or perhaps had reservations about the play himself, as the reaction 'was what I had expected'.³ Nevertheless he was very disappointed, and said that

...I can't but be more and more aware of the gap between what I have to give and what even the most sympathetic expect.⁴

Considering that, in itself and in the total response it provoked, Prophecy to the Wind was by no means a complete failure,⁵ Nicholson's feelings seem unduly depressed here. But

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1. Gerard Fay, Time and Tide, 18 August 1951.
 2. Peter Forster, Observer, 12 August 1951.
 3. Letter to George Every, 7 Oct. 1951.
 4. Ibid.
 5. The Little Theatre Guild, for instance, said that they enjoyed Prophecy 'better than any play they have done in the whole ten years of their existence'. (Nicholson, letter to George Every, 9 May 1951).

though they cannot easily be accounted for, the fact remains that Prophecy to the Wind is a case by itself,¹ and that Nicholson's later plays returned to specifically religious subjects.

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1. Nicholson spoke of two more secular plays, but did not write them. In a letter (4 March, probably 1951) to George Every he said that: 'I feel that I'm warming up for a new play... a sort of allegorical Who-dun-it, in which the detective is the murdered man's brother and eventually by Poirot-like deduction finds that he himself must have been the murderer in a brainstorm. I want a play which can be followed at the Agatha Christie level, yet which will have implications of Mauriac. Its form is perhaps the only conventional drama form that I could tackle...and there'll be no love complications, which is a great help to me'. In a letter to George Every of 21 July 1953 he also said: 'I visited Roa Island [near Barrow-in-Furness] and stared a long time at Piel Castle...This is where Lambert Simnel landed from Ireland. I wonder if, someday, you'd look up a book for me which would give a broad outline of his story, I feel it might make a play'.

III

If, however, Prophesy to the Wind represents an abortive attempt to widen his audience, Nicholson's third play, A Match for the Devil (1955), is the even more interesting case of a play whose reception demonstrates the difficulty of pleasing both Christian and secular critics simultaneously. Whether or not Nicholson was thinking of The Old Man of the Mountains when he said that the poet who wrote 'to a prescribed audience' felt that 'his work is being praised or criticised for the wrong reasons',¹ can only be conjectural; but he would certainly have had every excuse for thinking the Church' reaction to A Match for The Devil a prime example of hostile criticism 'for the wrong reasons'. Such criticism led to the performance of the play before an audience for which it was not originally intended, and this in turn resulted in further criticism, hostile for different reasons. The secular criticisms are not unfair, focussing on real weaknesses in

1. Nicholson, 'The Poet Needs and Audience', c. 1949.

Nicholson's approach, but the doctrinal criticisms reveal little but their own absurdity and the insensitivity to the play's tone of those who made them. One might sum up the situation by saying that, though A Match for the Devil is on a certain level an enjoyable and occasionally moving play, the circumstances by which its production was surrounded were almost wholly unfortunate, and one therefore cannot quite see it objectively. One's criticisms of the play are certainly mitigated by sympathy for its writer, who seems to have been between two stools throughout.

A Match for the Devil takes its origin from the first three chapters of the Book of Hosea, but the play as it was acted in 1953 and published in 1955 grew rather slowly. Its first foreshadowing comes in a letter of June 1951, in which Nicholson said that

...I've just started to read Hosea - I'd never come across him before, and he's a valuable new experience.

It seems from this letter that Nicholson was already contemplating

1. Letter to George Every, 29 June 1951.

a play taken from Hosea, as he also spoke of wishing to familiarise himself with 'the historical background and chronology', but the theme he mentioned was 'Captivity rather than...Exile'. Neither of these ideas is presented in the finished play, and other evidence suggests very vaguely that both may have been linked with a different play which had been in Nicholson's mind a few months earlier.¹ The next reference is in a letter written in October 1951. The play had been put aside, partly because Nicholson had been disappointed by the reception of the Watergate Theatre performance of Prophecy to the Wind in August of that year, and partly because of an inherent dramatic difficulty:

...Dramatically there's no reason why Hosea's wife should return to him. The Bible story centres entirely on Hosea and ignores the attitude of the wife.²

Nicholson eventually solved the problem, but only by means

1. This is referred to in a letter to George Every of 9 May 1951: 'My play continues to shape itself in my head... I think I've got a better setting: -Dunnerholme Rock, a detached limestone rock-island, with farm and some acres of land, off the lonelier part of the Lancs. side of the Duddon Estuary directly opposite the Millom Ironworks, but itself quite remote. Also, perhaps, a title: FRIENDS PLEASE ACCEPT.' That this was a 'biblical' play is attested by a letter to George Every of 4 March 1951.

2. Letter to George Every, 7 Oct. 1951. See Hosea iii.

of a species of trickery. Judging from his comment on the Edinburgh Festival performance, however, the trick worked on the stage, though his comment also clearly indicates just how much trouble the passage had given him:

It's interesting to notice that the most successful passage in the play was the dialogue between Hosea and Gomer in the last act, when Gomer appears to come back to him and then doesn't. And, while I was at work on the play, it was that scene that I funk'd more than any other - indeed, I nearly gave up the play on account of it.¹

The lull in composition seems to have lasted some months, but on 12 March 1952 Nicholson received the needed impetus from E. Martin Browne, who requested a play 'for a new company of touring professionals - something like the Pilgrims - who are to be formed by Pamela Keily'.² Nicholson saw this as the ideal vehicle for the play he had in mind, and imagined his audience as one more sophisticated than that for which The Old Man of the Mountains had been written, 'still essentially a church audience, but belonging to the larger

1. Letter to George Every, 28 August 1953.

2. Letter to George Every, 13 March 1952.

industrial towns'.¹ A letter to George Every of 3 May 1953 makes clear, however, that Martin Browne had given Nicholson reason to think that the audience would not be 'churchy' in a narrow-minded sense, and Nicholson's fairly free treatment of Hosea - which was to involve him in trouble later - was based on this assumption. At the time the play was commissioned Nicholson had decided its final title and its verse form - a 'cadenced metre' which he had had in mind 'for this play for a long time'² - but its subject matter was rather different from that of the finished play. Nicholson wanted historical information about the age in which Hosea lived, about sacred prostitution, and about 'the organisation and services of the Temple and the main Hebrew festivals',³ but he envisaged dealing with this material in relation to the 'Exile' theme and the setting up of Saul as King of Israel. Another letter (undated) of about this time suggests that the First Book of Samuel was

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1. Nicholson, letter to the writer, 11 Feb. 1965.
 2. Letter to George Every, 13 March 1952.
 3. Ibid.

stimulating his imagination as much as the Book of Hosea: he wanted to present 'the young Samuel' and thought of calling the play Boy Wanted. This interest in Samuel persisted as far as the finished play where it takes the form of an emphasis on the character of David.

Nicholson had decided at this time not to set the play in Cumberland but in Palestine, though the treatment would be loose and anachronistic - 'a kind of charade treatment'¹ - and Hosea would keep 'something like a little baker's shop, with customers and a...suggestion of counter etc.'² Which part of Palestine Hosea would live in caused Nicholson some thought. Bethel, despite having a temple, was ruled out because it was in hill-country, and Nicholson wished to stress the contrast between hills and plains (a contrast he already planned to point up by introducing the character of Amos, the uncompromising prophet of hilly Tekoa, into a more

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1. Letter to George Every, 13 March 1952. Cf. another 'charade' treatment of the Hosea story, Sidney Keyes's Hosea: A Modern Morality (c. 1940) in Sidney Keyes, Minos of Crete: Plays and Stories, ed. Michael Meyer, Routledge, 1948, pp.59-94. Keyes's play, however, is very different from Nicholson's, and cannot be said to have influenced it.
 2. Letter to George Every (undated).

decadent plain landscape). Shechem lay near Samaria, and so had associations of decadence, but was in a valley. Finally Nicholson fixed on Jezreel: it was on a plain, 'the land (through Ahab and Jezebel) had certain luxurious associations',¹ and Hosea had given the name Jezreel to his first son by Gomer.² The choice - which had at least the negative virtue that Hosea was not known not to have lived there - was approved by the Old Testament scholar H.H. Rowley of the Department of Semitic Languages, Manchester University, to whom Nicholson had written for advice on a number of points connected with the play.³

By the March of 1952 the play had settled into something recognisably like its final form, the most radical change having been suggested by Martin Browne and Pamela Kelly, who wanted Nicholson 'to leave out Samuel and concentrate entirely on Hosea'.⁴ Nicholson wished at this stage to compromise by

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1. Letter to Geroge Every (undated, probably before 21 June 1952).
 2. See Hosea 1, v.4.
 3. Professor H.H. Rowley, letter to Norman Nicholson, 21 June 1952.
 4. Nicholson, letter to George Every, 27 March 1952.

introducing 'Samuel in the Temple as a Dream Interlude',¹ but eventually even this modification was discarded, and all that remains in A Match for the Devil of its proto-plot is the discussion at the beginning of Act IV between Hosea and David of Hosea's dream in which Hosea had 'dreamed I was Chief Priest in the Temple at Shiloh' and David had appeared 'all preened out as the Child Samuel' (p.64). In May Nicholson submitted an outline of the play to the New Pilgrims, Pamela Keily's group, and by June he had completed the first three Acts to the satisfaction both of Pamela Keily and of Martin Browne.

The New Pilgrims put the play into rehearsal, but early the following year came a totally unexpected setback. The Religious Drama Society, to which Martin Browne, in order to save a possible two months' delay, had not initially passed on Nicholson's outline, intervened and gave 'orders to stop production'.² Nicholson was both disappointed and 'justifiably

1. Nicholson, letter to Geroge Every, 27 March 1952.

2. Letter to George Every, 14 Feb. 1953.

annoyed' that he had expended 'months of concentrated work with no hope of any immediate results'.¹ The objections of the Society (with Martin Browne their only dissentient director) were on four counts:

...the audience would object to the association of religion with prostitution;...audiences will confuse the Temple with the present-day churches; ...the prophetic element is given to the Boy instead of Hosea, and...the play is a comedy instead of a Tragedy.²

The reasons reveal both an extraordinary moral narrowness difficult to credit nowadays³ and a hardly warrantable desire to limit Nicholson's way of dealing with his Bible material. In what way the material of Hosea could have been treated tragically it is hard to imagine: the book is a mixture of prophetic denunciation and tender appeal, with no sequence

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1. Letter to Geroge Every, 14 Feb. 1953.
 2. Ibid.
 3. In a letter to the writer (5 Feb.1968) Pamela Keily commented that '...the verdict came as a terrible blow - in the world that we are now in, one marvels that such disapproval could have occurred'.

of events to suggest the potentiality of tragedy.¹ It is true that David brings about first Hosea's marriage to Gomer and then his reconciliation with her, but in bringing about these events he is simply a convenient dramatic vehicle, the agent through whom God's instructions to Hosea in the Bible² are revealed to the audience. He cannot really be said to 'prophecy' anything. The first two points made by the Religious Drama Society are simply prejudgements, shakily based on the totally inadequate evidence of Nicholson's outline. They betray, one feels, both an unpleasant condescension to the audiences the Society wished to 'protect' and, in effect, little faith in the power of the Church to survive satire, had satire been intended. The play itself is in fact too broad in its treatment to imply satire of any kind other than the perennial, humbling suggestion that improvement is always in order, and the theme of prostitution is not only treated without sensationalism, but is entirely historical, based on the picture presented in the Book of Hosea and the Book of Amos

1. For a view of the Book of Hosea parallel to Nicholson's interpretation of it in A Match for the Devil see Nicholson, 'The Comic Prophet', The Listener, 6 Aug. 1953. This article, published only two weeks before the play's premiere at the Edinburgh Festival, reads partly as a gloss on the play and partly as a defence - aimed at the Religious Drama Society - of Nicholson's 'comic', rather than tragic, view of Hosea's predicament.

2. Hosea i, v.2, and iii, v.1.

of the decline and corruption of the Jewish religion:¹

...and a man and his father will go in
unto the same maid, to profane my holy
name: And they lay themselves down upon
clothes laid to pledge by every altar,
and they drink the wine of the condemned
in the house of their god. (Amos ii, vv.7-8)²

All in all, the reaction of the Religious Drama Society,
palliated by 'not a word of regret, apology or gratitude',³
was a performance almost as ludicrous, seen from a secular
point of view, as it was discreditable.⁴

1. Nicholson defended himself adequately in a letter to George Every of 3 May 1953: 'I feel that though [the play] may not be the correct interpretation of Hosea, it is a justifiable use of his story, quite orthodox in its foundations, and no more perversive of the material than are many sermons of the text on which they are based. And it seems unfair to beg me to write a play which can be performed to audiences who are not churchy in outlook, and then to complain that it will offend those who are'. Though Nicholson's plays may have owed their origin to commissions, this last remark certainly illustrates one of the dilemmas involved in the writing of a commissioned play.
2. This passage is made use of in Amos' speech, pp.54-5.
3. Letter to George Every, 14 Feb. 1953.
4. In a letter to George Every (Tuesday in Holy Week 1953) Nicholson said that: 'I got a cutting from a Sheffield paper [Pamela Keily was Religious Drama adviser for this area] saying that the play had been abandoned because "the Biblical theme was not portrayed with true theological values" - the phrase is evidently quoted from an official statement'. It would seem that the Religious Drama Society, in their concern to cover themselves, were less than fair to Nicholson in their implications here.

Whatever Nicholson's annoyance and disappointment, the practical effect of the ban was to leave on his hands a play 'cut very closely to the requirements' of the New Pilgrims 'and of the audiences they would meet'.¹ He felt it was

...a play for the provinces not for London. Audiences might like the main theme - but the small-town stall-shop atmosphere would be a handicap.²

E. Martin Browne, attempting no doubt to make up for his earlier mistake, consulted T.S. Eliot and Nicholson's agent, Margery Vosper, and for a couple of months inquiries appear to have been made about the possibility of the play's production either on the secular, commercial stage or by experimental groups. By the July of 1953 what would appear on the face of it to be an ideal solution had been arrived at. A Match for the Devil was adopted by the well-thought-of London Club Theatre Group, and it was decided to produce the play during the Edinburgh Festival. The first performance took place in St. Mary's Hall on 28 August 1953.

1. Letter to George Every, 14 Feb. 1953.

2. Ibid.

Though it furnished Nicholson with a theme for his play - that of love and reconciliation rather than law and denunciation - the Book of Hosea offered little in the way of a story line, concentrating as it does on prophecy rather than on historical narrative. Chapter One says simply that Hosea was instructed by God to 'take unto thee a wife of whoredoms' (v.2) and tells how his marriage with Gomer produced three children. Chapter Two suggests her unfaithfulness to him, but the language is so vague that it may refer as much to Israel and God as to Gomer and Hosea. Chapter Three describes how Hosea was further instructed to take back his unfaithful wife. The Bible text, however, seems more interested in Hosea's marriage as a metaphor of God's love for erring humanity than in its domestic details. Nicholson is concerned to convey the divine implications of Hosea's love for Gomer, as appears in this lyrical speech by Hosea to Amos, a speech whose language and rhythm strongly suggest the influence of Christopher Fry on the play:

...here in our love there's a reflection of another love,
 A glimmer of the first fire.
 You've seen the skies, the hanging gardens of heaven -
 God's pussy-willows pollened with stars,
 A universe of pear-trees blossoming with cloud,
 And the great herbaceous border of the sunset?
 There's not a man or woman truly in love
 But can catch the seeds of them, feathering down,
 And grow Paradise in a plant pot. (pp.48-9)¹

But as a dramatist Nicholson is equally concerned with showing the Bible's symbolic figures as human beings, although A Match for the Devil can be described not so much as a play with a plot as an improvisation on the scanty Biblical story. David, Gomer's 'love-child' by a temple worshipper, takes the place of the three children of Hosea's marriage, and acts also as God's messenger to Hosea. Sarah, Rachel, Esther and the Scribe are invented to give Hosea's story a social context and to

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1. Such speeches as this (and there are a number of them in the play) certainly suggest, in their rhythm and fanciful language, the influence of Fry. The sense of Fry's presence in them remains in the mind despite the fact that, on looking through Fry's plays, particularly The Lady's not for Burning (1949) and Venus Observed (1950), for close verbal and rhythmical parallels, one does not find any. The only fair way, therefore, of characterising such speeches is to say that this is how one feels Fry might have written them. Nicholson himself expressed, in a letter to the writer (10 Feb. 1969) a long-standing dislike of Fry's verse and said that his actual intention was 'to suggest the poetical parts of the Old Testament prophets - notably Hosea himself and (though it's not a prophetic book) the Song of Songs'.

suggest the ridicule to which as a cuckold he was exposed, the High Priest Amaziah is imported from the Book of Amos to serve as a sort of apologist for ritual prostitution, and the prophet Amos himself is introduced as the mouthpiece of harsher, disapproving attitudes in contrast with which the tolerance and forgiveness of Hosea can more easily be appreciated.

The play is in verse throughout.¹ Two reasons may be suggested for this. One is that the pseudo-Palestinian setting (chosen instead of a contemporary Cumberland setting probably because the idea of temple prostitution might well have been difficult to transplant) is the sort in which a thoroughgoing use of verse is easier to accept, perhaps because of Nicholson's incorporation into it of Biblical phrasing and imagery.² The other reason lies in the play's fairly constant maintenance of a single tone - a tone of seriously-intentioned 'comedy' rather than the mixture of high and low pressure,

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1. Except for one short, awkward lapse into prose on p.29. I can see no reason for this: the ideas could easily have been accommodated to Nicholson's free-flowing, conversational verse form.
 2. Cf. Eliot, Poetry and Drama (1951), p.23: 'Picturesque period costume renders verse much more acceptable'.

human and divine levels, ancient story and modern setting which characterises The Old Man of the Mountains, and leads in it to an alternation of verse with prose. A Match for the Devil is the only play of Nicholson's which either intentionally follows, or is enabled by its single tone and setting to follow, Eliot's recommendation that 'we should aim at a form of verse in which everything can be said that has to be said'.¹ Nicholson's verse-form is very flexible, based on

...the sense of backward and forward flowing, a balancing not of stress against stress but of the whole cadence of a sentence or phrase against another sentence.²

It is influenced on the one hand by the antiphonal patterning of the Psalms, on the other hand by Ezra Pound's Cantos,³ and is able to modulate easily from ordinary conversational language into prophetic denunciation or colourful lyricism.

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1. Eliot, Poetry and Drama (1951), p.14.
 2. Nicholson, letter to William Brasmer, 24 Sept. 1953. Professor Brasmer, of Denison University, Ohio, produced A Match for the Devil at Denison University in December 1953.
 3. In a letter to George Every of 13 March 1952 Nicholson described the verse as 'out of Pound rather than Eliot'. An earlier letter (9 May 1951) mentioned that Nicholson had been systematically reading through The Cantos.

The ease of the verse is apparent in Hosea's self-introductory speech at the opening of Scene I. Hosea is presented as a baker, according to a tradition which derives from his use of images drawn from baking.¹ This view of him, and his address to the audience, recall the direct, down-to-earth manner of the Miracle Plays, and indeed the simplified motivations of the play as a whole, and its occasional employment of knockabout farce, link A Match for the Devil with the tradition of 'ritual drama'.² The confidential tone which Hosea adopts - introducing himself as a man like his fellows in the audience rather than as a remote observer and judge like the Raven in The Old Man of the Mountains - epitomises the attitude of moderation:

The name's Hosea -
 Baker and confectioner;
 Bread, cakes, scones fresh daily;
 Weddings and funerals catered for.
 I'm a stranger to this part of Jezreel

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1. Hosea vii, vv.4-8.
 2. Cf. the general throwing of loaves (p.60) and Hosea's shaking of Sarah (p.50) with, say, the fighting of Noah and his wife in the Wakefield Play of Noah and the tossing of Mak in a blanket in the Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play (The Wakefield Mystery Plays, ed. Martial Rose, Evans, 1961). Also, in the Miracles, characters like God and Herod begin plays by addressing the audience. Hosea's line 'You giversome grub-hound, I'll have you hanged for it' (p.60) is particularly reminiscent of the work of the 'Wakefield Master', and indeed the whole play's tendency to alliteration links it closely with the alliterative verse of some of the Miracles.

Gomer, Sarah's daughter, represents the religious decadence of the period, in which 'ritual prostitution was tolerated even in the temples of Yahweh',¹ but the presentation of Gomer as a temple prostitute² is a complex one. Though she is seen by Rachel as no more than 'this cast-off comfort girl from the chapel of ease' (p.81), and by her mother, with salacious innuendo, as 'a handmaid./ A Maid very much to hand' (p.17), and by Amos simply as a harlot, Gomer is allowed to present herself, sincerely, as performing a less purely sensual function:

True, desire strikes like an apoplexy:
 Making the senses dizzy with greed -
 But yet there is also a giving: -
 Under the hot nerves, in the cool of the heart,
 There is also a quiet giving...
 To Yahweh. (p.20)

Amaziah, the High Priest, sees her as simply different from 'true' Jews, like Hosea and himself (though this latter equation

1. Nicholson, 'The Comic Prophet', The Listener, 6 Aug. 1953.
2. This view of Gomer as a specifically temple-prostitute is, according to Nicholson, 'now widely accepted'. (Letter to the writer, 21 Nov. 1967). It is an inference based on the strongly personal tone of Hosea's denunciation of temple-prostitution in the Bible.

is not one which Hosea will accept):

Her blood is of the ancient race of Canaan,
Pagan as the stone circles of Gilgal. (p.69)¹

It was perhaps Nicholson's willingness to put forward such views of Gomer that affronted the Religious Drama Society, but because of them the play is prevented from being a tract on the stock Victorian theme of the reformation of a fallen woman.

When Gomer appears in Scene I she has become tired of the 'growing emptiness' of her profession, and left the temple at Samaria. David, the son who is ignorant of what her 'religious duties' have involved, plans to marry her off to Hosea, to whom he has attached himself. Gomer goes along with his plan willingly enough. The process by which David persuades Hosea, 'as proud of being single as if he were commander/ Of all King Jeroboam's chariots', to marry Gomer is omitted, just as Hosea's reasons for obeying God's

1. Cf. Nicholson, 'The Comic Prophet' (1953): ' [The] northern part of Palestine was very vulnerable to the influence of the outside world. The Israelites, in fact, were becoming cosmopolitan. Their religion was modified, diluted - debased, as the prophets would say, with the thoughts and practices of the fertility cults of Canaan'. The second line alludes to the prehistoric stone circles in Cumberland, at Keswick, Swinside, etc.

instruction are ignored by the Bible, and Scene II presents him married to Gomer, happy, uxorious, and taking too much care of her. Gomer wishes to be useful, to feel that she can 'bring something' to the marriage, but Hosea's kindness relegates her unwittingly to the status of an ornament. The touching earnestness of her attempt (p.33) to be of use by curing Hosea's toothache¹ is largely lost on Hosea. When she asks him 'do I bring you nothing?', his answer - too concerned with his own feeling of happiness - is not the reassurance that she seeks:

No, dearest, you bring the flowers from nowhere,
 Holding them like a magician hidden in your sleeve;
 You swill the very flagstones with a bucketful of light.
 You wind up the finches and set the throstles working
 Till every bush tinkles like a musical box. (p.32)

Gomer becomes bored with doing nothing and disappears with the primary intention of getting Hosea the contract to make bread for the temple. While she is away, Amos enters, denouncing the sinfulness of Samaria in his own Biblical words.

1. The incantation she uses to bring about the cure alludes to the second epigraph of the play (Romans xvi, v.20), and thus is closely involved with the play's main theme, which is the power of love.

Hosea interposes, with a moderation founded on his own happiness, a less harsh view of God's relation to man:

...up on your limestone balcony,
 Hearing the wind relaying its messages,
 You learn of the glory of Yahweh,
 The power of Yahweh,
 The judgement of Yahweh,
 But never of the love of Yahweh.
 We can learn more of that here in Jezreel. (p.47)

By a very effective dramatic irony, Hosea is talking in this strain just as Gomer, off-stage, has succumbed again to the attractions of the paganised temple of Jezreel. Sarah, who has been to look for her, reveals the true state of affairs in two harsh and superbly-balanced lines which conclude the scene with a fine effect of shock:

Gomer has returned to her former profession:
 Your wife is one of the temple prostitutes.

Scene III takes place eight months later, an interval which acts as a kind of parallel with the lengthy second chapter of Hosea which is placed between Hosea's marriage to Gomer and her return to him. Hosea's loss of happiness is symbolised by the lack of concentration in his baking, which brings down the complaints of his customers, and the 'wallow', or unsalted,

bread that he does bake. Betrayal by his wife lays him open to the bitter influence of Amos, and on page 58 he speaks in gloomy chorus with him, taking a significantly similar tone. But for him Gomer is not the only harlot; her unfaithfulness symbolises the backsliding of the country as a whole. His picture of this, painted at least as much in sorrow as in anger, presents the first of the three meanings of the play's title:

This land of Israel is a land of harlots...
 This land that Yahweh took as wife,
 His chosen, his cherished one.
 Plaiting the wild vines in her hair,
 Looping her shoulders in a weave of lilies;
 This land that he held as a bridegroom holds his bride,
 Tacking the blue braid of the Jordan in the hem of her
petticoat;
 And this land, this wife
 Has turned away from her husband, away from Yahweh.
 She has become an adulteress.
 She has ogled after heathen lovers,
 She has become a mate for idols,
 A match for the devil. ¹ (p.57)

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1. Cf. George Adam Smith, op.cit., p.331: 'Samaria, fair and facile, lavished her favours on foreigners, and was oftener the temptation than the discipline, the betrayer than the guardian, of her own. The surviving paganism poured into her ample life...From Amos to Isaiah the sins she is charged with are those of civilisation that has been ripe, and is rotten - drunkenness, clumsy art, servile imitation of foreigners, thoughtlessness and cruelty'.

David, acting as the voice of God, suggests that the only way out of the impasse is for Hosea to take Gomer back, but Hosea, unwilling to add to the ridicule of cuckoldry the humiliation of being a complaisant husband, refuses, and the scene ends with David, in a touch of visual symbolism rare in Nicholson's plays, dejectedly looking for the mouse, given him earlier by his mother, which he has lost.¹

Scene IV, however, shows Hosea at the Temple, ready to forgive his wife, and again believing in David's wisdom because of a dream he has had in which David appeared as the Child Samuel.² Hosea is represented as following the instructions of David, who has even told him what to say. He himself does not quite understand God's will for him and is not, in any case, sure that what he is seeking will come about:

But she left me of her own free-will;
And of her own free-will why should she return?
(p.66)

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1. The loss of the mouse, which 'came from the temple' (p.56), stands both for David's sadness at the loss of his mother, and for the sad state Hosea finds himself in now that Gomer has returned to the temple.
 2. This passage is of course a survival of Nicholson's earlier plot for the play, and is not strictly necessary. If one accepts the omission of motivation between Scenes I and II as a parallel with the lack of it in the Book of Hosea, the same justification would apply had Nicholson omitted at this point any reasons for Hosea's second change of attitude.

This was the difficulty Nicholson speaks of having been confronted by when he 'nearly gave up the play', and indeed the scene is not altogether convincing. The changes of direction are rather too rapid, and give the impression of the working out of a preconceived didactic pattern. Just as one feels that Gomer left Hosea rather too abruptly, so her initial response here to his arrival is too easy; and when difficulties do arise, over Hosea's forgiveness of her, which she finds patronising and unacceptable, their solution on a comic level by David's ruse of appearing bedraggled, unsandalled and yet repudiating his and his father's need of her (his trickery earning from Amaziah the sobriquet 'a match for the devil') seems a deliberate lowering of the play's presentation of serious issues. Amaziah's description of debased Judaism hints at intricacies which Nicholson avoids following up, as they might upset the play's balance, but one feels rather cheated as a result:

My dear Hosea, what knowledge have you of our people?
 What knowledge of the way their imagination moves?
 They are pagans still at heart.
 Yet there's a kind of innocence in their idolatry.
 What you call lechery,
 They call the Sacred Marriage of Heaven and Earth -
 The sun-god attending in a procession of flame,

The dawn for his best man,
 The winds to blow the organ;
 What you call harlotry,
 Is a girl giving herself to the sun.
 Plighting herself to the husband of heaven,
 Becoming - in the full absolute of allegory -
 A lover of life. (p.70)

A similar sense that an issue is raised only to be side-
 stepped is produced by Hosea's reaction to Gomer's anger at
 his 'forgiveness'. Hosea seems to accept Amaziah's view that
 Gomer is different, that - at least provided she is willing to
 give up her occupation - her 'difference' must be accepted:

I spoke of forgiving when I ought to have asked for
 forgiveness.

AMAZIAH. Forgiveness? And what for?

HOSEA (to Gomer) For wanting you not what you are;
 For offering you the consciousness of guilt in part-
 exchange for love.

When I speak of sin, Amaziah, I distort her innocence;
 When I speak of forgiveness, I put her in the wrong. (p.79)

This reasoning leads Hosea into deeper waters; he probes into
 the nature of God's forgiveness and seems thus to imply that
 Gomer's hostility to his own forgiveness is understandable:

But what does his forgiveness mean?
 It asks to be what we don't want to be -
 We resent the presumption;
 We deny the right.
 How can God begin to forgive us
 Till we learn to forgive God? (p.79)

At this point Hosea is interrupted by David, and the play is steered rapidly to its conclusion. Hosea is rambling on, and the interruption is dramatically necessary, but it serves the less admirable purpose, one suspects, of avoiding the unsuitably unorthodox conclusion to which Hosea's over-elliptical obscurities may be leading. Nicholson seems to have miscalculated by introducing issues which he then appears to shirk exploring; the matter might well, one feels, have been more satisfactorily handled. Gomer's resistance to Hosea's 'I forgive you' and its sequel also undermine David's position as God's mouthpiece, for it is he who has told Hosea what to say. It seems that in order to secure a moment of crudely-effective reversal - when Gomer throws Hosea's money in his face and says

Go and buy yourself a balloon
And spend your nights watching that no one bursts it
(p.76)

- Nicholson has betrayed himself into the error of implying that God's mouthpiece (on all other points infallible) can be misinformed.

Bumping over these difficulties, the play reaches the conclusion laid down by its source: Gomer does return to Hosea.

In accepting Gomer for what she is (though one may feel that the play's ambiguities of treatment do not succeed in making 'what she is' very clear), Hosea demonstrates the triumph of love over law, which the play's two epigraphs (Genesis iii, V.15 and Romans xvi, v.20) suggest is the final meaning of the play's title. Hosea's return to the joys of marriage is an assertion of the Affirmative Way in the face of the Negative Way represented by the isolationism of Amos. Public ridicule no longer matters, and in their reconciliation Gomer and Hosea prove that it is human love which is 'a match for the devil'. Their reunion is also a metaphor of God's loving relationship with his imperfect creation. Hosea's final happy speech is more truly meaningful than his earlier protestations to Amos in Scene II because his happiness has been painfully gained, 'at a certain cost in silver and barley and at an infinitely greater cost in shame and humiliation':¹

...I see God's pleasure in the broad grin of the oleander;
I hear it in the chuckle of water in the wadis,

1. Nicholson, 'The Comic Prophet' (1953).

In the laughter of the wind among the palms,
 And my wife and I will share the joke with Yahweh,
 The holy joke of marriage. (p.82)

Nicholson once referred to A Match for the Devil as his 'favourite among the plays'.¹ It is clearly a play on which he expended much effort, and is unusual among his output in that it deals not only with a religious theme but with the difficult real relationship between a man and a woman.² Whether one considers A Match for the Devil successful, however, depends on how easily one can accept the 'charade' treatment which Nicholson, writing originally for small-town audiences, adopted as a way of dealing with his subject. Though the three main characters - Hosea, Gomer and David - are lovingly brought to life, the minor characters, with the exception of Amaziah, are little more than stock figures, and introduce into the play an air of bustle and often of farce which, while lively and amusing, blurs its more serious theme. A crucial passage in

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1. Letter to the writer, 11 Feb. 1965.
 2. The marriage of Hosea and Gomer is treated more from the inside than the love (in Prophecy to the Wind) of John and Freya, which displays from the first a solidarity against the opposition of the world that Hosea and Gomer gain only after much misunderstanding.

groups and to entertain local audiences, but whether such an allowance may be made for the play in print is debatable.

Despite Nicholson's statement that his material would be treated 'with plenty of anachronism and no attempt at historical accuracy',¹ his concern about where the action should be located and his care to establish, by quotation from the Books of Amos and Hosea and the Song of Solomon, an Old Testament atmosphere in his poetic language seem to indicate a wish to create historical verisimilitude. Reference to Biblical place-names and events, and the use of Amaziah, a sophisticated, rather Eliotesque character of some dignity,² to suggest the possible spiritual aspects of ritual prostitution bring into the play an illusion of realism which does not always blend very well with the 'charade' elements reminiscent of the anachronistic habits of the medieval Miracle Plays. One has the feeling that one's standards of judgement need to keep changing in order to deal with a manner of presentation

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1. Letter to George Every, 13 March 1952.
 2. His speech 'But it will start again - the wheel you ran away from - / Turning and turning, / The same after the same' (p.72) recalls Becket's use of the 'wheel' image in Murder in the Cathedral, Part I. (Edition of April 1950, p.21).

for which the basis criterion has never quite been decided. Even Nicholson's use of 'biblical' language - evident in its least serious form in Esther's exclamatory use of quotations like 'Quicken me with quinces' and 'Purge me with hyssop' - is not always consistent. A different kind of realism causes him to make characters like Hosea speak sometimes with a Cumbrian 'naturalness', using words like 'lish' and 'giversome' which are out of place in the Palestinian setting of the play. A jarring example is the Scribe's annoyance at the appearance of Hosea and David at the temple:

The rituals of the temple are not to be interrupted
For the sake of every lout of the lonnings.¹

The various mixtures of method and language and of stock provincial comedy and more serious implications which are not followed up make the total effect of A Match for the Devil difficult to assess. I feel that, of all critics of the play, Anne Ridler made the most piercing observation when she wrote in 1955:

1. 'Lonnings' means 'lanes', or 'back-alleys'. David also uses the dialect word 'wallow' (p.59). As he explains its meaning in his next line, its employment seems particularly inappropriate.

Mr. Nicholson has in this play deliberately subdued his talent.¹

A comparison of the play itself with Nicholson's discursive treatment of its theme in his article 'The Comic Prophet' (1953) is certainly to the disadvantage of the former. Judging from the article, Nicholson had clearly been moved deeply by the Book of Hosea and by Hosea's brave gesture in defying the ridicule of his neighbours, but the play, if it succeeds, succeeds on a lower level of emotional intensity. It would be presumptuous, however, to assume that the limitations of the play point to a limitation in Nicholson's talent. A Match for the Devil was written specifically for a kind of audience which the strictures of the Religious Drama Society prevented him from reaching. Had Nicholson been aware from the beginning of the kind of critical climate in which the play would actually be presented he might well have replaced some of the broader comic touches with a more searching exploration of the potentialities of his subject.

Before he went to see his play performed at the Edinburgh

1. Review of A Match for the Devil, Manchester Guardian, 6 Sept. 1955.

Festival, Nicholson wrote to George Every:

I'm going rather apprehensively to Edinburgh, feeling very doubtful whether the critics will take to what they usually feel is so provincial a point of view.¹

The reaction was in fact mixed. An invited audience of nurses, doctors and the like enjoyed the play's Dress Rehearsal 'very much',² and its first night was a success. The audience, once they had 'got hold of the idea of sacred prostitution', 'followed the story intently'.³ Scottish and provincial English reviews approved.⁴ Where the London critics were concerned, however, Nicholson's trepidation was prescient. There were accusations of ineptitude, looseness of dramatic construction, too obvious a didactic intention, superficiality and diffuseness. The Church of England Newspaper, though interestingly enough it did not reproduce any of the objections of the Religious Drama Society, made inevitable but derogatory comparisons

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1. Letter to George Every, 21 Aug. 1953.
 2. Letter to George Every, 28 Aug. 1953.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Nicholson, letter to William Brasmer, 10 Sept. 1953.

between Nicholson's poetry and that of Christopher Fry:

The influence of Christopher Fry's early plays is apparent in the language, without Mr. Fry's subtle ambiguity. The language is altogether too lush; simply to reproduce the most exotic words in the Old Testament is not to produce poetry...¹

The New Statesman (5 Sept. 1953) felt that 'a promising theme' had been turned into 'an anecdote arrived at through masses of verbiage'. Harold Hobson was curtly dismissive:

...my own tepid enthusiasm for the play is due, not to its morals, which seem to me impeccable, but to its dullness, to its wilderness of semi-Biblical metaphors, and its apparent belief that alliterations like 'Quicken me with quinces' are witty.²

Nicholson was very disappointed with the reception of his play by the London critics, partly for practical reasons. He wrote to George Every that their reviews

...seem to have put paid to any further productions of the play, if not, indeed to any hope I may have of becoming a dramatist.³

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1. Church of England Newspaper, 4 Sept. 1953.
 2. The Sunday Times, 6 Sept. 1953. It may be hazarded that Esther's habit of using such tags is intended to indicate her irreverence and decadence; the Song of Solomon is no more to her than a well of secular slang. The effect in practice, however, is of a straining after Christopher Fry-like verbal wit.
 3. Letter to George Every, 7 Sept. 1953.

Considering, however, that its Edinburgh audience and a number of non-London papers had liked A Match for the Devil, Nicholson's statement, later in the same letter, that 'this is the end of me as a dramatist' sounds excessive, an even gloomier version of his feelings after the Watergate Theatre performance of Prophecy to the Wind two years before. In a way, too, it is harder at first sight to understand. In so far as A Match for the Devil was intended for urban provincial audiences, Nicholson's trepidation before its performance in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the Edinburgh Festival is understandable, but by the same token its success with its own Edinburgh audience and with the provincial papers should have enabled him to ignore as irrelevant the hostility of metropolitan critics.

The point, of course, is that a dramatist can conceive a play with one kind of audience in mind and yet still hope that it may succeed with another. One may easily imagine how, after the intervention of the Religious Drama Society had ruined the prospect of performances by the New Pilgrims, the chance of a performance at the Edinburgh Festival might

have conjured up in his mind the possibility of the play's winning over the London critics and so, perhaps, bringing about for him some kind of break-through into the commercial theatre. Only if one constructs the hypothesis that Nicholson's apprehension of failure concealed a wild hope of success can one fully understand the extent of his disappointment. That such a hypothesis is reasonable is suggested by a letter Nicholson wrote to Professor William Brasmer, who produced the play in America:

Of course, one would always like a metropolitan production and a financial success, but, in fact, I have no knowledge either of the London theatre or the fashionable world which attends it.¹

Such knowledge of 'the fashionable world' which attends 'the London theatre' was available to Nicholson at Edinburgh when he saw during his visit a performance of Eliot's The Confidential Clerk. Nicholson's experience seems to have been mildly traumatic, an indication of the gulf which stretched

1. Letter to William Brasmer, 5 Nov. 1953.

between what he had to offer and what the sophisticated theatre-goer wanted, and cannot but have strengthened the depressing impact on him of metropolitan critics' indifference or hostility to A Match for the Devil:

As I looked at the audience at The [Confidential] Clerk I felt really frightened - How, I thought, could I ever have things to say to these people that they would understand. The vast majority come from a class which is represented in Millom only by one or two Jewish financiers none of whom would even [or: 'ever'] speak to me.¹

Nicholson felt that, to such an audience, Eliot's conveyance of his spiritual meaning in the vehicle of drawing-room comedy was far more acceptable than his own presentation of religious themes. It also appeared that, to them, urbane-spoken characters like Sir Claude Mulhammer and Colby Simpkins were far more real than Hosea or, for that matter, Elijah. Although Nicholson's 'morose fit'² did not take very long to dissipate itself, the words of the London critics and his own first-hand

1. Letter to George Every, 7 Sept. 1953.

2. Letter to George Every, 15 Sept. 1953.

experience at Edinburgh of the world for whom they spoke made it clear that the commercial theatre was not for him, and his fourth play, Birth by Drowning, represents a return to the kind of pastoral morality with which he had begun his career as a dramatist.

IV

In the sense that it deals with Elijah's successor Elisha, Birth by Drowning (1960) may be thought of as a sequel to The Old Man of the Mountains. Like The Old Man of the Mountains, Birth by Drowning transfers Old Testament events to a Cumberland setting. Though names and places remain Biblical, the rendering of events is almost entirely in modern terms. I say 'almost' because the story of Elisha, like that of Elijah, contains miracles, and no attempt is made either to leave them out or to rationalise them. Birth by Drowning also resembles Nicholson's first play in employing almost as much prose as verse, the action likewise fluctuating between ordinary conversation and passages of more pointedly thematic content.

The similarities, however, are only of the surface. Compared with The Old Man of the Mountains, with its urgent presentation of a deeply-felt conflict, Birth by Drowning is a play which only rarely involves the emotions, a spectacle rather than a sermon. Whereas Elijah in all his alternations

between muddle and spiritual authority is a character movingly presented from the inside, Elisha is drawn in broader strokes, a near-stereotype of a country doctor whose brisk, blunt and homely manner is well illustrated by this speech early in the play:

(MIRIAM) Seven year of drought you prophesied.

ELISHA And seven year we've had. The pasture dry as an arrowroot biscuit. But now the whole dale is convalescent again. The soil has a good complexion, the air is beginning to smell clean, and the becks are flushing away all the clog and rubbish of the last seven years. I tell you, Samuel, the land is like a man - If you want it to be healthy, you've got to keep its bowels open. (p.16)

Compared, in fact, with all three of Nicholson's previous plays, Birth by Drowning is obviously a lightweight effort, belying the possible complexity suggested by its paradoxical title.¹ That it is lightweight, however, is not necessarily a sign of failure. Its immediate predecessor, A Match for the Devil, seems to me ultimately to fail because of the very way in which

1. Nicholson's original title, What the Doctor Ordered, though rightly vetoed by the play's commissioners, better exemplifies the play's air of 'folksiness'.

its occasional notes of genuine anguish¹ and its tantalising hints of unexplored issues compel one to judge it by serious standards. Birth by Drowning raises no expectations of profundity, and so in a sense disarms criticism. A review of Birth by Drowning in the Church Times which commented on the play's 'vigorous verse...sturdy dialogue..[and] homely humour'² is, I think, more pertinently geared to its quality than one in the Times Literary Supplement which concluded severely:

It would be a difficult moment for anyone arguing the cause of a serious theatre in which poets, if they were dramatists, could take part if they were confronted with this play.³

All Nicholson's plays were written with a specific type of audience in mind, but Birth by Drowning is the only one also to have been written for a particular occasion. This fact must be borne in mind when the play is judged. The Times Literary Supplement listed among its strictures that 'the

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1. One thinks particularly of Hosea's predicament at the end of Scene III.
 2. Church Times, 3 June 1960.
 3. Times Literary Supplement, 8 July 1960.

idea of three gossipy old peaks...as chorus...is basically ludicrous'. This view is not only humourless and rather short-sighted, it also ignores the circumstances of the play's original staging in an open-air theatre where Nicholson felt that having the peaks as speaking characters would enable him 'to move the action from place to place without any break in the dialogue'.¹ Birth by Drowning was commissioned in 1957 by the Committee for Religious Drama in the Northern Province,² whose Adviser was Pamela Kelly, and one may see in the commission a gesture of vicarious amends to Nicholson by one who herself had been deeply disappointed by the Religious Drama Society's ban on A Match for the Devil.³ The specific occasion for which the play was commissioned was the Commemoration Festivities of the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield.

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1. Nicholson, letter to George Every, 2 Jan. 1958.
 2. i.e. of the Church of England.
 3. The memory of the ban was strongly in Nicholson's mind when he was writing Birth by Drowning a full six years later, for a letter to George Every of 10 March 1959 states: '....it does sound as if there are going to be no theological objections to my Three Fells. I took a lot of trouble to avoid this, but couldn't quite be sure how it would strike others'.

These Festivities necessitated

...a play which [could] be enjoyed by some
3 to 4 thousand folk of 'bank-holiday'
texture.¹

The first draft was completed in March 1959, and the play was eventually performed by a cast of theological students at the open-air Quarry Theatre at Mirfield on 9 July 1959.

Much of the play's character can be immediately understood in terms of these practical circumstances. A religious occasion called for a religious subject, and the fact that the audience would be predominantly one of Northerners made a Cumbrian setting virtually inevitable for Nicholson. The great size of the audience - together with the fact that Pamela Kelly was directing a cast of amateurs - made necessary a play which would be fairly humorous in tone, simple in outline, and free of too many nuances of characterisation.² In an open-air theatre the Fells would

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1. Pamela Kelly, letter to the writer, 5 Feb. 1968.
 2. An anonymous review by Nicholson (Church Times, n.d.) of Anne Ridler's play Who Is My Neighbour, also commissioned by the Committee for Religious Drama in the Northern Province, clarifies his own situation with respect to Birth by Drowning: '[The] primary requirement... [of such a play] is that it should be within the acting scope of [Church] groups, while it also has to hold the interest of the not-over-sophisticated audiences who patronise them, and to have a religious content clear and challenging enough to get across'.

not provoke the embarrassment which an indoor presentation might entail, and their 'larger-than-life' effect would be appropriate. In an outdoor theatre employing few scenic props, the Fells serve a purpose comparable to that of a Greek chorus, commenting on the action, anticipating the entry of some of the human characters, and indicating the passage of time. They also perform two other functions, that of describing the physical scene and that of embodying God's instructions to his prophet. Unlike the Raven in The Old Man of the Mountains, however, the Fells do not address the audience. The fact that the play begins with the peaks calling to each other and ends with the echoes of their messages also becomes more meaningful given the acoustics of outdoor performance.¹

The key incident in the play, as the title indicates, is the healing of Naaman by Elisha described in II Kings v, but this is not treated until Act III, and the play as a whole actually represents the weaving together of a number of

1. Cf. T.S. Eliot, Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern (New York, 1954), p.20: 'I think that plays to be performed in the open air should be written, as Greek drama was, expressly for the open air'.

incidents and occasions in the Second Book of Kings. Nicholson treats his source material very freely, not only in the obvious way of giving it a contemporary atmosphere but by rearranging the Biblical material in an order of his own. In fact the material is presented in reverse order. Act I deals with the return to Shunem farm of its occupants (called by Nicholson Samuel and Miriam) after the seven years' drought prophesied by Elisha in II Kings viii, vv.1-6. They bring with them the son whom Elisha restored to life in II Kings iv, v.35, and this incident is referred to, with a humorous slanting, on pp.13-14. Nicholson, however, alters his material here by giving the son the name Gehazi, and having him become Elijah's apprentice, both in a medical and a spiritual sense. He thus runs together two completely different Biblical characters, partly for economy, but partly to avoid the incident in II Kings v, v.27, where the real Gehazi was afflicted by Elisha with leprosy as a punishment for his attempt to take payment from Naaman after his cure. The change tones down the Biblical harshness¹ and,

1. A similar wish both to use Biblical material and to reduce its unpleasant implications manifests itself on p.41, where Dan tells Naaman of the incident in II Kings ii, vv.23-4 where 'two she bears' avenge a harmless insult to Elisha by 'tearing' forty-two children. The incident is recounted in fairy-tale terms: the children are eaten up, but by three bears, who will, of course, remind the audience of the story of Goldilocks.

to make assurance doubly sure, Nicholson terminates the play at the point where his invented Gehazi leaves the stage along with Naaman. The 'commercialising' of Elisha's miracle is referred to, but only in Naaman's harmless words 'Your cure will bring prosperity to the dale' and in Joram's wish to

...talk over the practicability
Of opening a small hotel.

Act I takes place in an atmosphere of 'Border raids', which recall the medieval history of Cumberland as a debatable land between England and the Scots.¹ The Biblical source for this atmosphere is the constant friction between Syria and Israel, and Act II dramatises its culmination in the King of Syria's attempt, described in II Kings vi, to abduct Elisha. As in the Bible, Elisha is saved by divine intervention. This is described in Scene I in a Cumbrian version of the Biblical terms:

ELISHA Look at the fell-top.
 Look at the mist that hangs there
 As if that crag, crashing five hundred feet,
 Were a waterfall splashing spray in the air.

1. The germ of this idea was already present in The Old Man of the Mountains. See 1950 edition, p.16: (MARTHA) '...you know there's no love lost between those Northmen and us'.

Look at the sun,
 Quick as a trout, there, swimming in the mist.
 See it twisting as the wind swivels the current:
 See it diddering in the ripples of the vapour.
 There, Gehazi, stare straight into the glare of
 the sun.

What do you see?

GEHAZI. Horses! White horses and chariots of fire;
 The sky alive with horses.

In Scene II it is the Fells themselves who save Elisha from capture and the dale from infiltration by intruding in charade-fashion on the action, blindfolding Naaman and the Lieutenant with greyish muslin scarves to symbolise mountain-mist, and, in a version of 'Oranges and Lemons', leading them astray until they are back in their own country, Borderland, again:

Chase and chastise 'em
 Say the winds of Gerizim.
 Bend your backs lower
 Say the tracks of Gilboa.
 Shin up the steeple
 Say the crags of Mount Ebal.

.....
 Here comes a raven to peck out your eyes;
 And here comes a whirlwind to blow a SURPRISE.

During all this, Elisha himself helps in leading the 'Bordermen' astray, and when the scene ends the humiliated Naaman realises he has this 'stranger' to thank for not having been handed over

to his opposite number, General Joram.¹

The reason Nicholson has added to his source by making Naaman the leader of the soldiers who attempt in vain to abduct Elisha is clarified in Act III. Naaman comes to him, not knowing his connection with the previous incidents, to be cured of his leprosy. Elisha has been represented in Act I as a doctor who 'can only attend those who belong to this dale', and the curing of Naaman is made an example of the need for human brotherhood, despite differences of nationality. The fact that Naaman is already in Elisha's debt, as well as his former enemy, makes him more reluctant to accept the cure (the banal nature of which, as in the Bible, he resents), and makes the cure itself even more of an act of kindness on Elisha's part. In addition the cure is a surprise to Elisha. The Fells have described him in Act I as hard of hearing (unlike 'the doctor before him', Elijah), and when they tell him in Act III of the

1. The name 'Joram', for this invented character, is that of a King of Israel and son of Ahab (vide II Kings viii, vv.28-9). Naaman is called 'Captain' in an over-literal rendering of his Biblical description as 'captain of the host of the King of Syria' (II Kings v, v.1), i.e. General. There seems no adequate reason for the choice of Captain's rank, which is obviously a confusion with modern terms.

cure for an as yet unknown patient:

Tell him to go and wash himself in the beck. (p.51)
 he does not for some time connect the remedy with Naaman,
 saying still that:

The echoes speak only for those who belong to the dale.
 (p.56)

Eventually the realisation strikes him, and he passes on to
 Naaman his own newly-discovered truth, that

...you are the first man from beyond the bounds of the dale
 That the echoes ever spoke for. (p.58)

Nicholson's reversal of the Biblical order of events can
 therefore be seen not only as a desire to put into meaningful
 sequence what is in the Bible an episodic presentation
 of incidents,¹ but also as a desire by so doing to give the
 play both a story and a theme: in human terms, the need to
 forgive, and in political terms, the need to transcend the
 limitations of a parochial outlook. The theme is drawn out

1. There may also be another, textual reason. In II Kings v, 27, Gehazi is struck by leprosy, but in II Kings viii, 4 he talks to the King of Syria. It seems a trifle unlikely that the King of Syria would have spoken to Gehazi had he been a leper, and this unlikelihood suggests a non-sequential order of events for the various chapters of II Kings in which Ch.8 (the end of the drought) actually precedes Ch.5 (the curing of Naaman). The fact that Nicholson's Gehazi is not the Gehazi of Scripture does not, of course, interfere with this line of reasoning, which, if true, may have given Nicholson a justification for altering the Biblical story for his own purposes.

by Elisha:

For we have learned
 That the Lord speaks not just to this dale
 But to the broad world. The echoes sound
 Far beyond the bounds of these mountains,
 And 'Bordermen' and 'foreigner' and 'enemy'
 Are words that have no meaning any more. (p.62)¹

It is a view which clearly has great significance for Nicholson himself, as a provincial writer aware of the dangers of provincialism, but it would be a mistake to suggest that it predominates throughout the play, except in so far as the 'Border' disharmony in which the various incidents take place requires some sort of resolution. Elisha's words have the baldness of an abstract summary, and their seriousness is not adequately prepared for by the play's earlier mixture of comedy, rustic realism and charade. The actual curing of Naaman - rather than the moral which is educed from it - is presented in terms of broad farce, with the 'twin Pikes' holding a ewer and a basin and splashing Naaman with water in

1. A letter to George Every (undated, c. mid-or late 1957) indicates that the germ of this idea was in Nicholson's mind from the beginning: 'The play will turn on the fact that Naaman is the soldier of an ex-enemy country - and the needs for helping, and for accepting help, from those we like least'.

a symbolic, parodic baptism. The end of the play swerves off into a not very relevant repetition of the conclusion of The Old Man of the Mountains, with Elisha deploring the way in which the dalesfolk have missed the point of the cure - God's message of brotherhood - and deciding to

...climb to the high crags: I'll converse with the echoes
When the fell wind blows strong.

Such a reaction is inappropriate to Elisha, who has not during the course of the play been portrayed as an insecure prophet alternately trusted and derided by the people among whom he lives, but as a much more downright, simple character, though some more sensitive touches are given to him during his interview with Naaman in Act III, which provides the play with its few moments of deeper feeling. It is, however, on the whole only proper that the Fells, echoing all his final words,¹ should think his decision 'wrong' and recall him to his true duty 'to hear for those who have no ears'. The expansive last lines seem to pull the Third Act's loose ends almost forcibly

1. For this 'echo' effect, cf. George Herbert, 'Heaven', Works, ed. F.E. Hutchinson, Clarendon Press, 1941, p.188.

stereotyped, pseudo-military slang is mildly embarrassing:

My dear Lieutenant, who on earth are you calling 'Enemy'? You're not under the impression that we're fighting a war, are you?

.....
 [We're] Merely making a disturbance. Merely letting off a few whizzbangs so that somebody can protest and somebody can apologise and somebody else can make a profit out of both. Well, I don't complain about that. But I do complain when my whizzbangs don't go off. (p.40)

The verse of the play is much more interesting. As in The Old Man of the Mountains, verse is not reserved for specific characters according to a preconceived division of them into 'prosaic' and 'poetic' but can be used by any of them, at those points where Nicholson wishes to underline the significance of the action. Technically, it resembles the verse used in A Match for the Devil in consisting of an approximate alternation of longer and shorter unrhymed lines. Because the line-lengths parallel the rhythm of individual phrases, the play is able to modulate without awkwardness from verse to prose and back again to verse. But though the language of the verse is handled colloquially and does not allow the verse-medium to draw attention to itself, the quiet but definite patterning of stresses

has its unconscious effect on the ear:¹

(ELISHA) But I can tell you nowt. For weeks
 The fells have been empty of all echoes.
 Not even the thunder seems to rouse them.
 I've shouted and shouted,
 Chucked my voice against those crags -
 But it's like spitting into cotton-wool.

The same rhythmic alternation is apparent in sequences where a number of characters speak.

Birth by Drowning differs, however, from Nicholson's other plays in employing two kinds of verse: that which I have just described, spoken by the human characters, and the verse given to the Three Fells, which is based on the same alternation of line-lengths, but uses ingenious end-rhyme to create an effect of choral stylisation and, very frequently, of comedy. The conception of the Fells themselves is obviously the most striking aspect of the play, and they serve so many purposes that it is impossible to imagine the play without them. From their great height they enable the 'Border' situation to

1. One may surmise in this kind of verse some influence by the poetry of Marianne Moore. In an article on her poetry (British Weekly, 7 Aug. 1952) Nicholson commented appreciatively: '...to the present reviewer...her poetry seems to be among the most surely-made, the most valuable, and the most pleasure-giving of any of the last quarter of a century'.

be seen from both sides, as none of the individual characters could see it, and, in their unassuming way, they give the play's human action both a natural and a divine background. Their names, Gilboa, Ebal and Gerizim, make clear the play's historical location in the plains and mountain passes of Northern Samaria,¹ but by calling Gilboa 'Great Gilboa', and Ebal and Gerizim 'the twin pikes', Nicholson is easily able to suggest a modern Cumberland setting: the similarity to Great Gable, Scafell and Scafell Pike is obvious. It may in addition be said that on one's ability to accept the humanisation of the Fells - as gossipy, cross-talking middle-aged housewives - depends one's ability to enjoy the play.

Nicholson threw himself into composing verse for the Fells with such effect that one is tempted to agree with a surmise he made during the course of the play's composition that 'they'll probably turn out to be more human than everyone else'.²

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1. Nicholson's geographical knowledge in this play, as in A Match for the Devil, derives from George Adam Smith, A Historical Geography of the Holy Land, Hodder and Stoughton 1894; Fourth Edition Revised 1896. See especially p.119, p.122, p.327.
 2. Letter to the writer, 30 Oct. 1958.

Apart from the description of the Borderland soldiers by Elisha and Gehazi from their vantage point high on the mountain-side in Act II, Scene I, the Fells have the bulk of the play's colourful poetry. For all their homeliness, they open the play with a description which is clear and arresting:

GERIZIM. What's the weather like at your end of the dale?

GILBOA. A beautiful morning, Mount Gerizim; a pale
Green mist lifting up from the sea like a venetian
blind,

And the wind
Soap-sudding all the doorsteps of the shingle.

Much of the writing for the Fells, especially when seen on the page, has a decidedly virtuoso air. If one is not hampered by thinking them 'basically ludicrous', one can enjoy, and admire, the ingenuity Nicholson brings to their speeches. He wrote to George Every that

... [the Fells'] most 'poetic' images are often
presented in deliberately comic language. I
enjoyed myself enormously when I wrote their lines.¹

The comedy is theatrically most striking in their various charade performances when they intervene to assist the action, but it

1. Letter to George Every, 20 July 1959.

can be appreciated equally well in the published play in their versification, with its skilful and often unlikely rhyming, as when Gilboa describes the neglected state of the Fells after the seven years' drought:

And here, in the dale bottom, I'm up th the shins in mud;
bogged

And water-logged;
 My hair's turning to peat, and fool's celery's cluttering
up my gullies.

I've knitted woollies
 Out of every scrap of bog-cotton I could rake together. But
there's nowt like a static

Dyke-drain for aggravating my sciatica.

Ever since Samuel left Shunem farm

My left arm

Flank has been sorely neglected. (p.8) ¹

To attack Birth by Drowning, with its mixture of naturalistic dialogue and simple expressionism, would be deliberately to miss its point. To sneer at its humour would be a form of literary snobbery rather than literary criticism. It is a play which aims low, even at the provincial audience level for which it was intended, and to treat it at greater length would be to give it an altogether false position among Nicholson's plays.

1. The versification and rhyming of the Fells should be compared with Nicholson's contemporary tour-de-force poem 'Scree'. (Northern Broadsheet No.4, Titus Wilson, Kendal, Spring 1958).

It fulfilled the purpose for which it was conceived: it pleased its audiences - of the "parish party" type,¹ - both at Mirfield and at the performances which Pamela Keily subsequently directed in Manchester and Sheffield, and even drew from the Bishop of Wakefield, in whose diocese it was first produced, the statement that its commissioning had been 'magnificently'² vindicated. What it finally reveals - and this holds true to a lesser extent of Nicholson's three other plays - is that Nicholson's drama is essentially practical. Without thereby denigrating his verse plays, one may call him, not a playwright by primary vocation, turning to the drama as his inevitable means of expression, but a poet adopting dramatic form to body forth, more publicly than poetry allowed, his religious concerns. His plays are less finished works of the playwright's art whose hidden subtleties may be appreciated in printed form than a dramatic equivalent, to use the composer Hindemith's term, of Gebrauchsmusik - plays intended for use.

1. Pamela Keily, letter to the writer, 5 Feb. 1968.
2. Quoted by Nicholson, letter to George Every, 20 July 1959.

V

Norman Nicholson started to write plays at a time when poetic drama seemed to promise the theatre an injection of new vitality. In the nineteen-thirties, Auden, Spender and MacNeice had turned to poetic drama as a means of expressing their social and political views. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral ran for a year at the Mercury Theatre in 1937/8. At the turn of the decade Charles Williams began to write his verse plays for the Oxford Pilgrims. E. Martin Browne's season of 'Plays by Poets' in 1945 attracted considerable attention in the national press, and in 1950 no fewer than four plays by Christopher Fry were running simultaneously in London. It is not surprising, therefore, that G.S. Fraser, in his original version of The Modern Writer and His World (1953), could feel that 'the revival of the poetic drama...might bring back more fulness and life'.¹ By 1964, however, he had changed his views; for reasons it would

1. See 1964 Edition (Penguin Books), p.199.

be beyond my scope to consider here,¹ poetic drama seemed no longer to have much to offer. Nicholson's last play, Birth by Drowning, was first produced in 1959, three years after Look Back in Anger had already indicated a change of dramatic direction which included a return to the predominance of prose.

One may trace in the number of performances given to each of Nicholson's plays a curve whose steady fall is in part attributable to the decline of interest in verse drama as a medium. Against at least twenty-four separate presentations of The Old Man of the Mountains one can set no more than four of Birth by Drowning. A less exterior explanation, however, may be found in the gradual slackening of intensity perceptible in the plays themselves. Although he considered that Prophecy to the Wind and A Match for the Devil were technical improvements on The Old Man of the Mountains, this first play, for all its

1. One of them - the audience's basic distrust of verse - is suggested by Kenneth Muir in 'Verse and Prose', Contemporary Theatre, (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 4), Edward Arnold, 1962. Another is perhaps a developing lack of sympathy with the Christian views which so many verse plays presented. The simplest explanation, no doubt, is the revitalisation of prose drama by such playwrights as John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter and John Arden.

frequent echoes of Eliot and its air of earnest didacticism, remains emotionally his most powerful one. It has been performed as recently as 1960. Nicholson once spoke of having for it 'a doting father's affection',¹ which sounds a little patronising, but the sense which the play communicates of its author's strongly-felt concern for his theme is such as to render its occasional stiffness of technique comparatively unimportant.

The influence of T.S. Eliot on Nicholson's plays has been indicated earlier in this chapter. Overtones of Christopher Fry, whose A Phoenix too Frequent was one of the plays presented at the Mercury Theatre in 1945, are also discernible in one or two places, particularly in A Match for the Devil.² It is however, with Anne Ridler and Ronald Duncan that Nicholson has generally been grouped by critics, since all three of them contributed religious plays to the 1945 Mercury Theatre season and all of them 'show the influence of Eliot's dramatic

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1. Letter to George Every, 23 July 1951.
 2. See also Prophecy to the Wind (1950), John's speech at top of p.33.

verse-line'.¹ The grouping is more a shorthand convenience of literary history than the result of a careful comparison of the three writers' 1945 plays. Ronald Duncan's This Way to the Tomb employs various types of verse form, balances a serious, introspective treatment of the past, in lines recalling Eliot and Pound, with a satirical, revue-like comment on the irreligious, rationalist present, and displays a self-regarding sophistication which is, perhaps luckily, quite out of Nicholson's range. Anne Ridler's The Shadow Factory has a theme not basically dissimilar from that of The Old Man of the Mountains - the correct use of power - but deals with it in an unequivocally modern context in terms of middle- and working-class urban characters, and its climax in the Nativity Tableau (Act 2, Scene 2) has perhaps a more immediate appearance of relevance to its time than Nicholson's refurbishing of the Old Testament story of Elijah. Like This Way to the Tomb, the play offers an introspective presentation of its central

1. David Daiches, The Present Age (after 1920), Cresset Press, 1958, p.159.

character - indeed the musings of Anne Ridler's Director¹ and of Duncan's St. Anthony have their origins both of subject matter and language in the speeches of Becket in Murder in the Cathedral. Such an introspective element is rare in Nicholson's plays. Much of the verse of The Shadow Factory consists of short four-stress lines, 'rhythmic ordinary speech'.² Nicholson saw in the play more of the influence of Auden than that of Eliot and felt that it was 'much more experimental and adventurous than mine'.³

Nicholson's view of his own plays is a very modest one:

I make [no] exorbitant claims for the plays. They are only a very minor contribution to modern verse drama, and only to a special and smaller corner in it. But I do feel that they fulfil a purpose, that they can speak to the audiences for which they were designed, and that, in their little way, they give a kind of tang or tone which can be found nowhere else in modern drama.⁴

In 1953 he defined his particular 'tone', not very helpfully,

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1. Anne Ridler, The Shadow Factory, Faber, 1946, pp.49-50.
 2. Nicholson, letter to George Every, 1 Sept. 1944.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Nicholson, letter to the writer, 11 Feb. 1965.

as being 'in the tradition of Dekker and John Day and George a Green'.¹ It is difficult to know exactly what he meant by this - one can see little similarity between, for instance, The Shoemaker's Holiday, and Simon Eyre in particular, and Nicholson's characters and plays, which are alike (apart from the case of Prophecy to the Wind) rural and religious - but one imagines that he intended to suggest by his comparison the essentially unsophisticated appeal of his plays.

Most obviously the 'tang' of the plays resides in their attempt, by making convenient use of Nicholson's geographical area, to localise and objectify religious themes and to express them in language which is either sharply visual or given energy by an admixture of dialect words and inflections. In using this same method in his poetry - that is, in writing about what is closest to his own experience - Nicholson manages to communicate without undue restriction of audience, because he is able to measure more precisely the amount of local material he can use without endangering a poem's wider application, and

1. Letter to George Every, 7 Sept. 1953.

because his own personality supplies the poem's unifying element. Where, however, he has created characters, where he has used the 'third voice' of poetry, his touch has been less sure: the speech and behaviour of his characters sometimes draw undue attention to the local setting and so restrict the communication of the play to few more than those people in the audience who resemble them.¹ One may put the matter in a slightly different way. In his poems Nicholson is able to attain a more than provincial appeal because he himself - and it is his own personal views which his poems express - is more than simply a provincial. By choosing to write plays which present many ordinary provincial characters - a correct enough choice given the kind of audience at which he aimed, perhaps his only choice given the kind of people among whom he had spent his life - and by allowing these characters to function on a realistic local level, Nicholson made it very hard for himself to transcend provincially as a dramatist. One may indeed feel finally that, though the plays have both vitality and a degree of verbal beauty, by comparison

1. In a letter to George Every (7 Sept. 1953) Nicholson said that: '...the audiences I know are...composed of people like Hosea'.

with his poetry they allow Nicholson's mind and imagination insufficient scope, and that, for circumstantial, economic reasons, Nicholson may in all of them, to varying degrees, have 'deliberately subdued his talent'.¹

1. Anne Ridler, Review of A Match for the Devil, Manchester Guardian, 6 Sept. 1955.

CHAPTER SIX: POETRY SINCE 1954.

Norman Nicholson's three main volumes of poetry, discussed in Chapter Four, appeared at average intervals of about five years. After The Pot Geranium (1954) one could therefore have expected the publication of a fourth volume by the end of the decade. In fact, Nicholson had by 1960 produced only twenty new poems;¹ these have been supplemented in the last nine years by a dozen or so more, but Nicholson does not expect to publish a further volume for another few years yet.

The impression of flagging poetic vitality given by this brief summary is partially corrected, however, when one realises that the fifteen-year period since 1954 contains three distinct phases. In the first, which lasted until the end of 1959, Nicholson produced twenty poems, an average of only four

1. I count in this total the poem 'On Suspected Dry Rot in the Roof of a Parish Church', which appeared in the New Statesman (25 July 1953). According to a letter from Nicholson to George Every of 3 May 1953, the final choice of poems for inclusion in The Pot Geranium had been made by that time, so this particular poem was probably written just too late to be included. There is no reason to suppose it would be excluded from a later volume.

per year. Such an output was certainly very small by comparison with that of previous years, and one can fairly speak of a gradual drying-up of the poetic impulse, though some individual poems, notably 'September on the Mosses', are as fine as anything Nicholson has written. The second phase, from 1960 to the middle of 1965, was one of complete poetic silence. In 1965, however, Nicholson wrote a longish autobiographical poem entitled 'The Seventeenth of the Name', which broke distinctly new ground and stimulated his dormant poetic faculty. This third phase, now in its fourth year, has produced fourteen poems which significantly extend Nicholson's range and yet, because they can be seen as a natural development of what preceded them, do not upset the continuity of his poetic work as a whole.

Writing in about 1956 in a Northern students' magazine, Nicholson referred to himself in passing as a poet who, having reached the age of forty, had 'lost his first wind' and was 'not yet...sure of his second'.¹ Nicholson's 'first wind',

1. Norman Nicholson, prefatory note to 'A Statement of Aims', The Grapevine, c. 1956, p.9. This magazine, further details of which I have not been able to trace, was a student production issuing from either Northumberland or County Durham.

originating with 'The Blackberry' in 1939, had carried him from the provincial descriptive pieces of Five Rivers to the overt justification of provincial experience demonstrated by the poems of The Pot Geranium. One gets from his work later in the 1950s the impression that, though he was still capable of writing individual good poems, Nicholson had been left high and dry, without that purposeful awareness of a central theme in his work which marks his third volume. Some of these later poems, though not precisely repetitions, seem to be the product of impulses which had found intense expression already: examples are 'On Suspected Dry Rot in the Roof of a Parish Church' and 'Scree'. Two others, 'Birthday Card' and 'Of this Parish', are faint stirrings of an awareness of his parents and his relationship to the past which Nicholson was to register more powerfully in and after 1965. 'Old Man at a Cricket Match', alone among the poems of the later 'fifties, provides a two-way link, between the 'remark' poems of The Pot Geranium and those of the last four years: 'A Local Preacher's Goodbye', 'The Riddle' and 'Have You Been to London?' Many of the remaining poems may be classed as either occasional (like 'Ferry on the Mersey' [1954], whose descriptive piquancy is unrelated to any

particular point in the poem as a whole), or merely abortive.

That Nicholson was aware of, and dissatisfied with, his poetry's lack of direction in the later nineteen-fifties is suggested by his deletion of four poems written in 1955/56. These poems still exist in manuscript, but they have not been published and Nicholson now disowns them. Two of them, 'Christmas Present' and 'Of Becoming', seem to have been composed without any real poetic pressure behind them, and the latter poem shows this lack of pressure in its laboured permutation of abstract terminology:

The Is in the Might,
 The immutable ability
 In mutability.
 Make Becoming
 A coming to Be: -

The other two take Nicholson's sense of poetic inadequacy as their theme. 'The Searcher' presents his inability to find anything to write about, even in areas which had previously been very fruitful. The alliterations of stanza two suggest deliberate self-mockery, perhaps even a sense that 'rock', a once favourite subject, was played out:

He quarried questions, racked the rock,
 Pothole and pinnacle and pike,
 Prospecting for the prosperous ore -
 But not a poem did he strike.

Sir Philip Sidney's remedy for poetic barrenness - 'Look in thy heart and write' - is no specific for Nicholson. After 1965 he was able to write more directly of himself in the context of his childhood and his family relationships, but he has rarely at any time been a personal poet of the lyric sort, and 'The Searcher's last stanza indicates more than a temporary limitation:

He looked inside his smuggling heart;
 He spied the poem there and then.
 Smiling, he skewered it from his breast,
 And watched his heart die on his pen.

'The Waste of Words' has a different emphasis. The inadequacy is seen here not so much as a lack of subject matter, but as a deficient critical sense which does not know what to select and an inability to find language simple enough to satisfy the poet's new sense of what is suitable. Nicholson seems to be impatient with merely momentary poetic impulses:

So I'll spare now
 The abounding bough
 Till wanting come.

Here 'wanting' clearly signifies a response to experience much deeper than the superficial desire to write a poem about something: the lines suggest that Nicholson was in search of, or simply waiting for, a vein of subject matter which he could explore in depth and which he could make his own, as he had been able to do up to 1954. One feels too an impatience with the richness of language which had characterised many of his earlier poems, a richness not necessarily the inevitable expression of a complex subject but often a merely automatic habit of tautology and unnecessary alliterative emphasis, as in these lines from 'The Orphan':

Pigs of daylight flood and fill
Every gulley, hutch and hole,
Like molten metal tipped to cool.¹

'The Waste of Words' suggests repudiation of such a manner of writing:

Squirrel and miser
Practise a wiser
Way; hencehomeward, while
Yet there's time, I'll
Never use two
Where one will do.

1. The Pot Geranium (1954), p.45.

One thinks immediately of Yeats, who in 'A Coat' (1914) decided that '...there's more enterprise/ In walking naked'. Unfortunately, though Nicholson was frequently to employ a more economical diction after 1965, at this time he could speak of it more easily than he could practise it, and many lines in this poem reveal the very fault he wished to avoid:

Not a stitch left
Of word or weft,
All ripped and reft
From tip and side.

A poem which Nicholson did not delete, but which he now thinks unsatisfactory, is 'The Affirming Blasphemy'.¹ The title's air of paradox and portentousness is not encouraging, and the whole poem is emotionally forced, its rhetorical use of exclamatory phrases and its overloaded, fanciful language gesturing at some important theme which it does not finally succeed in communicating:

The world's one No
Drags cold across the land; a harrow of iron
Rips up the soil and grapples deep in the rock.
Trees are charred in the freezing wind; a black

1. Times Literary Supplement, 10 Dec. 1954.

Hoar of soot settles on leaf and petal,
 Congealing all to mineral nullity. Coal-
 black ice, in packs and fractures, retched
 Up pit-shafts' frozen geysers, binds
 The lie against the light. Glaciers of denial
 Grind outwards from the black, blaspheming Pole:
 "Good God, man, no! No good,
 No God".

The natural imagery is characteristic enough, though its handling is clumsy and muscle-bound and recalls both Nicholson's pre-War echoes of Hopkins and some of the less successful poems in Rock Face. What is uncharacteristic is the poem's obscurity: individual phrases (for instance 'the sky's one seed', followed immediately - and thus with an appearance of significance - by 'the seed's one star') are baffling, and the poem's broad panorama of visual phenomena leaves no total impression in the mind beyond a vague sense of seasonal death and rebirth. That the poem is intended to convey more than this vague sense is suggested by the way its final phrase ('Good (Yes, girl) God') is a re-ordering of its initial exclamation ('Good God, girl, yes!'), by the punning inversion (serious in its intention but clever-clever in its effect) of 'God and his goodness' into 'Good and its godness', and by the repeated pattern of the phrases 'the world's one Yes'

and 'the world's one No', whose meanings are no less inaccessible for Nicholson's apparent belief that they are too obvious to need clarification. Despite these verbal indications of an intellectual structure in the poem, and thus of a meaningful content, the meaning does not emerge. The poem's obscurity is all the more surprising because the initial text it springs from, a young Mexborough girl's preference for her colliery-town home over America, is of a kind for which one would have thought Nicholson particularly able to provide a moving and lucid commentary. That he should so signally have failed to do so - a failure which he admitted in 1967,¹ feeling that the confusion in the poem (which he now no longer really understands himself) sprang from a confusion in his own mind - suggests the erratic operation of his poetic powers at this time.

It would however be a mistake to emphasise only the negative aspects of the period from 1954 to 1959 and thus imply a complete absence from it of worthwhile poems. 'The

1. In conversation with the writer.

'Affirming Blasphemy' is counteracted by far better work from 1954 to 1956, and though the malaise evidenced by the four deleted poems provides an explanation for Nicholson's poetic silence from 1960 to 1965, the publication of 'Bond Street' as late as 1958 is convincing testimony of the continued vitality - however intermittent - both of his language and of his local subject matter. It is to his good poems of the 'fifties, therefore, that I shall now turn.

The theme of decay and rebirth as seen in nature, which Nicholson had expressed in 'The Seven Rocks' and particularly in its last section, 'St. Bees Sandstone', continued to interest him up to about 1956, and is dealt with in a number of poems, the first of these being 'On Suspected Dry Rot in the Roof of a Parish Church'. The church was St. George's, Millom, which had been built of St. Bees sandstone in the eighteen-seventies. Nicholson sees the church initially as a kind of monument to the gradual geological process which turned the sand of pre-historic deserts into the sandstone out of which men have made many of their buildings - as, in fact, the visible link between man and his natural environment. The church is described

in terms which make its natural origins quite clear, yet the 'sandstorm' which 'built it' now seems to have solidified into the permanence of something timeless:

This whirlwind stratified mid in its whirl,
 This mirage you can break your ankles on,
 This dried-blood delta of permian denudation,
 Proud paleozoic
 Corpse of a desert mummified into stone,
 Hierarchic and heroic,

This act, this accident, this church - has felt
 No change of climate, known no count of clock.

Yet inside this solid stone, the process of decay has started. The signs of dry rot are indicated with a lively colloquialism not altogether in keeping with the scientific, even pedantic language which precedes and follows it:

Someone's left the cold tap dripping in the belfry.-
 Look at the stain!

The fact that dry rot specifically affects the church's timber roof does not alter the point which Nicholson is making: stone also decays, both in buildings and in its natural state, through erosion. Nothing on earth is permanent, and the dissolution commented on in the last stanza can be seen as the natural complement to the process of evolution, from shifting sand to 'solid' sandstone church, outlined at the beginning. What

Nicholson is doing in the poem is speeding up the natural pattern of growth and decay so that it is visible to the human eye, and so that both aspects of this pattern can be realised to be of equal importance in the cycle of life. The image of the 'microbe' which 'corrupts' is balanced by the 'spore' and, in human terms, the 'spirit' which 'plant gardens' even in such an apparently infertile substance as sand:

Fungus probes deeper than the wind that blows
Over these vertical dunes. Life, rotting on the bare
Detritus of a dead star, blossoms as the microbe,
Corrupting beam and band;
Spirit and spore under bright infected air
Plant gardens in sand.

The same theme is dealt with in 'Scree'. This was published in 1958, but in a letter of the previous year Nicholson referred to it as a poem 'not new, but as yet unpublished, because I had forgotten about it'.¹ It would therefore seem to date from 1956 or even earlier. It is in content simpler than 'On Suspected Dry Rot', being concerned with the stratification and erosion

1. Letter to the writer, 7 March 1957.

of rock as a single constantly-moving process with no central point of apparent fixity such as the church provides in the earlier poem. Its ending also suggests rebirth more explicitly, not only by the use of the word 'seed' but by a change and quickening of rhythm and a final triple rhyme. What draws perhaps more attention than its theme, however, is the virtuosity of the poem's method. This virtuosity partly consists in the presentation of rock-processes in terms of the extended metaphor of 'a great tree'; the geological stages are made easier to grasp by being described in imagery to which the layman's imagination has more likely access, and this imagery also has the advantage for the poet of providing a legitimate, natural way of compressing into a shorter time-span a process which in reality lasted 'a million centuries'. The virtuosity is even more obviously a matter of technique: the poem very skilfully alternates longer and shorter rhymed lines, and within these lines is crammed the maximum number of alliterations, assonances and internal rhymes. These devices not only give the impression of Nicholson's own enjoyment of the act of writing and his determination to overcome self-made

obstacles but also (which is more pertinent to the poem itself) emphasise the vigour and purposefulness of the process which is being described. Nicholson himself sees a close relationship between the poem's subject and the way in which it is presented:

...it seems to me that the alliteration, the (intentionally amusing) awkwardness of the short line and quick-coming rhyme, the deliberate contortions, at times, to keep to the demands of the rhyme-scheme against the inclinations of the flow of the words, all quite successfully suggest the nature of scree - its slither and twist beneath the feet, and the difficulty of walking on it, of keeping one's balance etc. I feel that much of the content of this poem is conveyed physically by rhythm and sound.¹

The following extract, describing the rock's emergence from prehistoric seas into the air which begins immediately to erode it into scree of the type which rises steeply from the southern margin of Wastwater, vividly illustrates the skill and ingenuity with which Nicholson tries to communicate to the reader his own excitement about geological processes:

1. Letter to the writer, 8 March 1957. For a description of scree, see Portrait of the Lakes (1963), p.29.

Coal

Sprang from its bole
 Like a parasitic plant; surf and sand
 Salted and
 Silted it. Yet still the blunt trunk thrust
 Out through the crust
 Shedding the paleozoic years like bark,
 While habitual, dark
 Roots hankered back to unfossiliferous blocks
 Of rocks that made the rocks.
 The wind rips off the wrap of sand till the tree stands bare
 In the hacksawing air,
 Or under the rub of water, seep and sump,
 Worn to a stump,
 Flakes away rind in a mildew of mist.

The similarity which for Nicholson exists between the cyclical processes of geology and the growth, decay and rebirth of trees (and, by extension, animate nature and human life) is brought out sharply a few lines from the end when he condenses his extended metaphor into two memorable, explanatory images:

Scree

Is the autumn fall of the deciduous rock;
 Acorn-grey, October of stone....

'September on the Mosses', written in 1954, again is concerned with the process of change in nature, but in a somewhat different way. Attention is transferred from 'deciduous rock' to a 'deciduous tide' whose status as a symbol for change would be immediately apparent to any reader, and instead of simply

assuming throughout that change is a continuous process needing only to be recognised and described, Nicholson relates it more closely to himself by at first expressing the familiar human wish to arrest it and preserve the beauty of the immediate moment:

Wait, tide, wait;
 Let the mosses slide
 In runnels and counter-flow of rock-pool green,
 Where web-foot mud-weeds preen
 Leaves spread in the sunshine; where
 On slow air-ripples the marsh aster lays
 Innocuous snare of sea-anemone rays.

Apart from 'To the River Duddon', where Nicholson addresses a particular river, 'September on the Mosses' is the only poem in which he adopts this intimate manner, speaking to nature almost as if it were a part of himself. Though 'Scree' and 'On Suspected Dry Rot' are good poems, their goodness is of an unfamiliar kind: one needs some knowledge of geological terms and a prior awareness of Nicholson's deep interest in geology before one can appreciate to the full both their literal content and its allegorical relationship to the pattern of human life. Even then their scientific language, recording natural processes almost as if they were projected stage by

stage on a cinema screen, interposes a certain distance between them and the reader. By contrast, the lyrical method of 'September on the Mosses' has greater emotional immediacy: Nicholson seems personally vulnerable to the process of change, which he reacts to rather than objectively presents, and by allowing his speaking voice to be quietly audible he creates a feeling of sympathy in the reader.

The poem's second and third stanzas renew the appeal to nature to 'wait', but despite the 'summerfull of light' which shines on the mosses, the tide itself is 'autumnal', and Nicholson's description of the estuary, expressed in images both concise and evocative, contains within itself hints of change:

Behind your wide-
 as-winter ebb the poplars of the waves
 Turn up their underleaves of grey.
 Thunder-blue shadows boom across the bay.

In addition to the ambiguity of the natural imagery, the altering line-lengths suggest an ebb-and-flow movement, a sense of uncertainty, which work against the poet's appeal, so that when the final stanza reaches the only possible conclusion, laid down by nature itself, - that change cannot be halted - Nicholson's realisation of the need for change comes as less of a surprise,

and we are prepared to accept the last line's inversion of his earlier, repeated request ('Wait, tide, wait') as a viewpoint to which his mental processes have gradually been moving, rather than to dismiss it as a clever piece of pattern-making:

Deciduous tide,
 On the willow whips of inshore billows the inside
 Edge is brown. Crying 'Never!'
 Delays no due tomorrow,
 And now is ever
 By being not by lasting. So
 With pride let this long-as-life hour go,
 And flow, tide, flow.

All three of these poems, 'On Suspected Dry Rot in the Roof of a Parish Church', 'Scree' and 'September on the Mosses', share a common theme with 'The Seven Rocks'. Where they differ, however, from this and the other poems in The Pot Geranium which convey those concerns of most obvious importance to Nicholson, is in the emphasis they reveal on external poetic form. Whereas the key poems in The Pot Geranium generally employ a sort of flexible pentameter which adapts itself to the rhythms of speech, use end-rhyme only occasionally, and evolve their structure out of the natural development from one 'verse paragraph' to another,

Nicholson's poems of the middle 'fifties employ either regular stanzas, or a regular rhyme-scheme, or both. It would be tendentious to suggest any element of artificiality in this concern for visible pattern, but it is noticeable that the group of poems which displays it contrasts also with Nicholson's most recent work, which is looser in form without forfeiting a sense of inevitability, and in which the occurrence of rhyme has the air of felicitous accident. One may perhaps infer that Nicholson was not so much interested in external form as such, but found that, during this period of only intermittent poetic activity, the technical demands of an invented or adopted stanza or rhyme-scheme stimulated him in the shaping of his ideas.

In an interview recorded in April 1964 Nicholson said:

I think the most profitable stimulus for poems, since I have not been writing them very frequently, has been the 'remark'..¹

'Remarks' were to be the source of a number of poems after 1965, but since, when he made this statement, Nicholson appears not

1. Interview with Peter Orr, The Poet Speaks (1966), p.158.

to have been writing any poems at all he was presumably recollecting his at that time most recent example of the 'remark' poem, 'Old Man at a Cricket Match', published early in 1956. It is a very short poem, and not only illustrates the stimulus provided by a chance remark but also exemplifies Nicholson's habit of giving his observations and conclusions a neat outward shape, in this case one of his own invention:

'It's mending worse', he said,
 Bending west his head,¹
 Strands of anxiety ravelled like old rope -
 Skitter of rain on the scorer's shed
 His only hope.

Seven down for forty five,
 Catches like stings from a hive,
 And every man on the boundary appealing -
 An evening when it's bad to be alive,
 And the swifts squealing.

Yet without boo or curse
 He waits leg-break or hearse,
 Obedient in each to lease and letter -
 Life and the weather mending worse,
 Or worsening better.

1. 'Bending' was originally 'turning', and in 1966 Nicholson said in conversation that he now preferred his original choice, as 'bending' introduces internal rhyme rather too early.

Nicholson has clearly, with this poem, not lost his ability to move easily from sharply particularised details - the simile in line seven has a powerfully tactile appropriateness - to a conclusion applicable to human life. His final inversion of the initial dialect phrase 'mending worse' into the similarly paradoxical 'worsening better' economically suggests a parallel between the bad weather out of which good (in the form of a draw) can come for the cricket-supporter whose team would otherwise lose, and death, apparently to be feared, out of which good can also come, in the form of eternal life. The expansion, in the last stanza, of the description of a cricket match into a philosophical statement about life is prepared for by the overtones present in the phrases 'his only hope' and 'every man on the boundary appealing', which refer not just to cricket but to the possible fear of death felt by the old man as he watches it. The fact that the match is taking place in the 'evening' also adds an extra dimension to the description of it. The poem is nothing so forced as a parable; rather it creates from the natural ambiguity of its descriptive details the maximum amount of suggestion. It is interesting to observe, also, that its

turning of pessimism into optimism by means of phrasal inversion is yet another mutation of the theme of decay and rebirth in nature presented by Nicholson in the three poems which I discussed earlier.

Leaving aside the short occasional piece 'Christmas Carol for the First Man in the Moon', published in 1959,¹ Nicholson wrote only two more poems worthy of discussion before his five-year silence overtook him. Both poems show him as a provincial writer responding to local experience, though 'Windscale' has a topicality which is more than local and is in effect a general warning about the dangers of atomic power. The poem was published in November 1957, soon after the rumour of a radio-active leak at the Calder Hall atomic factory, only twenty miles north of Millom, had forced the inhabitants of West Cumberland to pour away milk and burn meat supplies for fear that they were contaminated.² Nicholson saw the 'toadstool

1. Nicholson wrote only two overtly religious poems between 1954 and 1960. This was one (House Beautiful, Dec. 1959); the other, also a Christmas poem, entitled 'Peculiar Honours', was published on a full page of the Church Times (24 Dec. 1954), backed by a drawing of a Nativity scene. The unusual stanza forms of both poems are noteworthy.

2. See Portrait of the Lakes (1963), p.76; also The Listener, 14 July 1960, pp.49-50.

towers' of Calder Hall as

Stinkhorns that propagate and spore
Wherever the wind blows.

For him the sinister unpleasantness of radio-activity was that its dangers could not be seen; it could strike, as it were, out of a clear sky. The second stanza of 'Windscale' makes the most of this contrast between peaceful appearance and poisonous reality in a series of quietly-scathing antitheses, and stresses ironically the dislocation of normal patterns of life brought about by man's search for power - a search which, it is implied, can become a perversion of the divine purpose:

This is a land where dirt is clean,
And poison pasture, quick and green,
And storm sky, bright and bare;
Where sewers flow with milk, and meat
Is carved up for the fire to eat,
And children suffocate in God's fresh air.

'Windscale' is the pungent, topical re-enactment, eleven years later on, of the struggle between Elijah and Ahab in The Old Man of the Mountains.

In 'Bond Street', published in December 1958, Nicholson returns to the interest in his home town which characterises many of the poems in The Pot Geranium. Here, however, he is

concerned not with Millom as a microcosm of the world, nor with his own relationship to it as a writer, but simply with an aspect of its past which he deals with for its own sake. The re-creation of the past is given a dramatic framework by being presented as the answer - inside Nicholson's own head - to a request for directions put by a visiting insurance salesman:

"Bond Street", I said, "Now where the devil's that?" -
 The name like one whose face has been forgotten. -
 He watched me from a proud-as-Preston hat,
 His briefcase fat with business. "See, it's written
 First on my list. Don't you know your own town?" -

A further difference from the Millom poems of The Pot Gernaum consists in the semi-comic guise in which Nicholson appears in relation to this 'off-comer': though in describing Bond Street to the reader he is the poet lovingly dwelling on a local anomaly, we see him assume towards the insurance salesman the slightly malicious offhandedness of the local resident. As the salesman declines to accept his assurance that "you'll sell no insurance there", he abandons him to his fate with words that have the effect of an ironic inward chuckle:

"Whatever you choose", I said. "A mile past the square.
 Then ask again. Hope you enjoy your walk".

The irony of this has already been explained to the reader in the poem's central section. Bond Street exists on a map, but it was only planned. No houses were ever erected, as the street was in that part of Millom which, though intended originally to be the town's centre, was later forgotten about when the railway company built their bridge a hundred yards or so up the line. This development left Bond Street only

... - a mouse
 And whippet thoroughfare, engineered in mud,
 Flagged with the green-slab leaves of dock and plantain,
 A free run for the milk cart to turn round
 From either of the two back-alleys shunted
 End on against it.

From his description Nicholson moves on to seeing Bond Street briefly in symbolic terms: though it did not become 'the first of streets' in the sense originally intended, by remaining virgin for ninety years it is in another sense still 'the first of streets', not only preserving untarnished the aspirations of Millom's Victorian planners but also representing the hopeful beginnings of any human endeavour:

.... the throstles sense
 That here is the one street in all the town
 That no one ever died in, that never failed
 Its name or promise. The iron dust blows brown.

The last phrase switches abruptly into the present, and one feels in the poem more than the semi-comic dialogue of poet and insurance salesman. Set into this there is also the more serious confrontation in the poet's mind between his own town's present and its past.

In retrospect, the nostalgia for the local past evinced by 'Bond Street' may now be seen as a healthy indication of Nicholson's poetic future. His poems from 1965 onwards extend his range both technically and in terms of subject matter, but though their consistent emphasis on his family history and his experiences in childhood and early youth is something new in his work, it is not completely unexpected when one considers the hints provided in earlier poems and the references in prose pieces to incidents out of which his later poetry grew. The period from 1960 to the middle of 1965 was one of silence, but it is not far-fetched to infer that this silence concealed much subconscious activity: Nicholson's poetic life was not 'mending worse' but 'worsening better'.

Even as early as 1950, 'The Buzzer'¹ shows Nicholson as

1. Tribune, 6 Jan. 1950. Reprinted in The Pot Geranium (1954), p.53.

able to return to his own childhood, given favourable circumstances:

But, with an east wind,
The night slides backward, down a scree
Of memory, the black walls fall in ruin,
And the buzzer wakes the boy whose bed I lie in,
Whose dubious dream is me.

An otherwise weak and insignificant poem entitled 'Birthday Present', written when Nicholson was forty, shows the germ of an awareness that Millom and his early experiences there had formed him, and suggests the likelihood of his one day exploring those early experiences:

Yet the round, milk-boned limbs, with iron browned
And heather too,
Roots nuzzling beck-ward - all this new-born ground
Hitherto
Was father too.

His actual father, Joseph Nicholson, died in 1954, and he reacted to this event obliquely in the poem 'Of this Parish'.¹ In a letter written in 1959 he mentioned the death of one of his

1. The Grapevine, c. 1956, p.13. My inference that this poem was prompted by his father's death is based on its title. The phrase 'Of this Parish' is carved on Joseph Nicholson's gravestone in St. George's churchyard, Millom.

uncles:

The last remaining of my father's 13 brothers died yesterday, age 84. Except for the last 12 months, all his life had been spent in Millom. I am now the only one of the Nicholson family left in the town.¹

It was this realisation, brought about by the deaths within five years of his father and his last uncle, that he was the last of his family which eventually found extended expression in 1965 in 'The Seventeenth of the Name'. In this poem he also made use of the anecdote about his grandmother's first reaction to the sight of Millom which he had previously told in Provincial Pleasures (1959, p.143) and the memories of his uncles which he had published in an article in the Church Times in 1961. This same article, 'Christmas Candles at Odborough'² also anticipates in some of its details his poem 'The Riddle', published in 1967, and his poem about his grandmother, published in 1966, entitled 'Have You Been to London?'. The phrase which stimulated this latter poem is mentioned in an

1. Letter to the writer, 2 March 1959.

2. Church Times, 22 Dec. 1961, p.7.

article called 'Where England Begins', which appeared in The Listener in 1958. Thus one can easily see that much of the material of his later poetry, already given partial expression in earlier poems and in passing prose references, was in all probability present in Nicholson's mind during the five years when to all appearances he must have seemed finished as a poet.

The long silence ended in the early summer of 1965, when Nicholson said in a letter:

I've written one really good (so far as I can judge) poem recently - something quite new, and, I have some hopes, a beginning.¹

The poem, which was published in September 1965, was 'The Seventeenth of the Name', a series of recollections of Nicholson's forebears and relatives which comes to a point in his presentation of himself as the last of his family line. What is immediately striking about the poem is its form, which consists in the alternation of two long, flexible, unrhymed lines, which allow full scope for story-telling, and two short, rhymed lines which

1. Letter to the writer, 2 June 1965.

prevent the anecdotes from rambling on, and superimpose on the speech rhythms a pattern which is visible on the page and gives, when the poem is read aloud, the effect of a recurrent echo, now weaker, now stronger. This method of writing proves of particular value in the latter part of the poem, permitting Nicholson to use the rhymed lines to emphasise his most important points; it has some affinity with the method of Marianne Moore, though Nicholson's lines depend on a system of heavy stresses rather than on a prearranged number of syllables.¹ 'The Seventeenth of the Name' is a poem which is eminently speakable, seeming to contract and expand in time with the in-and-out movements of breathing, and well illustrates, as do many of his recent poems, a description of his poetry which he gave in 1956:

Often I feel that my poetry is not so much composed as overheard. It is as if it were present in the speech of every day, hidden beneath the blur of the commonplace. It is my job to scrape off that blur and, at the same time, to build the whole into a significant pattern, without distorting

1. See Marianne Moore, Collected Poems (Faber, 1951): 'The Fish', pp. 37-8; 'Critics and Connoisseurs', pp.42-4; 'Melancthon', pp. 45-8.

the original natural shape and sound of
the phrases.¹

The first two-thirds of the poem are anecdotal, starting
with Nicholson's grandmother and working through fourteen
male members of the family in sections of varying length:

My uncle Jack
Played full-back
For the Northern Union and went in second wicket for
the First Eleven.
One August Monday he smacked a six clean into an
excursion train -
"Hit it from here
To Windermere",
My grandmother said. He broke his spine down the mine
and died below ground
(His family's prided loss on the iron front),²
Left, "Not to Mourn",
A daughter, born
After he died, and a widow who held to his name for
fifty years.

The anecdotes build up the sense of a long family tradition
which paralleled the century-long development of Millom, but
they are given their particular, personal significance by

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1. 'A Statement of Aims', The Grapevine, c. 1956, p.11.
 2. See Norman Nicholson, 'Hodbarrow Hollow', Manchester Guardian,
21 May 1959, p.9.

Nicholson's realisation, provoked most of all by the 'what-are-you-going-to-do-about-it/ Memorandum' of his father's gravestone, that:

...the family has died out and...I've done nothing to perpetuate it or, indeed, to help the growth of the town in the way that my grandparents did.¹

This realisation is expressed in the mixed gravity and exasperation of the poem's final lines, which add to the previous list of anecdotes an overtone of lamentation and tribute. The poem is in fact Nicholson's own contribution - by celebrating it in his poetry - to his family tradition, but he seems to see his poem, with a certain sympathetic impatience, as a negative substitute for what his forebears might more easily have appreciated - a child who would carry that tradition on into later generations:

Step on the gravel and the stones squeak out
 "Nicholson, Nicholson".
 Whereupon
 Grandmother, grandfather, father, seven known
 And six clocked-out-before-me uncles stare

1. Letter to the writer, 4 Feb. 1966.

of 'The Seventeenth of the Name' liberated Nicholson's dormant poetic energy and suggested a thematic potentiality in his family and local past which he subsequently exploited, need not be considered as a depreciation in advance of his later work.

On occasion Nicholson's re-creation of incidents from his past does not rise above the level of a private anecdote. An example of this is 'Great Day', published early in 1969,¹ which recalls a meeting between Nicholson's father (who "gave him an err" ... meaning/ Masonic handshake') and the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) on his visit to Millom in the 1920s. The circumstances of the Prince's visit are described in apparently pointless detail; there seems little poetic significance in the fact that 'It rained,/ On and off, for eleven hours', and the precise reason why Nicholson was at the end of the day

Eager at last for God Save the King and tea
And my father's now royally contagious hand

is never made clear. Nicholson's affection for his father is hardly a sufficient justification for the poem.

No such criticism need be levelled at 'The Cock's Nest',

1. New Statesman, 14 Feb. 1969. The poem was finished in June 1968, at which time its title was 'A Rainbow and a Cuckoo's Song'.

written in the March of 1968 in commemoration, it would seem, of the death of Nicholson's father in the February of fourteen years before. It is a restrained but very moving poem, avoiding the risk of sentimentality by being expressed entirely in natural imagery. It describes how, in the spring of 1954, a cock wren built a nest for its mate in the backyard of Nicholson's house:

It found a niche
Tucked behind the pipe of the bathroom outflow,
Caged in a wickerwork of creeper; then
Began to build:
Three times a minute, hour after hour,
Backward and forward to the backyard wall,
Nipping off neb-fuls of the soot-spered moss
Rooted between the bricks.

The detail here is functional; Nicholson adopts literally a bird's-eye viewpoint, suggesting the importance to the bird of its own purposeful activity and suggesting also, by his minute observation, the significance of that activity in terms of human life. The poem turns on the theory that the cock bird builds a number of nests, in any one of which the hen may choose to lay her eggs. But 'she didn't choose our yard', and the final lines quietly bring home the metaphorical relevance of the resulting empty nest to the sense of loss felt by

Nicholson at his father's death. One also sees how the earlier description of the cock's nest-building has been deliberately emphasised in order to throw into relief, with painful irony, the emptiness of the poem's terse conclusion:

And as March gambolled out, the fat King Alfred sun¹
Blared down too early from its tinny trumpet
On new dug potato-beds, the still bare creeper,
The cock's nest with never an egg in,
And my father dead.²

The image of the empty nest, particularly in the context of growth supplied by the 'new dug potato-beds', has another significance: Nicholson, unmarried in 1954, had no child whose life might have compensated in some measure for his father's death. Nicholson married in 1956. That he should have chosen, in a poem written in 1968, to symbolise the loss of his father in such an ambiguous image as an empty nest suggests, especially when taken in relation to the end of 'The Seventeenth of the Name', his continuing awareness of his childlessness.

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1. 'King Alfred' is a popular variety of daffodil. An early ms. version of the poem used the phrase 'the daffodil sun'.
 2. Nicholson once said in conversation that this line was a deliberate echo of the end of Anthony Thwaite's poem 'Mr. Cooper Dead'.

The indirect approach adopted by 'The Cock's Nest', which depends on the emotional power of selected images, is found again in 'Have You Been to London?'. This poem represents on one level Nicholson's recollections of his paternal grandmother, to whom when he was at Millom Secondary School he used to read every Saturday. She herself could not read, though he did not know this at the time. 'Saturday's stint' is vividly re-created in the second section, the abrupt, breathless rhythms of the boy's arrival contrasting with the greater formality, heightened by internal rhyme, of the lines describing the old-fashioned living room:

I blew into the room, threw
 My scholarship cap on the rack;
 Wafted visitors up the flue
 With the draught of my coming in -
 Ready for Saturday's mint imperials,
 Ready to read
 The serial in Titbits, the evangelical
 Tale in the parish magazine,
 Under the green
 Glare of the gas,
 Under the stare of my grandmother's Queen.

The visual details - the severe portrait of Queen Victoria, the 'china dogs on the mantleshelf' - combine with the deflation of the young boy's rather cocky assurance by means of the semi-proverbial reminder of his careless manners:

"They shut doors after them
In London", she said

to produce a likeness of a straight-backed, sarcastic but not unkind grandmother which would be recognised by many readers. So far the poem is no more than a dryly affectionate personal reminiscence, an amusing confrontation between grandmother and grandson. But the last ten lines, harking back to the 'draught' created by the boy and to the kettle which when three generations of Nicholsons were alive was always 'simmering on the bright black lead', draw out the hidden, sadder implications of what seemed at first only descriptive phrases. Nicholson's 'virtuosity of print' now becomes symbolic of the destructive effects of education on the warm, close family feeling embodied in his illiterate grandmother. In regretting her absence, Nicholson seems also to regret the loss of a way of life whose value is only realised when it is too late. He is left in a cold and different world, the last of his family, and his literacy is no comfort:

...the generations boiled down to one
And the kettle burnt dry
In a soon grandmotherless room;

Reading for forty years
 Till the print swirled out like a down-catch of soot
 And the wind howled round
 A world left cold and draughty,
 Un-latched, un-done
 By all the little literate boys
 Who hadn't been to London.

'Have You Been to London?' seems to possess reactionary undertones of a rather suspect type: in his sadness about the disappearance of past virtues, is Nicholson perhaps suggesting that illiteracy would not be too high a price to pay for their return? Is there perhaps a hint of 'Where ignorance is bliss/ 'T is folly to be wise'? Luckily for the poem, however, such implications lie sufficiently far beneath its acceptable nostalgia for one not to need to quarrel about them. What one mainly feels is a genuine sense of bafflement and regret, movingly and economically conveyed. 'To the Memory of a Millom Musician', which pays tribute not to Victorian traditions but to the gaiety and camaraderie which flourished in Millom during the Depression years and thus made them easier to bear, is only moving up to a point. It describes the life of Harry Pelleymounter, son of a Millom shopkeeper and later one himself, a near-contemporary of Nicholson's who died at the age of fifty-three in 1962. In

short and lively lines Nicholson recalls Harry's musical talents and the gayer aspects, to which they greatly contributed, of life in Millom in the 'thirties, and then goes on to suggest his own nostalgia for a 'down-at-heel decade' by emphasising, in a strikingly appropriate and very characteristic geological image, the contrast between Harry's later prosperity and his recollections of the days of his youth:

...Harry, dumped in the lateral
 Moraine of middle-age,
 The boulder clay
 Of peace and profits, heaped
 On his own counter now,
 Strummed back the golden dole days
 When the boys with never a chance
 Went without dinner
 For a tanner for the dance.

One feels a certain poignancy in Nicholson's description of the paradoxical co-existence of gaiety and poverty, and the validity of his own nostalgia, based on first-hand evidence which the poem presents, is unquestionable. Where he seems perverse is in going on to criticise Harry's daughter, who

Is knitting a history thesis
 Of Millom in between
 Her youth and Harry's...

The pejorative tone of 'knitting' is rather offensive, and Nicholson's objection to the daughter's reliance on 'statistics', though it involves a reasonable criticism, in principle, of history's being compiled only from official sources, is hardly fair or relevant in this particular context. A thesis is not a novel, nor necessarily the place to describe the 'minutes', the day-to-day actuality, of a historical period, and it is unreasonable to imply, as Nicholson seems to do, that their absence from a thesis connotes any inability on the part of its writer to perceive them:

Pulling at threads of the dead years,
 The minutes taken as read -
 Spectacles, earnest, unaware
 That what the Chairman left unsaid,
 The print in the dried-up throat, the true
 Breath of the paper bones, once blew
 Through Harry's soft-hummed, tumbled tunes
 She never listened to.

Though the main point here - that Harry's tunes contained more of the spirit of the Depression than any Council records - is poetically valid, too much else is patently arguable. That Harry's daughter is 'unaware' is hardly her fault: she could not very well have listened to tunes played years before she was born. In moving from nostalgic evocation of one generation

to explicit and inappropriate criticism of the next Nicholson seriously miscalculates and so spoils a potentially good poem.

One important factor common to these poems of the 'sixties which I have been discussing, and shared by such poems of the 'fifties as 'September on the Mosses', is that no attempt is made in them to relate the local materials of which they are composed to any consciously-asserted theory about the general value of provincial experience or about the provincial writer's relationship to the literary world as a whole. This distinguishes them at once from the 'key' poems in The Pot Geranium, which are in a sense commentaries on themselves, seeking not only to express their materials but also to justify their use. In his more recent poems Nicholson still writes as a provincial, in that he takes whatever comes to hand in the life around him and in his local and personal memories, but he no longer writes as a self-conscious provincial. He described the different nature of his latest poems in a letter thus:

The new poems don't [relate their material to an explicit provincial attitude] ... they take it for granted - as if...I had drawn up the scheme through which I see life and the world and could now just forget about it,

or, rather, could feel it without having to talk about it.¹

Normally, as I have said, this new unselfconsciousness is to be inferred in Nicholson's latest poems, but in one, 'The Elvers', it is to some degree explicit. The first two sections describe the

Five-inch elvers
That for twice five seasons snake
Through the earth's turn and return of water
To seep with the swell into rifts of the old workings
And be churned out on cinder beds and fern

by the pump which syphons out the water from the shafts of the old iron mines at Hodbarrow. Why the elvers should travel round the world to end up like this is something they are unaware of, and the final section develops this enigma into a statement about Nicholson himself:

And I,
Beneath my parochial complement of sky,
Plot their way
From Sargasso Sea to Cumberland,
From tide to pit,
Knowing the why of it
No more than they.

The ambiguity of this ('it' can be taken as referring to

1. Letter to the writer, 18 June 1967.

Nicholson's life as well as to that of the elvers) includes the possibility that Nicholson is talking about his own poetry: just as the elvers are driven to move about, so he is driven to describe them, and by extension whatever else occurs 'beneath my parochial complement of sky', without understanding the reason. The important point here is that Nicholson does not sound particularly worried about not knowing the reason: he is content to accept the material offered him by his provincial experience and to render it as vividly as possible.

Description of the elvers leads Nicholson to a comment about himself. In 'The Black Guillemot', his only other recent poem about himself as a writer, he employs the method of extended allegory, leaving the human application to be inferred. On one level, the poem can be read as pure description, presented in almost excessive detail, of the sea-birds which he observes 'midway between Fleswick and St. Bees North Head':

The guillemots rest

Restlessly. Now and then,
 One shifts, clicks free of the cliff,
 Wings whirring like an electric-fan -
 Silhouette dark from above, with under-belly gleaming
 White as it banks at the turn -
 Dives, scoops, skims the water,
 Then, with all Cumberland to go at, homes

At the packed slum again,
The rock iced with droppings.

Apart from the rather unsuitable 'electric-fan' simile, the language and rhythm - now broken, now smooth - reproduce the bird's flight with the accuracy and literal fidelity of an observing naturalist; but the interpolation 'with all Cumberland to go at' already suggests that the picture of the birds applies also to human society, whose members have the same homing instinct. The following section offers a contrasting picture of the black guillemot, the odd-man-out who is

...self-subsistent as an Eskimo,
Taking the huff if so much as a feather
Lets on his pool and blow-hole
In the floating pack-ice of gulls.

Such a description is hardly less true of the artist, who values his independence, than it is of the 'rarer auk'.

The point which Nicholson wishes to emphasise, however, is not the artist's difference from his fellows, but his likeness to them. This is brought out in the final section, which takes its cue from the natural phenomenon that, in times of storm, all the birds are found in the same place:

But, turn the page of the weather,
 Let the moon haul up the tide and the pressure hose of spray
 Swill down the lighthouse lantern - then,
 When boats keep warm in harbour and bird-watchers in bed,
 When the tumble-home of the North Head's rusty hull¹
 Takes the full heave of the storm,
 The hundred white and the one black flock
 Back to the same rock.

The heavy stresses and doubled rhyme of the last two lines serve to underscore the human application which Nicholson wishes to bring out. 'Storm' represents stress, and in times of stress, which reveal the deepest human instincts, the artist is no different from his fellow-men, - specifically, his fellow townsfolk. That Nicholson is referring here to the provincial writer, in fact to himself and to his own sense of community, is made clear if one reads the talk 'On Being a Provincial' in which he used, as if in anticipation of this poem, much the same natural image:

In the metropolis, the artist, the writer, cannot hope to be grafted on to the main stem because there is no main stem. So he feels isolated; he feels set apart from the rest of mankind. He is regarded as an

1. See Portrait of the Lakes (1963), p.45, where the South Head of Tomlin at St. Bees is described as 'a huge hull of rock... shoving its rusty steel-plating straight into the sea'.

oddity: he is made to feel the white black-bird, the albino of the tribe. The provincial artist, on the other hand, is not allowed to feel isolated, even if he wants to. His fellow townspeople know him too well. They know his family; they know where he was brought up. However odd may seem his vocation or his beliefs or his behaviour, yet he is still one of them. He himself may resent this; he may try to deny it. He may claim the artist's romantic freedom from all ties and chuck himself from the church steeple to prove his point - but the neighbours will come to his funeral just the same.¹

Clearly, though most of his recent poems display a confidence in their local material and imagery which makes overt justification superfluous, 'The Black Guillemot' shows Nicholson as no less aware than he was fifteen years ago of being a provincial poet, possessing all that this phrase implies of a sense of identity with his fellow provincials. One natural form this sense of identity has lately taken is an interest not just in his own childhood memories but in what might be called community memories: the past of his home town, whose prosperity sprang from the ore-bearing rock

1. 'On Being a Provincial', The Listener, 12 Aug. 1954, p.248.

of Hodbarrow mines.

'The Riddle' deals with an incident of the 1920s, when one of the small engines employed at Hodbarrow mines vanished utterly into a hole in the ground caused by mining subsidence. The title of the poem refers not to this strange incident, which is given no particular significance except in so far as its shock-effect seems to have represented for Nicholson a line of demarcation between childhood and adolescence,¹ but to the schoolboy chestnut which begins the poem:

Why is a baby
Like a railway engine?

The poem in fact sprang from this remark, which occurred to Nicholson apropos of nothing. The connection between it and the poem's eventual subject was only established after much searching of his memory: it had been said to him once by the 'son of the day-shift engine-driver' in whose company he had seen the engine vanish, and had remained in his subconscious for forty-odd years to emerge in 1966² and release in poetic

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1. See the lines: 'But why is a baby?-/ I forgot the answer/ That muggy November/ All Souls' Eve,/ The night the engine died'. The precise placing of the incident as 'All Souls' Eve' is perhaps intended to suggest the beginning of a response to experience maturer than that suggested by trite schoolboy jokes.
 2. The poem was published in The Malahat Review No.3, July 1967.

terms a recollection which he had already set down briefly in prose in 1959:

The land subsided. Houses collapsed; roads caved in; a railway locomotive dived out of sight into a hole which opened for it like a yawn.¹

The feeling of mute amazement experienced by the boys is sensitively conveyed by the short lines in which the poem is cast:

We stood in the steaming
November air
Staring at rails
Bent to no junction;
And switch-point levers
Left without function
Swiveled eyes wide
Down tracks of drifting shales -

After describing the way in which 'the sand's slow tide' covered up the scene of the accident until no sign of it was left, the poem returns to the present. 'Old Rustyknob's bizarre fate has now become an item of Millom mythology, something which

1. Provincial Pleasures (1959), p.108.

...only the old remember now,
And only the young believe.¹

'Bee Orchid at Hodbarrow' offers in effect a short history of the changes in the local landscape which a hundred years of mining have brought about. The building of the Outer Barrier 'fifty years ago',² in order to prevent subsidence above the lengthening mine-galleries, reclaimed from the sea an area of barren ground known as Hodbarrow Hollow:

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1. Nicholson seems to have had the conclusion of his poem in his mind before he started to write the poem itself. 'The Riddle's first ms. worksheets begin with the crossed-out lines: 'Where only/ The very old remember,/ And very young believe'. He described his usual methods of composition in The Poet Speaks (1966) pp. 157-8: 'Very frequently I am given a line, which is sometimes the first line, but quite frequently the last. And, given the line, I either see what the poem is going to be fairly quickly, or, on the whole, I give it up. If it's a first line, I may start writing the poem and let the imagery make the poem. If it is not the first line, if it is more likely to be the last, then I actually work the ideas out and write a poem in which I know what I am going to say. But I think probably, more often than not, the poem has to discover itself as it is being written'. In 'The Riddle', stimulated originally by the 'schoolboy's joke', both methods seem to have been at work: the first two lines led Nicholson to compose the first section at one sitting, but a fortnight elapsed before he could continue - before, that is, he had evolved a way of working forward to the final lines which were already (in slightly different form) in his mind. For further information about Nicholson's writing habits, see Provincial Pleasures (1959), p.35.
 2. Nicholson's article 'Hodbarrow Hollow' (Manchester Guardian, 21 May 1959) provides an extensive footnote to this poem. The Outer Barrier was in fact completed in 1905.

A Jordan Valley without the Jordan,
 Neither sea nor land,
 Lower than low
 Ebb mark, arid
 As wrack left lifted
 High on the sand.

In this landscape, created by industry, Nicholson now finds natural growth surprisingly asserting itself in the exotic shape of the bee-orchid, 'A metaphysical/ Conceit of a flower'; yet the poem's long-range view of time enables one to feel that the bee-orchid is no more natural a phenomenon, nor a much less temporary one, than the iron whose mining changed the landscape and so produced the conditions in which the flower could grow. The sea, once pushed back, will one day return, and like the mines, now worked-out, the bee-orchid will not last for ever. The activities of flower and of man are both involved in natural cycles of growth and decay, and the poem's final lines urgently communicate the need of the bee-orchid to make the most of the time available to it:

The whole articulated
 Body of the flower -
 Bloom, stem and leaf -
 Is tense with need
 To breed, to seed,
 To colonize the new-found,
 New-sunk island,
 To snatch the brief

Between-tide hour
 Of this limestone summer,
 Before the sea
 Pours in again
 In three or four
 Hundred years time.

Just as the content of Nicholson's latest poems is generally less consciously provincial than that of his work of the early nineteen-fifties, so, in his own words, 'their tone is lighter, much more lyrical, and flows more quickly along'.¹ The 'strongly forward and limpid rhythm'² of 'The Riddle' and 'Bee Orchid at Hodbarrow' provides a particularly apt illustration of Nicholson's new manner of expression. In 1967 he summed up his own view of his latest poems in words that suggested the likelihood of future work on the same lines:

[They] may very well be the beginning of a period less 'important'...than my poems of ten years ago, but I feel that these are the poems I can now have pleasure in writing.³

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1. Nicholson, letter to the writer, 18 June 1967.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.

Nevertheless, one may feel that his poetic future is less predictable than this suggests. Up to now Nicholson's poems about his own history and that of his town have been based, implicitly, on an assumed continuity between past and present. Millom's livelihood has been founded, for the hundred years of its existence, on iron, and despite the present dereliction of Hodbarrow mines, iron has continued to be produced in Millom from ore imported from abroad. Nicholson's nostalgic memories of the past have therefore been indulged in the context of a positive, modestly-thriving communal present. In 1968, however, Millom's continuity was abruptly broken by a Government decision to close the Ironworks. The effect of this decision, for a one-industry town, was crippling. The 'golden dole days' of 'To the Memory of a Millom Musician' were replaced by the leaden, contemporary reality of unemployment for 25% of the population - the highest 'percentage of unemployed' in the country. Nicholson's prediction of 'three or four hundred years time' for the bee-orchid has been suddenly reduced to a life-expectancy of no more than a couple of years, for one side-effect of the closure has been that the old mine-shafts are no longer pumped out, and Hodbarrow Hollow, the indirect

result of former prosperity, is now slowly filling with water.

It was to be expected that a poet as closely involved with his community as Nicholson would respond poetically to the closing of the Ironworks.¹ 'On the Closing of Millom Ironworks: September 1968' is a mixture of elegy for a now-vanished way of life and terse irony directed at a decision based not on industrial inefficiency but on a centralised policy of 'rationalisation' which takes no account of local needs:

Down
 On the ebb-tide sands, the five-funnelled
 Battleship of the furnaces lies bleached and rusting;
 Run aground, not foundered;
 Not a crack in her hull;
 Lacking but a loan to float her off.

The townspeople's habit of telling by the Ironworks's smoking chimneys 'which way the wind is blowing' must now be unlearnt, and the lack of sound in the air is deafening to those

1. In The Poet Speaks (1966), p.157, Nicholson said that he was interested in contemporary social and political events 'as a poet', by which he meant that he responded to them as concrete instances, rather than as abstractions. He felt that the Slump was a period of such concrete instances. Such an attitude must have been easily transferable to Millom in 1968.

accustomed to its constant, taken-for-granted presence:

...no grey smoke-tail
 Pointers the mood of the wind. The hum
 And blare that for a hundred years
 Drummed at the town's deaf ears
 Now fills the air with the roar of its silence.

Nicholson's admission that 'It's beautiful to breathe the sharp night air' has a touch of conscious banality about it which suggests an ironic intention: 'sharp night air' provokes a response which in a resort would be in order, but which in a working town like Millom is out of place. Economic stagnation is too high a price to pay for such equivocal improvement (expressed in a rhyme whose triteness is hardly accidental) as is produced by the absence of blowing slag-dust:

The curtains will be cleaner
 And the grass plots greener
 Round the Old Folk's council flats.

The pious cliché that "No-one starves in the Welfare State" is no compensation for loss of work, loss of pride, and the permanent disappearance of the town's very reason for existence, a disappearance which even in the Depression years was only temporary. Millom has returned to its pre-industrial state in 1860:

They stand
 By the churchyard gate,
 Hands in pockets, shoulders to the slag,
 The men whose fathers stood there back in '28,
 When their sons were at school with me.
The town
 Rolls round the century's bleak orbit.

Unfortunately, the concise and controlled mixture of sorrow and anger communicated by the greater part of the poem is weakened by its conclusion, which conveniently forgets the earlier statement that no smoke is visible (and thus the direction of the wind unknown) in order to make rather sentimental use of dead metaphors which might better have been avoided. One feels that Nicholson's concern as a man has on this occasion overcome the equally vital concern of the poet for properly moving expression:

But not a face
 Tilts upward, no-one enquires of the sky.
 The smoke prognosticates no how
 Or why of any practical tomorrow.
 For what does it matter if it rains all day?
 And what's the good of knowing
 Which way the wind is blowing
 When whichever way it blows it's a cold wind now?

The finality of this situation, together with the fact that the poem presenting it is Nicholson's most recent

work,¹ prompts one to wonder what its effect may be on a poet who has always valued his local background and whose subject matter and imagery have always been intimately connected with it. But it would be profitless to speculate whether Nicholson will continue to exploit his recent vein of recollection or whether, now, his poetry will need some different impulse to inspire it.

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1. The ms. gives its date of composition as Nov./Dec. 1968. One other poem, 'The Dumb Spirit', was written at about the same time (Autumn/Winter). The combination of its religious imagery, its being addressed to God, and the appeal it makes for a renewed ability to perceive and express things more clearly is such as to reinforce my hypothesis about 'some different impulse'.

CONCLUSION.

In an article contributed to a symposium on 'Poetry since the War', published in 1959, George MacBeth gave a useful three-fold definition of the regional poet:

- (1) he often writes about a particular landscape and a particular group of people inhabiting it;
- (2) his work avoids technical experiment for its own sake and aims at a conversational directness in words and rhythm;
- (3) and he draws on incidents from his daily life to back up moral judgements and psychological insights.¹

In MacBeth's view it was regional poets who had been the main upholders in this century of what he called 'the conservative tradition', as opposed to the 'modern movement' in which he grouped such poets as Eliot, Auden, Empson and Dylan Thomas, with their 'obscurity' and 'constant striving after originality of style'. Whatever the merits or demerits of MacBeth's general argument, his definition of the regional poet fits

1. George MacBeth, 'Regional Poetry', The London Magazine, Nov. 1959.

Norman Nicholson very well, and it is clear that Nicholson can most conveniently be seen as part of this 'conservative tradition' which MacBeth postulates, its characteristic striving after clarity of utterance springing from

....a preoccupation with a certain kind of society and the moral role which poetry should play in that society.¹

So closely, in fact, does Nicholson approximate to the regional exemplum ('poets with deep roots in real places') which MacBeth is recommending to the young poets of his own generation that it comes as a considerable shock to find that his name is not once mentioned in the article:

...the total number of poets writing in [the conservative] tradition has been relatively few. In fact, between Edward Thomas and Philip Larkin the only important example seems to be the Welsh poet, R.S. Thomas.

The choice of R.S. Thomas is understandable: his reputation had been first established in England² by the publication of

1. George MacBeth, 'Regional Poetry', The London Magazine, Nov.1959.
2. He had of course already published two small volumes of poetry in Wales: The Stones of the Field (1946) and An Acre of Land (1952). His 1954 volume includes 44 poems reprinted from these earlier books.

Song at the Year's Turning in 1954, and his name was therefore likely to be fresher in MacBeth's mind than that of Nicholson, who began to attract favourable notice in the middle of the previous decade. Alternatively one might put forward simple ignorance as an explanation of MacBeth's oversight. There is, however, a slightly tendentious ring in the phrase 'the only important example' which suggests a possible critical snub behind the omission of any reference to Nicholson, particularly as a later description of another important characteristic of the regional poet seems to be far more applicable to him than to R.S. Thomas:

The poet who has found his region, or who has never lost it, usually has the assurance to be...optimistic.

I am not concerned here to establish the precise reason for MacBeth's failure to refer to Nicholson, as any of the three reasons suggested implies that Nicholson had not made an impact on general literary opinion strong enough to put him forward as an obvious illustrator of MacBeth's theories. I wish later on to examine briefly the varied critical response to Nicholson's poetry throughout his career, but my immediate

interest is to establish, by reference to roughly comparable contemporary figures, the special brand of regionalism which distinguishes him from them and thus backs up his metaphorical self-portrait in 'The Black Guillemot' (1967):

Not a bird of his kind
Nesting to the south of him in England.

Nicholson's increasingly close involvement with one area during his poetic career is immediately made plain if one considers the work of James Kirkup, a fellow-Northerner born in South Shields in 1923. It would be tempting to see a regional element in Kirkup's earlier poetry, and the picture which opens 'Landscape near Seaton Delaval' is one which will seem very familiar to any reader of Nicholson:

Coming from the sea, across the coal-streaked sands,
Ascend the dunes, where sharp grass
Shivers in monotonous north-easters.
Then you will see those heaps of slag that form
A mountainous province of perfect cones.¹

But though it is clear that Kirkup responds to local visual details, such poems as this and others like 'View of the Town

1. A Spring Journey, O.U.P. 1954, pp.53-4.

Hall, South Shields'¹ and 'The Harbour: Tynemouth'² are only 'regional' by virtue of their titles. They are not concerned with making particular statements about the landscapes which prompt them, and they move forward in a mood of rather romantic vagueness to conclusions which, one feels, could have been reached from many other physical starting-points. In illustration of this one may quote the last stanza of 'The Harbour: Tynemouth':

Within the harbour mouth, whose steeped banks
 Rise from a scaffolding of ships and crane-hung streets,
 The white-belted ferries, pilot-craft, and fleets
 Of yellow-funnelled trawlers dart like water-flies
 Round a departing tanker's orange hulk, that drinks
 The open sea with haunted, anchor-weeping eyes.
 To landlocked mariners among their scale-rimed nets
 The moving vessel moans farewell. Early the lighthouse winks
 One inland eye, and town-hall clocks chime in the sea-wide
skies.

After comparatively few poetry-writing years in England, Kirkup has spent the rest of his peripatetic life in Scandinavia, Spain and Malaya, finally coming to rest, a latter-day Lafcadio

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1. The Submerged Village, O.U.P., 1951, p.60.
 2. A Correct Compassion, O.U.P., 1952, pp.10-11.

Hearn, in Japan. In the outward appearance of all these countries he has shown an equal poetic interest, and a recent poem, 'Undivided Loyalty', makes clear his feeling that he 'only happened to be born'¹ in England, in South Shields. A similar attitude of detachment is conveyed by another recent poem, 'Curtains for Kirkup', whose laconic dismissal of the family ties symbolised in a surname is the complete opposite of the sense of family identity revealed at length in Nicholson's 'The Seventeenth of the Name':

The last of my line,
The last to bear the family name
And wear the family face.

Both odd. Well, something dies
With all of us. With me
Something else, a name.

It's time it did.
What's in a name? Only a sad
Fable. It is finished. I am glad.²

Comparison between Nicholson and Kirkup demonstrates only

1. Refusal to Conform, O.U.P., 1963, p.8.

2. Ibid., p.15.

a very obvious difference, between '[the provincial] who stays' and a rather extreme example of 'the provincial who leaves home'.¹ Comparison with R.S. Thomas, who shares with Nicholson the characteristics set out in George MacBeth's definition of the regional poet, comes much closer to revealing distinguishing marks of a more significant kind. Like Nicholson, R.S. Thomas has stayed in the place where he was born, but with him this is a country - Wales - rather than a particular town or part of a county. Within Wales R.S. Thomas has moved about considerably: he was born in Cardiff in 1913, brought up in Holyhead, read classics at Bangor University College, studied theology at Llandaff, and has been an Anglican clergyman in three different areas of Wales. His early poetry, collected in 1954 in Song at the Year's Turning, was written while he was for twelve years rector of the hill-farming parish of Manafon in Montgomeryshire. Isolated in this remote part of Wales he devoted himself to understanding the in many ways alien lives of

1. Nicholson, 'On Being a Provincial' (1954), p.248.

his parishioners, feeling, like Nicholson in Cumberland, that

....your speech has in it
The source of all poetry, clear as a rill
Bubbling from your lips.¹

Yet the final lines of this poem, 'A Priest to his People',
express a sentiment which is quite unlike anything in

Nicholson's work:

You will continue to unwind your days
In a crude tapestry under the jealous heavens
To affront, bewilder, yet compel my gaze.

Nicholson's 'gaze' at life in Millom and Cumberland has similarly
been compelled, but he never seems to have felt any affront or
bewilderment. One may feel that the accident of ill-health
which kept Nicholson in one place and which ended his formal
education at the age of sixteen has brought about a far greater
sense of identification between him and his environment than is
found in the work of R.S. Thomas, whose orthodox middle-class
education and development have combined with the social position
inherent in his priestly office to put him at a certain distance

1. 'A Priest to his People', Song at the Year's Turning (1954),
p.29.

from the people and places which form his poetic material.

There is, certainly, some similarity between the two poets' work. Very occasionally, as in these lines from Thomas's early poem 'Out of the Hills', there seems to be verbal and rhythmical similarity: the 'tankard' metaphor (fanciful in effect, everyday in origin) and the flexible pentameters have a touch of Nicholson's manner about them:

....under the half-closed lids
Of the indolent shops sleep dawdles, emptying the last
Tankards of darkness, before the officious light
Bundles it up the chimney out of sight.

In the poem 'Ire'¹ occur the lines:

The table unlaid and bare
As a boar's backside.

The resemblance of this simile to one used by Ahab in Nicholson's The Old Man of the Mountains ('All as dry as a badger's backside'²) is close enough, and is no doubt equally derived from pithy local speech. But such parallels are rare; the

1. Song at the Year's Turning (1954), p.36.
2. The Old Man of the Mountains, 1950 edition, p.46.

more decorative language and looser rhythms used by R.S. Thomas in his earlier poetry were soon laid aside and replaced by a much more economical diction and a deliberate tightening of rhythm which do not resemble Nicholson's work at all.

Like Nicholson, R.S. Thomas is concerned to penetrate the lives of those among whom he works and to make those lives understandable to people in England and in other parts of Wales. His many poems on Iago Prytherch, his invented type of the hill farmer, show him coming ever closer to a feeling of identification until Prytherch becomes almost his own alter ego, the side of himself which appreciates the value of rootedness:

Prytherch, man, can you forgive
 From your stone altar on which the light's
 Bread is broken at dusk and dawn
 One who strafed you with thin scorn
 From the cheap gallery of his mind?
 It was you who were right the whole time;
 Right in this that the day's end
 Finds you still in the same field
 In which you started, your soul made strong
 By the earth's incense, the wind's song.
 While I have worn my soul bare
 On the world's roads, seeking what lay
 Too close for the mind's lenses to see,
 And come now with the first stars
 Big on my lids westward to find
 With the slow lifting up of your hand
 No welcome, only forgiveness.¹

1. 'Absolution', Poetry for Supper (1958), p.44.

Yet the earlier effort hinted at in this poem suggests Thomas's awareness of himself as someone different from those he writes of, and his frequent use of the first person partly communicates a sense of distance. Behind the local themes which create in many of Thomas's poems a superficial similarity to those of Nicholson one senses a very different kind of personality, more melancholy, more questioning, more bitter, the personality of a man who has more obstacles to overcome in the search for identification with an area, obstacles created by greater education, by the unavoidable separateness of clerical status,¹ and by the fact that he is not, apart from

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1. See the discussion of the Nonconformist minister's position on p.21 of the chapter 'Chapel and Community in Glan-Llyn, Merioneth', by Trefor M. Owen, which occurs in: Jenkins, Jones, Hughes, Owen, Welsh Rural Communities, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1960, 2nd Edition 1962: 'The uppermost status in the hierarchy is that of the minister who is almost invariably an outsider as regards birth and upbringing. In other words, he does not rise from status to status within the congregation which he heads but enters the highest status in the group as a virtual stranger'. One presumes that an Anglican minister like R.S. Thomas would have been equally 'a virtual stranger' in his community, especially in such a predominantly Nonconformist parish as Manafon. See also Isabel Emmett, A North Wales Village, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964, p.43: 'The practice of a profession continues this process of estrangement from others: the professional worker, as minister, doctor, lawyer or high-grade Civil Servant, is placed in a role which makes his relations with other people special and unequal'.

his shared Welshness, one by birth with the local community in which he lives.

One final poem illustrates neatly the essential difference between R.S. Thomas and Norman Nicholson. In 'The Village' Thomas presents a Nicholsonian theme - the universal significance of a place which is small and apparently insignificant:

Scarcely a street, too few houses
To merit the title; just a way between
The one tavern and the one shop
That leads nowhere and fails at the top
Of the short hill, eaten away
By long erosion of the green tide
Of grass creeping perpetually nearer
This last outpost of time past.

So little happens; the black dog
Cracking his fleas in the hot sun
Is history. Yet the girl who crosses
From door to door moves to a scale
Beyond the bland day's two dimensions.

Stay, then, village, for round you spins
On slow axis a world as vast
And meaningful as any poised¹
By great Plato's solitary mind.

It is an admirable poem, making its point with economy and

1. 'The Village', Song at the Year's Turning (1954), p.98.

lucidity, and I do not suggest that Nicholson's way of dealing with the same kind of theme in such poems as 'The Pot Geranium' and 'Old Main Street, Holborn Hill, Millom' is necessarily a better one. But it is noticeable that R.S. Thomas's village is not particularised: nothing is named, the village could be anywhere. Thomas's interest lies in his conclusion, and one feels that he himself is not sufficiently part of the village he presents to enter into its distinctive reality. Nicholson, perhaps because he belongs to the town which he writes about, is able to reach the same general conclusion as Thomas by the different method of describing his town in the kind of detail which shows it as a special and unique place.

Fully to define Nicholson's kind of regionalism one needs to add one more clause to the list offered by George MacBeth. This clause is supplied by Nicholson himself in his article 'On Being a Provincial' (1954):

By a provincial I do not mean someone who merely happens to live in the provinces - I mean someone who lives in the place where he was born; the place where his parents live, and his friends and relatives. Someone who has shared from childhood the culture of his native region - the way of life, the pattern of activities.

Clearly, R.S. Thomas is no more a provincial of this type than is James Kirkup. Only one other contemporary poet, to my knowledge, has lived all his life in his birthplace: the Cornish poet, Jack Clemo, born in 1916 'in a hamlet seven miles north-west of St. Austell, lodged deep in the gut of the Cornish china-clay industry'.¹ In addition to spending his whole life in the same place, Clemo, like Nicholson, has never moved from the house in which he was born. Just as Nicholson has used in his work the imagery of rock and iron supplied by his environment, so Clemo has used the imagery of clay and clay-pits supplied by his. Both Nicholson and Clemo are religious poets, though the Anglicanism of the one is very different from the Calvinism of the other.

In fact, despite superficial similarities, the two poets differ greatly. The disability of temporary blindness in childhood and permanent blindness from 1955 onwards has obviously made Clemo a poet much less responsive to his visible surroundings than Nicholson, and the fact that Clemo has been

1. Charles Causley, 'The World of Jack Clemo': introduction to Jack Clemo, The Map of Clay (1961), p.7.

stone-deaf since the age of eighteen has made his poetry evolve a peculiar, and often eccentric, rhythm and idiom rather than modify, as Nicholson's has done, the rhythms inherent in colloquial common speech. Blindness and deafness have both prevented Clemo from sharing in 'the culture of his native region' as Nicholson has been able to do, and Clemo uses local imagery not for any intrinsic interest it may possess but almost entirely to express his religious preoccupations. In a word, his poetry is introverted rather than extravert, and its difference from Nicholson's is succinctly indicated in a passage from Clemo's autobiography:

My geographical contacts, even within the clay area, were extremely limited. There are still, within three or four miles of my home, several villages I have never entered; even in St. Stephen's and St. Dennis there are streets I have never passed through. Of no man could it be said with less truth that he knows every nook and cranny of his own district. I had no interest, historical or aesthetic, in local beauty spots; all I wished to see could be seen from the clay dumps around Goonamarris. This habit of narrow concentration had always prevented me from giving much detail in my descriptive passages, except when I was writing about clay-works. I had to confine myself to a broad general picture of the scene, and try to convey its spiritual tone.¹

1. Jack Clemo, Confession of a Rebel (1949), p.199.

I have attempted by the preceding process of elimination to show that Nicholson occupies a unique position among contemporary poets, unique not only by virtue of his specifically Cumbrian subject matter and imagery but also because of the particularly close identification with his material which he has attained to by spending his whole life in one place. Without certain prerequisites of poetry - imaginative persuasiveness, technical skill and the sheer ability of language to hold the attention - one would not of course take Nicholson sufficiently seriously as a poet to be interested in what further factors make him unique, but I trust that these prerequisites have been adequately demonstrated, by quotation and comment, in earlier chapters.

To say that a poet is unique is not necessarily to imply that he is a major figure, and Nicholson himself makes no extravagant claims for his work:

I do not pretend that it is from this sort of provincial background that we shall get our major works of art.¹

1. 'On Being a Provincial' (1954), p.248.

The wide range of critical response to Nicholson's poetry, which in practice means the various responses of Nicholson's reviewers, suggests that he has not yet consolidated a position in the hierarchy of contemporary poets which can be taken for granted. In so far as literary reputations are still made in London, it may be felt that Nicholson's provincial material has militated against his complete acceptance, and one may also suspect that his Christianity, his early alignment with what Kathleen Raine once called 'Faber Anglicanism',¹ has been a stumbling-block for some critics, particularly those connected with Scrutiny, where both his Anthology of Religious Verse (1942) and Five Rivers (1944) were severely censured.² The only places in which Nicholson's poetry has been uniformly praised have been avowedly Christian organs like the Church Times and The Methodist Recorder, or the literary columns of provincial newspapers. Here Nicholson's local material and his religion

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1. Review of Rock Face, New English Review, Jan. 1949
 2. See, respectively, R.C. Lienhardt, Scrutiny, Spring 1944 and A.I. Doyle, Scrutiny, Sept. 1945;

have respectively assisted appreciation, an appreciation in many cases not without real literary perceptiveness. With the national press, however, the all-too-easy labels 'regional poet' and 'Christian poet' seem frequently to have hindered a response to Nicholson simply as a poet. Nicholson himself has also perhaps, unintentionally, weakened the impact of his poetry by the implicitly self-defensive tone of such articles as 'On Being a Provincial' (1954) and 'The Provincial Tradition' (1958), which may alienate some readers by what seems at times an element of special pleading.

Apart from the very hostile review in Scrutiny which I have already mentioned, critical reaction to Five Rivers (1944) was largely favourable. The Listener had been prompted by Selected Poems of the previous year to refer to Nicholson as 'a poet about whom one feels increasing curiosity',¹ and Julian Symons followed up the promising implications of this by calling him, in Tribune, 'a considerable poet'.² Richard Church,

1. The Listener, 22 July 1943.

2. Tribune, 6 Oct. 1944.

who went on to review Nicholson's later volumes very warmly, discussed his first with particular shrewdness.¹ What reservations there were had to do with Nicholson's early tendency to 'embroider his themes' with 'masses of ornamentation',² but the statement of these reservations in The Times Literary Supplement is counteracted by a sense that Nicholson's poetry had something positive and valuable to offer:

If [his dashing style] is sometimes blurred it is because there is too much wealth of detail, too little selection...But although his verse is continually endangered by sheer virtuosity, it has a rich content of religious, human and naturalistic experience.³

More serious objections present themselves in the reviews of Rock Face (1948), and here one finds more disagreement between the reviewers. Paul Dehn, for instance, felt that Nicholson's poems had more than a regional appeal,⁴ whereas

1. The Fortnightly, 22 Oct. 1944, p.272.

2. The Listener, 12 Oct. 1944.

3. TLS, 19 Aug. 1944.

4. Time and Tide, 1 May 1948.

the anonymous reviewer in The Times Literary Supplement considered Nicholson's Cumberland to be not sufficiently connected with the world at large:

What is most lacking...is a sense of life going on outside.¹

Both this reviewer and that of The Listener found 'a certain monotony of mood and theme in this collection'.² Julian Symons, though feeling that Nicholson 'has conserved his talent well, and used it intelligently', now pronounced him 'a poet of minor talent',³ and even as well-disposed a commentator as Kathleen Raine was able to refer to him in no stronger term than as a 'young poet of the second line'.⁴

Reviews of The Pot Geranium (1954) indicate a similarly mixed reception. Anthony Hartley objected to the undue lengthiness and unnecessary detail of such poems as 'Ravenglass Railway Station',⁵ but it was Nicholson's subject matter, rather

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1. TLS, 8 May 1948.
 2. The Listener, 9 Sept. 1948.
 3. Tribune, 11 June 1948.
 4. New English Review, Jan. 1949.
 5. Spectator, 4 June 1954.

than his treatment of it, that provoked most comment. For The Times Literary Supplement Nicholson would seem to have been successful in infusing significance into his local material:

How refreshing it is to read a poet who is at home in the world in which he finds himself!...He has been wise to school his eye to such minute observation and his lively powers of observation to such faithfulness, for he is one of the poets who mean most when they are most directly engrossed in presenting some concrete object.¹

Giles Romilly, however, felt that Nicholson's objectivity, and particularly his concentration on rock, were impediments. Romilly's review seems to imply that, for him at least, Nicholson had failed to establish the claim to poetic stature which his poems appeared to be making, and his final comment in the following quotation is decidedly double-edged:

Mr. Nicholson is a rugged individualist whose "sermons" in Cumberland stone might appear to have raised him, solid and safe, to a vantage point of individual vision. Yet The Pot Geranium... shows almost an opposite: preponderance of technique, contraction of personal mood. Rock

1. TLS, 5 Nov. 1954, p.702.

is his fundament. Yet rock's fundamentality, of course, is only physical...Poetically, Mr. Nicholson's art seems to me a specialised impressionism in which he is skilful and superior and able to please.¹

A certain uniqueness does seem to be admitted here, but it is clearly a uniqueness without value for a critic who is unable to see the human meaning behind Nicholson's concentration on Cumbrian landscape.

Another version of Romilly's criticism was made by G.C. Fraser, who in effect reiterates the charge of monotony, of unduly limited horizons, which had been made by some reviewers of Rock Face:

Mr. Nicholson seems to me a good poet who has become the victim of his formulas. The chief formula is to consider the local geology and architecture of Cumberland and suggest, by loving minute description of these, God's patient love for everything in this various universe. But Mr. Nicholson's universe - not God's - seems not various enough.²

One may perhaps agree with the implication that Nicholson is

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1. The Observer, 6 May 1954.
 2. New Statesman, 29 May 1954.

not sufficiently independent of his regional experience. It is no criticism of what he does write to express a regret that his poetic imagination usually seems to go into abeyance when he is away from home. But one is bound to suggest in Nicholson's defence that he is surely not the only poet to become 'a victim of his formulas': Philip Larkin has remained equally loyal (to rewrite Fraser in less tendentious terms) to a certain kind of subject matter and a particular tone of voice. Alan Ross summed up Nicholson's poetic habits more sensibly, and with a rather more open mind, in 1951:

Nicholson, probably wisely, has decided to work a narrow seam very deeply rather than extend his range more shallowly.¹

One suspects behind Fraser's criticism the partial working of a sort of literary orthodoxy which may be related to the metropolitan sense of superiority against which such articles as 'On Being a Provincial' are aimed. In the context

1. Alan Ross, Poetry 1945-1950, Longmans, Green for The British Council, 1951, p.33.

of this literary orthodoxy Nicholson's particular formula - a not unnatural tendency, given his provincial experience, to be most strongly and frequently stimulated by that experience - seems to the London literary critic unfamiliar and unfashionable.

It is with the foregoing summary of Nicholson's critical history in mind that one should consider something he said in 1963. Writing in 'The Second Chance' about his childhood experience of local fame - as a reciter of poetry in his native town - Nicholson made two passing points which deserve to be taken up:

...that experience left me with the sense of having an audience - a sense which twenty five years of being almost totally ignored as a poet has done little to destroy.¹

Considering that his volumes of poetry have always aroused the comment, often - as has been shown - the favourable comment, of metropolitan reviewers, this latter point about virtually total neglect is, if taken literally, an obvious exaggeration. Yet one sees what is meant. Just as one senses behind Nicholson's nervousness about the provincial elements in A Match for the Devil a hope that, nevertheless, the London critics would be won over,

1. 'The Second Chance', The Listener, 5 Sept. 1963, p.344.

so one may infer in the poet of provincial experience a desire for the honours of the metropolitan world in which literary reputations are made. Such a degree of fame has not materialised. Nicholson's poetry is by no means as widely known or recognised as it deserves to be, and the reason seems mainly to lie in the very uniqueness of its regional approach, which places it to one side of 'the modern tradition' as MacBeth defines it.

Yet though his poetry may not claim a large number of enthusiasts among critics, one suspects that it has a strong appeal for that other, silent kind of audience that Nicholson senses: an audience of fellow provincials in many places, the nature of whose lives would give them an instinctive understanding of the kind of material his poetry interprets. Unique though Nicholson may be among poets (and thus a strange phenomenon to critics), he cannot, if one accepts his view that 'the vast majority of mankind is provincial',¹ be considered

1. 'On Being a Provincial' (1954), p.248.

unique among men. The ill-health which deprived him of an anticipated University education and accidentally led to a poetry not wholly acceptable to critics offered Nicholson the compensation, unusual for a twentieth-century poet, of rootedness in a half-rural, half-industrial environment in which he could observe more clearly 'that which is enduring in life and society'.¹ It is likely, though this is a conjecture by its very nature almost impossible to verify, that by expressing the 'timeless' rather than the 'changing' elements of natural and human life Nicholson is able to reach a wider, if less fashionable, audience than most modern poets are given the opportunity of addressing. It may thus be considered that he is far from being 'almost totally ignored as a poet'.

Essentially, Nicholson is a man who has come to terms with his physical circumstances and with the regional material which these circumstances have placed before him. In the words of The Times Literary Supplement he is 'at home in the world in

1. 'On Being a Provincial' (1954), p.248.

which he finds himself'.¹ In many details his life resembles that of William Cowper, about whom he wrote in 1951 a very perceptive book. At times, reading this, one has the illusion that one is reading a piece of autobiography,² and at no point is this illusion stronger than when Nicholson quotes four lines from The Task:

"He is a happy man..." [Cowper] says
 'Who, doomed to an obscure but tranquil state,
 Is pleas'd with it, and were he free to choose,
 Would make his fate his choice'.³

One may certainly say of Nicholson that his poetry is the process by which he has turned his fate of remaining in one particular area into his choice of interpreting that area so that it transcends itself while still retaining its local identity.

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1. Cf. his uncollected poem 'Lines addressed to the Wise Men of Borrowdale' (Time and Tide, 12 Nov. 1949), which seems to suggest the complementary pleasures of being at home in that world and being able also to enlarge his horizons by addressing an outside audience through his poetry.
 2. William Cowper (1951). See especially pp. 83-7, pp. 127, 132, 137, 164.
 3. The Task VI, ll. 906 ff. Quoted in William Cowper (1951), p. 99.

Like Cowper also, Nicholson is a religious poet, and his religious beliefs have strengthened his involvement with his own material and locality: it is with him as with Cowper, 'as if his religion had commanded him to love not only his neighbour but his neighbourhood'.¹

Nicholson once said that 'I probably enjoy life far too much to be a good poet'.² That enjoyment of life is a disqualification for the writing of good poetry is debateable, but enjoyment is certainly a quality apparent in most of Nicholson's work, whether it show itself in detailed description of the physical world, in vivid images often verging on conceits, in a general exuberance of rhythm and language, in the virtuosity of rhyme and stanza, or in a perhaps unfashionable religious optimism. Nicholson's enjoyment of life springs fundamentally from the fact that, despite his potentially-fatal ill-health in adolescence, he was given a 'second chance' which he was determined not to waste. What kind of poetry he might have

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1. William Cowper (1951), p.164.
 2. The Poet Speaks, Argo Records RG 452.

written had he not been obliged by ill-health to remain in Millom one cannot conjecture: perhaps a poetry which would have found more ready critical acceptance, perhaps no poetry at all. Equally one cannot imagine what poetry he might have produced if he had tended his health less carefully, or indulged himself in the expression of bitterness over lost opportunities.

In 'The Second Chance' Nicholson concluded the description of his re-adjustment to local realities after 1932 by summarising frankly the pattern of his subsequent life as man and poet:

I am, in fact, a man who has been given a second chance, and, whatever the present predicament of mankind may be, I cannot but feel intensely grateful for every moment of that chance.

I know many people will say that this is not gratitude, it is complacency. They say it would have been better for me as a man, and still more so as a poet, if I had never been healed at all; if I had gone on feeling out-of-place in the world and alien among my own people. They say that it would have been better if I had forgotten to look after myself and had risked throwing away that second chance. I should have been dead by now, of course, but, they argue, I might, just possibly, have written better poetry.

I doubt if this is true. But even if it were, I would still say: To hell with the poetry, thank God I'm alive!¹

There is fortunately no need, however, for conjectures about a hypothetical 'better poetry'. In making the most of the new opportunities he was given after the old were removed, Nicholson has written a kind of poetry which amply justifies the way of life which produced it, a poetry very much sui generis, unusual in its raw-materials, vigorously individual in expression, and of convincing human relevance.

1. 'The Second Chance' (1963), p.344.

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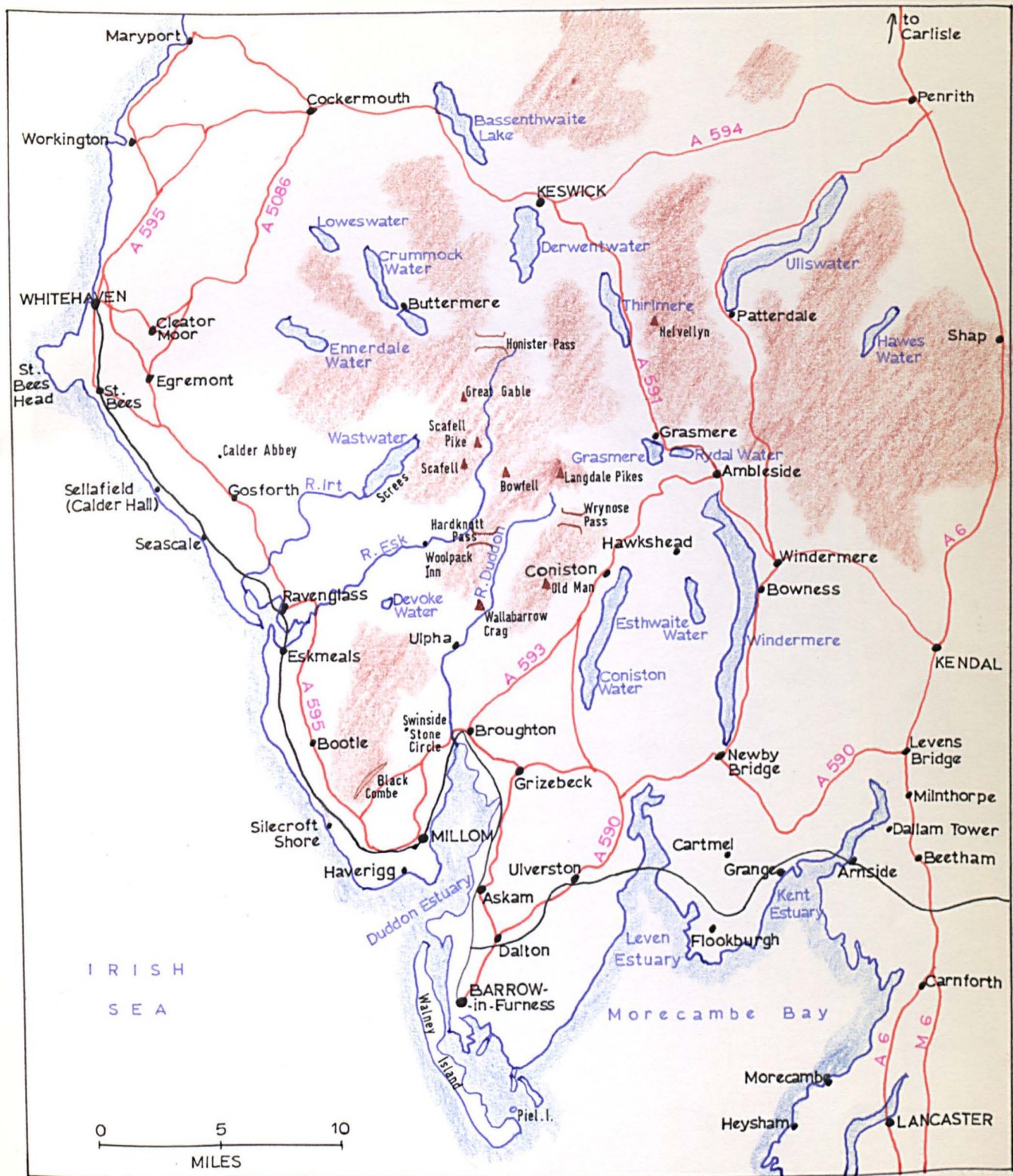
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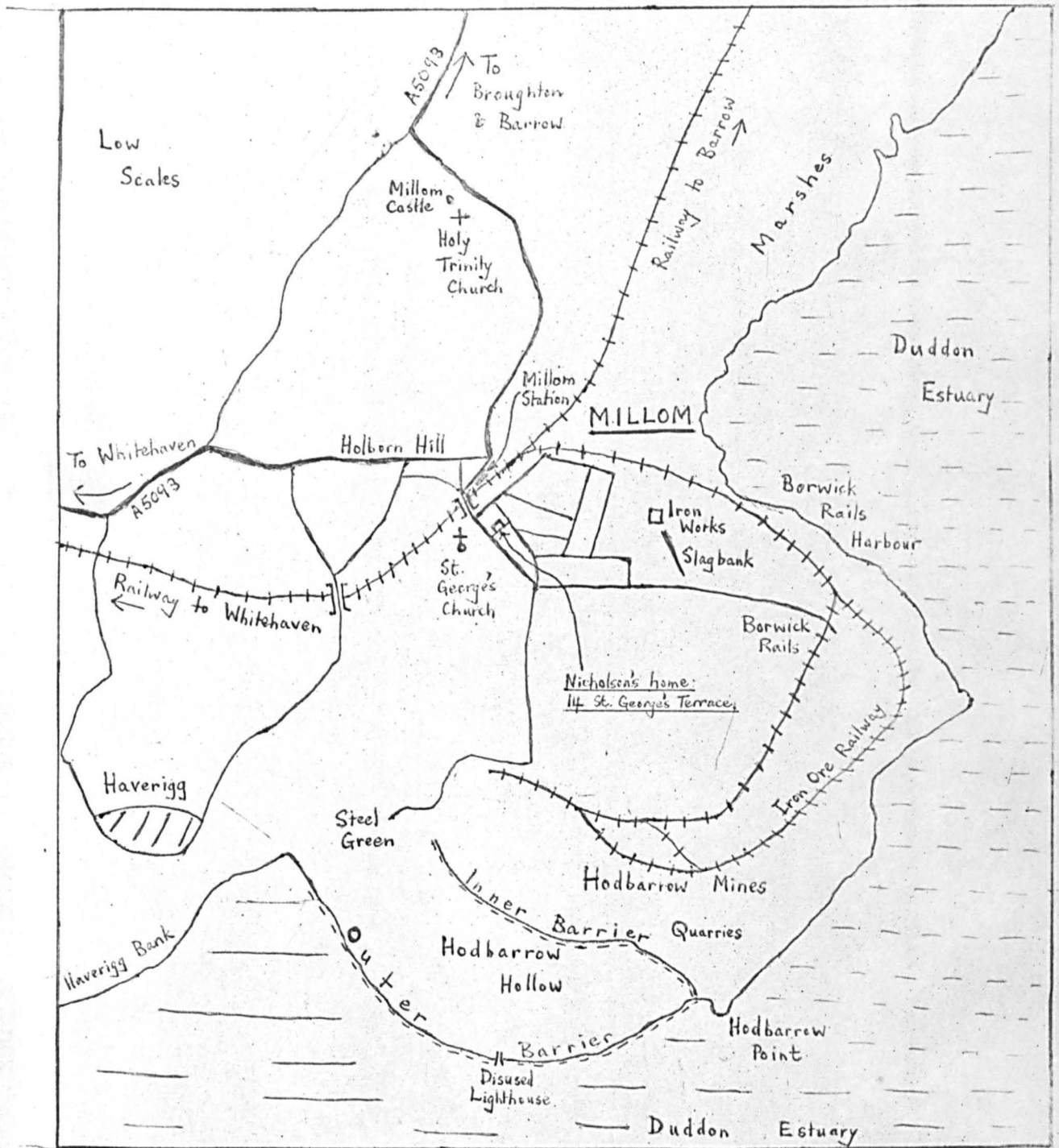
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Cumberland Westmorland & North Lancashire



APPENDIX B: Map of Millom.



Scale: 1 mile = $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches approx.

APPENDIX C

Texts of some early unpublished poems and of some less accessible recent poems.

POEM IN PENCIL

Your photograph
 Is a map in relief,
 Its frame the periphery
 Of a beloved territory.
 Fingers itch to mount
 The brow's escarpment,
 Corroded eyes
 Shirk the neon-pocked streets
 For the bolster combe
 Of the linen throat.
 But brittle as bath-salts
 Are the fells on canvas;
 The heart turns somersaults
 Through paper-hoop kisses.
 There are no hachures
 To etch the granite fissures,
 There's no theodolite
 To measure the right-
 angle where the lifted lid lets
 Light into the eye-jets.
 The graphed contour lines
 Fence in the fells less
 Than a curlew-cry across the screes,
 Than a pin-stripe of grass;
 And this snapshot view
 Evokes less of you
 Than a voice through an open door,
 An illogical gesture.

Sky beneath the skin,
 Veined becks ling-brown,
 Springs bubbling in the throat,
 Blood from a stone
 That is the feel of it,

The test and the taste of it,
 In the cadence of a visit,
 In the wing-flurry of a pipit,
 In the aluminium rain's
 Delicate grille,
 In your lubricant laughter
 Smooth on my eyeballs.

Till then no maps,
 No ground-plans, no props,
 For the mind's conjecture
 Needs no architecture
 And memory's witness
 Is an accurate atlas.

May 1937.

HAVERIGG BANKS (for Bess)

Now is the time to remember; before to remember
 Becomes only not to forget. Now is the time.
 It is always time and it will never be time again.
 And this is always true.

To remember how the wind dribbled sand along the dunes
 Like children playing football in a dusty schoolyard,
 And how the bentgrass bending and recoiling like loose fretsaw blades
 Hacked circles on the ground.

How the yellow bedstraw curled and curdled like sour milk,
 And cat's-ease bobbed on indiarubber stems,
 And the tight crochet-work of grass and dune weed
 Was clogged with sand.

Then the level laths of the clouds closed like a venetian blind
 And shuttered the sun, and the wind rolled coldly
 Over the sand which was still warm to an arm lazily stretched
 Or a bare foot.

There are scoops in the sand like craters of heavy bombs,
 Cliffs precariously reinforced by the marrams,
 Tunnellings, slidings, subsidences, as if the dunes
 Were worked-out mines.

I have known a storm which invented a landscape in the night,
 Sliced off the edge of the dunes like a cork slices piecrust,
 Filled in the old hollows and gouged out new,
 And piled incredible hills.

And yet they never alter and are never the same;
 We never see them twice alike and we know they do not change;
 The billions upon uncountable billions of sandgrains
 Add up to a constant total.

It is time to remember, too, those other dunes,
 Which look northwestward as these do, with the wind blowing
 Fire from the land, and the smoke settling on the sea,
 And the men waiting on the beach.

They, also, have not altered, they are still the same.
 The sand adjusts itself in familiar shapes;
 The salt corrodes the bones like splintered whelk-shells,
 And the gulls have forgotten the fracas.

The storm will not alter the earth whether or no we survive it.
 The eye that is not blinded by the sun sees no change,
 Except that which is too small for our eyes or too big
 for our understanding,
 The old unchanging change.

Fire cannot destroy the wood that is forever burning,
 Nor poison-gas rid the land of snakes.
 It is time now to remember such and to speak of it
 Before words are forgotten and only the meaning remains.

16 June 1940

SONNET FOR GOOD FRIDAY

Nailed to the cross-stretched continents I hang,
 My feet in China and my head in Spain.
 Nor shall the rain and tears from thunder wrung
 Adulterate my blood to holy wine.
 Mocking artillery flings my crown of shells,
 While armies skewer the fasces through my thigh,
 And submarines, when depth-charge spouts like whales,
 Thrust in my thirsty mouth the bile-sour sea.
 Out of the shaken Pyrenees I call
 'Why, why am I forsaken?'; for reply
 I hear the suffered silence of the hill,
 And learn now not to pray for victory.
 If I, who must die, die, what need I fear,
 When God, who cannot die, has died before.

c.1937

JOHN KEATS TO FANNY BRAWNE

Dearest, unfaithful now am I,
 For with another love I lie -
 A planet-eyed and peering wraith
 Who breathes on me the breath of death

Her lips are dry as sawdust, yet
 Wet as a rag I lie in sweat;
 Lie weak for sleep but cannot rest,
 Her hot arms clamped about my chest.

And if one night I slept with you
 She would lie there between us two,
 And when I'd tongued the blight of bliss
Your mouth soon she'd seek to kiss.

For her hermaphroditic wine
 Could heat your blood as well as mine,
 Could teach you what I learned of life,
 And take your widowhood to wife.

Therefore, beloved, let me go
 Into the bright Italian snow,
 And dig a mattress one rib wide
 To hold my ballad and my bride.

Date unknown

THE STONE THAT WAS ROLLED AWAY

- Mary Salome: This is the garden,
 And here is the Sepulchre.
- Mary the Mother
 of James: All is the same:
 The ivy rides the wall;
 The sun tacks trimmings
 On the edges of the palm leaves.
 All is the same.
- Mary Magdalene: But where is Our Lord? Where
 Is he for whom we have come?
- Mary Salome: Where are the angels, the watchers?
- Mary the Mother
 of James: All are gone
 Like smoke in a draught.
- Mary Salome: Only the stone is left.
- Mary Magdalene: But the stone is rolled away!
 Oh is there none,
 None who remembers
 How the sun rose
 Like a new invention?
 Come, let us ask
 Those who pass by;
 Let us gaze on their faces,
 For those who have seen Him
 Will bear his glory
 Stained in their eyes
 Like a picture on glass.
- Mary Salome: Let us ask this stranger
 Who strides like a soldier. Sir -

The Soldier: Yes, miss, I'm a soldier. Jerusalem's
Full of soldiers. Has been for years. Arabs, Jews,
They're at each other's teeth till we're called in
To drag 'em apart, and all the thanks we get
Is a cobble thrown from an alley on a dark night.
But we'll soon be out of it.

Mary Salome: Sir, did you see our Lord?

Mary the Mother of James: They buried him here in this sepulchre.

The Soldier: Why, yes,
I was on guard that night. There had been trouble -
I forget what - and the Elders were afraid
They'd try to steal the body from the tomb.
They did so too, but what surprised me...
Was something else.

Mary Salome: What else?

The Soldier: That stone.

Mary Magdalene: The stone was rolled away!

The Soldier: Yes. And two ton
It must have weighed if it was half an ounce.
It beat me then; it beats me now. But ladies
Two's company, three's a crowd, and in these days
A crowd is a conspiracy.
So move along;
Please, or stand a little more apart.

Mary Magdalene: He does not remember;
His eyes were empty.

Mary Salome: The sky is empty too.
There is no gospel
Pinned to the trees -

- Mary the Mother of James: And the creed recedes
Ringing in the wind.
- Mary Magdalene: But the stone was rolled away.
It was yet dark
When I looked in the tomb,
And a shadow fell
On my shoulder, brighter
Than the light it shadowed,
And I, supposing
It to be the gardener,
Turned - Oh!
- Gardener: I am the gardener.
- Mary Magdalene: But you are not Him.
- Gardener: Yet I am the gardener. Once this garden
Was rank and ripe as Solomon's beard, running
With Rose of Sharon and Lily of the Valley. Now
We brush the paths and keep you off the grass,
Though we've scarcely time to grow the grass to
keep off.
- Mary the Mother of James: Our Lord was laid in the Sepulchre here; do you
Remember Him?
- Gardener: The Sepulchre? Oh no.
It's never been used that I can think of. No.
- Mary Magdalene: But I saw one standing
In the tree-striped dawn.
It spoke to Him, thinking
That it was you -
- Gardener: Wait!
Someone impersonating me! Yes,
I think I remember that. But why? Why should he?
So early - the sun, bright as a celandine,
Laying a yellow glaze along the turf,
You'd almost think that you could scrape it off
With a penknife or a pin.

Mary Magdalene: Then you remember Him?

Gardener: No. Nothing. Nothing.
But, perhaps, the stone. It moved that night.
I've watched it near two thousand year since then,
And it's never moved again. But what have I
To do with stones that move, or stones that don't -
The lawns are all that I've got time for now.
(GOING AWAY)
Keep off the grass, there, please; keep off the grass

Mary Magdalene: He has gone. He has told us nothing.

Mary Salome: There is nothing to tell.
The bells ring fainter.
The words are faded.

Mary the Mother
of James: Our memories peel
Like paint on a sun-baked wall.

Mary Salome: The soldiers wrangle,
The crowds jangle,
The garden is tangled
With weed and sand.

Mary Magdalene: Oh trees and flowers,
Show us the vision
Once twined in your stems;
Oh sun and sky
Give us a sign.

The Stone: (ECHO)
I am the sign.

Women: But who are you?

The Stone: (ECHO)
I am the stone.

Mary Magdalene: The stone that was rolled away?

The Stone:

(ECHO OFF AFTER "YES")

Yes. The stone was moved
 And the movement still goes on
 Like a planet thrown
 To spin on its own orbit.
 Mountains burned
 And the slow weeping mud
 Left traces of tears
 To shape my turning.
 I am the body, the bread;
 The blond barley
 Is the hair of my head,
 And priests at altars raise
 The stone, the stone; for I
 Am the sacrament of matter,
 The matter of fact,
 The fact of sacrament.
 I am potential incarnation
 and perpetual resurrection,
 The created, the contrived, the controlled,
 The stone that was rolled away,
 And the stone that is always there.
 Go, therefore, go back to your homes,
 Back to the soldiers, the fighting and the hunger.
 Know
 That your Lord lives and the stone still moves.
 The tale the sun relates is true; the view
 Of heaven is rightly seen between the tree-trunks,
 And a miracle is solid to the touch.

Commissioned as part of 'An Easter
 Anthology', compiled by Rayner
 Heppenstall. B.B.C. Third Programme.
 28 March 1948.

HOSEA

Love, that on a mattress cuddles all
 The wooden legs and false teeth of the world;
 That presses a possessive mouth on small
 White ulcers and children who tell lies;
 Love, that can never know pity, for pity is known
 From the pain in another's eyes,

And all pain is always love's own -
 Take to itself this man
 Who beneath scouring skies
 Stares through the split rocks at a far town.

He sees no more the kisses, the torn gown,
 The stains on the steps of the altar,
 But in a testament of driven sand
 He reads the need
 For the accepted shame, the price
 In silver and barley and unfertile years:
 'For I have desired mercy and not sacrifice.'
 He roofs blurred eyes with a dry, cracking hand -
 His righteous anger cuckolded by tears.

Pre-1954. Place of publication unknown.

UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE COUNTY COUNCIL

It was the hum
 Of silence drew me to the crumbling
 Quarry in the yellow drench of autumn -
 Birk of silver-gilt and sycamores
 With flecked paint peeling off. November
 Turns its blowlamp on the timber
 Till the quarry walls are drifted, flag to beam,
 With blisters and burnings of leaf. Oranges
 and lemons
 Ring downward in a chime of colour from
 The steeples of the rocks. Yet it is shadow
 I remember,
 Unlit by fern: the hollow where an old steam
 Roller (its silent fly-wheels humming
 In a paralysis of power) waits for the green
 moment
 To break out from the tent of rust and bramble
 And bring an unearned meaning to this poem.

Time and Tide, 1955.

OF THIS PARISH

Here on the churchyard hill the dead lie higher
 (Under the winter
 Heliotrope, the garish
 Wreaths, the slanter
 Two o'clock shadow of the spire)
 Than all the tall electors of this parish.

Not in the ore that fed them or the slate that sheltered,
 But in brown smoulder
 Of glacial clay
 The dead burn colder;
 While rain and tears are skeltered
 Down through the drains of the town to the sump of the bay.

We dump the wreaths in a ventilated bin:
 Soused in paraffin -
 Tulips, chrysanthemums,
 Premature blossoming thorn,
 Find in the flames
 A short cut to the Resurrection Morn.

The Grapevine, c. 1956, p.13.

THE RIDDLE

Why is a baby
Like a railway engine? - I
 Knew the answer, maybe
 Forty years ago:
 The night old Rustyknob
 Of the jerry-laid iron line,
 All duck-waddle and puff,
 Dived like a gannet,
 Streamfeathered and slender,
 Plumb in the deeps of the mine.
 And the sand closed like water
 Over piston-rod and spoke
 Leaving not even the tender
 Behind for a schoolboy's joke.

We stood in the steaming
 November air
 Staring at rails
 Bent to no junction;
 And switch-point levers
 Left without function
 Swiveled eyes wide
 Down tracks of drifting shales -
 And the son of the day-shift engine-driver
 Stood at my side.

The sand's slow tide
 Flowed in and filled the crater;
 Salted sleeper and chair.
 Bolt and signal wire
 Reddened like raspberries
 In the soggy, sea-air.
 Thrift and sea-holly
 Spilled on the dolly-tub rim,
 Trefoil and clover
 Yellowed it over,
 Till not a dip the depth of a saucer
 Scored the spot where the night-shift driver
 Fought and fell clear,
 And the bumpers bored down
 To an underground siding,
 Hauling a thousand brown
 Bogey-loads of ore.

The dune-fly dances
 In the jittery sun,
 And skewers of marram
 Peg down the groundsheet sand.
But why is a baby? -
 I forgot the answer
 That muggy November
 All Soul's Eve,
 The night the engine died,
 As only the old remember now,
 And only the young believe.

THE BOREHOLE

A huddle of iron jammy-cranes
Straddles the skear, shanks
Rusty from salt rains,
Or halfway up their barnacled flanks
In the flood tide. Paid-up pits
Lounge round the banks,
Turning out red pockets.
The cranking waders stand,
Necks down, bills grinding in their sockets,
Drilling the sand.
A steam-pipe whistles, the clanged iron bells;
Five hundred feet of limestone shudders and
Creaks down all its strata'd spine of ammonites and shells,
And a vertical worm of stone is worried
Out from the earth's core.
The daylight falls
Westward with the ebb, before
The night-shift buzzer calls:
But what is it sticks in the bird's gullet -
Rubble or crystal, dross or ore?

Written 1967.
The Malahat Review No.9, Jan. 1969.

APPENDIX D: Part of Nicholson's original ms. of the poem 'Great Day'.

A RAINBOW & A CUCKOO'S SONG

(1)

GREAT DAY

I found him on - even; by London,

London. Mercury Players, Pilgrims
and Mercury Players.

to those hands; long to long

to you was that it was the same day as the day of the rainbow

to me on the same day as the day of the rainbow

to me on the same day as the day of the rainbow

Bring me to you on the same day as the day of the rainbow

Use my eyes to see you on the same day as the day of the rainbow

to me on the same day as the day of the rainbow

~~to me on the same day as the day of the rainbow~~

APPENDIX E.PERFORMANCES OF PLAYS BY NORMAN NICHOLSON.(a) The Old Man of the Mountains

<u>1945</u>	Sept. 13	London. Mercury Theatre. Pilgrim and Mercury Players.
<u>1946</u>	June 19/29	Bradford. Civic Playhouse.
	July 20/27	Newcastle-on-Tyne. People's Theatre.
	-	Workington. Theatre Royal. Playgoers' Club.
<u>1947</u>	May	Easington Colliery. One performance. E. Martin Browne and Pilgrim Players.
	May 27/28	Sunderland. Royalty Hall. E. Martin Browne and Pilgrim Players.
	-	Buckley (Wales). Buckley Drama Circle.
	-	Manchester. Whitworth Theatre. The Unnamed Society. (First performance of revised version).
<u>1948</u>	-	York. Rowntree Theatre, Haxby Road. York Settlement Community Players.
<u>1949</u>	-	Croydon. The Croydon Players.
	-	Widnes. Wade Deacon Grammar School. Quintillian [<u>sic</u>] Drama Club.
<u>1950</u>	Nov.	Ambleside. Ambleside Players. (Nicholson was present at performance on 23 November).
<u>1951</u>	-	Cheltenham. Bayshill Hall, Royal Well. Falcon Players.

- Bingley. Little Theatre.
- 1953 New York. Hunter College Playhouse.
Theatre Workshop Alumnae.
- Nov. Pembroke Dock Grammar School Dramatic Society.
- 1954 - Denmark. Performed in Danish translation
Den Gamle Mand fra Bjergene.
- 1955 - Coventry. Frederick Bird School.
- 1960 April Godalming. The Deanery Players.
- Drake Hall Men's Training College Dramatic
Society.
- Bromsgrove. Avoncroft Arts Society.
- Sheffield. Central Library Theatre.
(Sponsored by the Religious Drama Committee
of the Association of the Christian
Communities of Sheffield)

The play was also performed in Christchurch,
New Zealand, and in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral.

(b) Prophesy to the Wind

- 1949 January Newcastle-on-Tyne. Peoples' Theatre.
- April Ealing. The Questors Theatre.
- 1950 - Harrogate Drama Festival. York Settlement
Community Players.
- 1951 - Buxton. Playhouse Theatre. Adelphi
Guild Theatre.
- August London. Watergate Theatre.

- 1952 - Granville, Ohio. Denison Studio Theatre, Denison University.
- 1953 27 July - Porthcurno. Minack Cliff Theatre.
4 Aug. (Council of Social Service for Cornwall).
- 1956 26-30 Jan. Carlisle. West Walls Theatre. Green Room Club.

(c) A Match for the Devil

- 1953 27 Aug. Edinburgh Festival. St. Mary's Hall.
London Club Theatre Group.
- Granville, Ohio, Denison University Theatre.
- 1954 - Manchester. The Unnamed Society.

(d) Birth by Drowning

- 1959 9 July Mirfield. Quarry Theatre. Produced by Pamela Keily.
- (prob. 10/11 Dec. Manchester. Lesser Free Trade Hall.
1959) Produced by Pamela Keily.
- 1960 14/17 June Sheffield. Carver Street Methodist Hall.
Produced by Pamela Keily.

Pamela Keily also produced the play (exact place and date unknown) in the Diocese of Ripon.