

# ‘A Poor Jonah’: John Osborne’s Roads to Freedom

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When John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* opened on 8 May 1956, the broadly enthusiastic critical reception emphasized the youth and novelty of this powerful new writer. At least eight of the first night reviews (including those of *The Times*, *The Financial Times*, the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Daily Express*) specifically referred to *Look Back in Anger* as Osborne’s ‘first play’, an assumption repeated in Kenneth Tynan’s legendary encomium the following Sunday in the *Observer*.<sup>1</sup> The subsequent claiming of the play – and the year – as a transformative moment in British theatre history has supported this emphasis, and has meant that the majority of studies of Osborne’s oeuvre begin with the ‘overnight’ success of *Look Back in Anger*.<sup>2</sup> In fact, *Look Back in Anger* was Osborne’s eighth play to have been written, a fact hinted at in his pocket diary for 1955, in which he listed a number of titles of what he termed ‘forward engagements’:

The Great Bear  
Personal Enemy  
Epitaph  
The King is Dead  
LBIA  
Love in a Myth.<sup>3</sup>

To these titles we can add *The Devil Inside Him* (originally titled *Resting Deep*) and *Happy Birthday*: seven works recorded before Osborne’s ‘first play’ was acclaimed in May 1956.

Although recent years have seen increasing critical engagement with British theatre in the years before *Look Back in Anger*,<sup>4</sup> disputing the once common view of a pre-1956 theatrical wasteland, few writers have concentrated on the theatre of Osborne himself before this time, and these early plays remain little-known among students of Osborne’s oeuvre.<sup>5</sup> When the existence of these plays has been acknowledged, it is often as a footnote, and follows Osborne’s own belief that the texts had vanished.<sup>6</sup> However, the recent emergence in the British Library

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<sup>1</sup> See John Russell Taylor (ed.), *John Osborne: Look Back in Anger: A Casebook* (London, 1968), pp. 35–56.

<sup>2</sup> For the perceived transformational impact of the play, see, for example, Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London, 1999), pp. 2–6.

<sup>3</sup> Austin, TX, Harry Ramsom Center, John Osborne Accession 2009 (uncatalogued), Pocket Diary 1955. *Love in a Myth* was written after Osborne had completed *Look Back in Anger* and was waiting for the play to open, and is an early version of *The World of Paul Slickey*, which opened in 1959.

<sup>4</sup> To cite just a few examples, in addition to *1956 and All That*: Frith Banbury, *The Lost Summer* (London, 1995), Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre since the War* (London, 1999), Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> The only pre-1956 play to have received any sustained attention is *Epitaph for George Dillon*, co-authored with Anthony Creighton in 1955, although not produced until 1958 by the Royal Court in a substantially revised version.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Martin Banham, *Osborne* (Edinburgh, 1969), p. 100, referenced in turn by Arnold P. Hinchliffe, *John Osborne* (Boston, MA, 1984), p. 3. John Heilpern claims the script of *The Devil Inside Him* ‘hasn’t survived’ in his recent biography (*John Osborne: A Patriot for Us* (London, 2006), p. 104), and relies for the most part on Osborne’s autobiography in his treatment of some of Osborne’s early work.

of two play-scripts written by Osborne and (briefly) staged before 1956, alongside new evidence among recently deposited archival material at the Ransom Center, Texas, for the first time permits a more nuanced understanding of Osborne's apprenticeship in the theatre.

In this article, therefore, I will look in detail at Osborne's pre-1956 writing, exploring how his eight-year apprenticeship in the theatre allowed for wide-ranging experimentation with tone and technique, eventually culminating in the emergence of his own distinctive voice in *Look Back in Anger*. While the temptation towards teleology is strong, I want to examine Osborne's early work in its own socio-political and theatrical contexts, and avoid an exclusive focus on identifying the roots of *Look Back in Anger*. In addition to the archival sources in the British Library and the Ransom Center, I acknowledge the cautious use I have made of Osborne's published and draft autobiography; as much as I draw from these, however, I have tried equally to correct Osborne's factual errors in these most unreliable of memoirs, some of which are in turn recycled in John Heilpern's biography of 2006.

### We few, we happy few (*The Devil Inside Him*)

Like many new playwrights who emerged in the mid-1950s, John Osborne served his writing apprenticeship as a repertory actor in the provincial English theatre. In January 1948 he was hired as assistant stage manager and understudy for a 'number two' tour of the West End hit *No Room at the Inn*, and it was during this tour, backstage at the Empire, Sunderland, that he began work on his first play, *Resting Deep*, apparently completed in Leeds a few weeks later. During the summer, Osborne began a relationship with Stella Linden, the newly arrived – and married – leading lady on the tour, and he shared the draft of his 'melodrama about a poetic Welsh loon' with the older actress.<sup>8</sup> In his unpublished memoirs, Stella's husband, producer Patrick Desmond, recalled the moment when Stella introduced him to her soon-to-be lover:

One afternoon, she introduced me to the assistant stage manager, a willowy good-looking young man of eighteen. Stella had already told me about him, that he looked like a Greek god and wrote marvelous poetry ... A few weeks later, Stella brought me a play he had written ... It was very interesting, but useless.<sup>9</sup>

Stella shared her husband's concerns; schooled in the demands of repertory theatre, she identified a lack of structure in the text, and advised a crash-course in the well-made plays of Pinero. Moreover, Stella was particularly concerned by Osborne's soaring language, since 'intimations of poetry in the theatre was pornography to her'.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Patrick Desmond was hoping to take over the Granville theatre in Waltham Green, and Stella hinted at a production of *Resting Deep* for the opening season if the necessary changes could be made. Accordingly, the two lovers set to work reshaping the play, adding 'a few coarse jokes', and retitling it *The Devil Inside Him*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The two extant scripts produced before 1956 are from the Lord Chamberlain's play-scripts collection, part of the British Library Department of Manuscripts: *The Devil Inside Him*, Lord Chamberlain's Plays 1950/1608 and *Personal Enemy*, Lord Chamberlain's Plays 1955/ 7672. Both plays were published for the first time in June 2009 by Oberon, and references in the article will be to this edition. For the initial reporting of the emergence of the two scripts, see Jack Malvern, 'Early John Osborne plays, written before *Anger*, found after 60 years', *The Times*, 30 May 2009. The John Osborne collection at the Ransom Center was acquired in 1995, and has been added to subsequently. For more information regarding the sale of Osborne's papers to the Center, both during his life-time and *post mortem auctoris*, see Heilpern, *John Osborne: A Patriot for Us*, p. 479.

<sup>8</sup> John Osborne, *Looking Back: Never Explain, Never Apologise* (London, 1999), p. 179.

<sup>9</sup> Unpublished autobiography by Patrick Desmond, quoted by Chris Duff (son of Patrick Desmond) in an email to author, 24 December 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Osborne, *Looking Back*, p. 190.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

The extant script of *The Devil Inside Him* supports Osborne's recollections of its awkward collaborative conception, and is revealing of some of Osborne's theatrical influences in the early 1950s. Before looking in more detail at some of the generic conventions circulating in the play, it is appropriate to offer a brief summary of the narrative. The play is set in an isolated Welsh village (the country of Osborne's father), and is set in the increasingly claustrophobic *huis clos* of the main room of the Prosser family's boarding house.<sup>12</sup> The son of the house, Huw, is an introverted, artistic young man, taunted by the village children, and is the despair of his emotionally constricted puritan parents. The core of the play takes place one evening, when Huw is alone in the house while his parents visit an ailing aunt. The coquettish servant girl, Dilys, returns and, ripping her own clothes, begins to simulate circumstances that will suggest that Huw has assaulted her (we learn that she is pregnant as a result of a liaison with a travelling salesman, and is looking to Huw to ascribe an acceptable paternity for her unborn child). Realizing his trust has been betrayed, Huw decides to fight back, and attacks Dilys, wounding her fatally, and is shown at the end of Act Two confidently cleaning up the body. In the final act the icy Minister leads an inquisition into the murder, but in so doing exposes the hypocrisy and fear that he exerts over a cowed village. By the end of the play, Huw has assumed his crime, but the Minister's dominant atmosphere of guilt is broken, and Huw's alienating relationship with his emotionally distant parents begins to thaw.

Huw is established early in the play as an elemental, almost animalistic, foil to the hypocrisy of so-called civilized village society, and his opposition to the socialized routines of his parents is expressed through the truthfulness and luxuriant extravagance of his language. If Stella had attempted to remove the 'intimations of poetry' from the play, it appears that she was only partially successful. There is a primal violence in Huw's depiction of his job as a butcher's assistant ('Have you ever seen a pig slaughtered ... They cut its throat just as you might cut an apple. And it screams'), and his opposition of the sterility of the house with the integrity of the natural world employs exactly the 'flashes of poetry'<sup>14</sup> that Stella abhorred:

I can show you the softness of the mists, wandering like strangers amongst the marshes; where the sad music of the wild birds runs like mountain water over the strings of the young reeds. I can show you the smell of dead bark freshly chipped from its tree; the urgent smell of early morning and the hushed smell of the evening.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, the influences of Stella and Patrick Desmond are not hard to identify, and repertory conventions are exploited from the beginning. The play opens in a manner that would have been familiar to rep audiences, when a mysterious lodger creeps down the stairs of the provincial boarding house, and he is soon joined by a comically garrulous daily woman, and a precociously seductive servant girl. The suggestion of the lodger's black market activities, and his transparently shifty air, bear striking similarity to the introduction of Mr Paravicini at the beginning of *The Mousetrap*,<sup>16</sup> while the daily woman and servant girl are stock rep foils, rather than socially realistic characters.

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<sup>12</sup> The character family name Prosser was recycled by Osborne for his later play *Watch it Come Down*, first performed in 1976.

<sup>13</sup> John Osborne, *Before Anger: The Devil Inside Him and Personal Enemy*, ed. Jamie Andrews (London, 2009), p. 50.

<sup>14</sup> See Osborne, *Looking Back: Never Explain, Never Apologise*, p. 190.

<sup>15</sup> Osborne, *Before Anger*, pp. 88-9.

<sup>16</sup> The play began life in 1947 as a radio play, *Three Blind Mice*, and was first staged in 1952.

Despite Stella's situating of the play among recognizable repertory formulae, what would become familiar Osborne themes are nonetheless apparent at the beginning of his career. His bold language – albeit far removed from the more demotic idiom of his early successes – is employed as an appeal to the isolated strength of the individual, as it would be in *Look Back in Anger*. Huw, a sensitive individual alienated from his parents and society through an excess of feeling that eventually erupts in violence, is a recognizable Osborne figure, whose rage is directed against the conformity of an unthinking majority. In Act III, Burn alludes to *Henry V* when he contrasts the fear of a village prey to the strictures of the Minister with 'those happy few [who] don't need an interpreter', and Huw can retrospectively be understood as the first of Osborne's 'band of brothers' struggling to find an authentic place in an indifferent world.<sup>17</sup>

The clearest convergence between Osborne's ambitions for *The Devil Inside Him*, and the demands of the repertory conventions which framed its collaborative composition and reception, can be found in the pivotal murder scene. On the one hand, the swift dispatching of the servant girl (timed, for maximum effect, at the curtain of the Second Act) heralds a recognizable 'whodunit' dynamic, with the audience prepared after the interval for the assembly of the entire cast for the classic unmasking scene. The dynamic is further shaped to excite a repertory audience through the incorporation of Grand Guignol elements that apparently undercut the seriousness of the murder. It appears Huw has cut up the body, disposing of the parts 'in the loft – mostly'; a clue as to the location of the remaining body parts is suggested by Mrs Evans's excitable reports of a blocked sink.<sup>18</sup> However, Osborne does not entirely sacrifice the dramatic possibilities of the murder to generic conventions, and by allowing the other characters to understand the identity of the killer shortly after the beginning of Act Three, the logic of the 'whodunit' is destabilized.

Despite the older Osborne's exaggerated dismissal of Francophone philosophical fripperies, his notebooks from the early 1950s point to a student of contemporary continental philosophy.<sup>19</sup> In his notes on *The Age of Reason* (1947), the first volume of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist trilogy *The Roads to Freedom*, he emphasizes the individual's vertiginous imperative of choice and freedom – 'FREE, PERSONAL, CHOICE' – and he later notes that 'Sartre sees all communications and personal relationships as doomed to frustration'. Under the heading 'Choice', he continues:

I can't help feeling that those existentialists for all their raffishness have got something – or should I say 'had' something by now? We really do seem to be dominated by choice, don't we? We make decisions, ultimate resolutions of life, all the time.<sup>20</sup>

In light of this, the murder might be better understood as a deliberate choice by Huw to act against the moralizing of the village, and the crucial stage directions to the wordless, one-page scene interpolated at the end of Act Two suggest that by assuming the consequences, his act is truly existential – and thus transformative.

This is another Huw ... He seems to stand up straight mentally and physically for the first time ... None of his movements are hurried, neither are they unsure.<sup>21</sup>

It is an act that visibly redefines Huw and his ethical configuration within a new freedom. *The Age of Reason* was published in the same year that *Les Mouches*, Sartre's existential gloss on the *Oresteia*, was produced in England as *The Flies*, and the transformation in Huw

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<sup>17</sup> Osborne, *Before Anger*, p. 102.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> For Osborne's fulminating against his early philosophical readings, see Osborne, *Looking Back*, p. 288.

<sup>20</sup> Harry Ramsom Center, John Osborne Accession 2009 (uncatalogued), John Osborne Notebook I 1953.

<sup>21</sup> Osborne, *Before Anger*, p. 85.

evinced in the stage directions above might be compared to the new-found self-awareness and decisiveness of Sartre's Orestes after the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The Minister in *The Devil Inside Him* has come to paralyse the village with fear and guilt in the same way as the citizens of Argos are cowed by a guilt and remorse imposed by Zeus,<sup>22</sup> and seeing Huw as the existentialist hero of Osborne's play transforms an increasingly fantastic thriller into a metaphysical journey. Just as Orestes sets off alone at the conclusion of *The Flies*, pursued by the Furies and taking on the guilt of the townspeople, so Huw's final words ('I understand now') as he waits for the police suggest a moment of anagnorisis. By assuming the murder, Huw appears to have weakened the Minister's power, and – like Orestes – he has offered new hope for the village in the future, albeit at the price of his own happiness ('I understand now, but I can't live').<sup>23</sup>

Whatever Osborne's intentions, the play would be judged in the first instance through the responses of provincial repertory audiences. Although Patrick Desmond's ambitions for Waltham Green never materialized, he had secured the Theatre Royal, Huddersfield, for a short repertory season, and programmed *The Devil Inside Him* for a week's run in late spring. From May 1950, 'the world premiere' of the play was advertised in typically breathless Desmond prose as a 'turbulent drama with love, hate and murder'.<sup>24</sup> Although Osborne had volunteered to play the leading role in his play, an 'exciting young actor' was engaged instead (cynically glossed by Osborne as 'someone inexperienced and cheap'), and the play opened on 29 May 1950.<sup>25</sup> Osborne was reunited with Stella for the opening:

On Easter Monday 1950 I sat in the stalls of the Theatre Royal, Huddersfield, watching the world opening performance of my play, holding hands with my co-author ... After less than eighteen months in the theatre, I was watching my own play – or a version of it – being performed in a professional theatre.<sup>26</sup>

Takings on the opening night were good, and the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner* hailed the 'real dramatic instinct behind the play', as well as the performance of Reginald Barratt as Huw ('as brilliant a piece of acting as we have seen ... for a long time'). Reflecting the variety and frequency of roles that actors in rep were expected to cover, the newspaper also highlighted 'Mr Alan Bromley, last week in farce' as 'equally adroit as the strait-laced father', but (the thirty-two year old) Stella's interpretation of the enticing young maid was dismissed as 'stage machinery'.<sup>27</sup>

However, audiences waned throughout the rest of the week and, in Desmond's words, 'it created no stir'.<sup>28</sup> Although Osborne remembered the opening night with affection, he found his 'remaining waste-grounds of poetry palled', and he soon returned to itinerant repertory acting work.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The lodger, Burn, complains to the Minister's face: 'You create evil. You *want* it ... and that's your business, isn't it?', *ibid.*, pp. 98–9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, *Huddersfield Weekly Examiner*, 20 May 1950.

<sup>25</sup> Osborne, *Looking Back*, p. 211.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216. In his autobiography, Osborne remembers the opening as Easter Monday 1950; in fact, 29 May was Whit Monday. In his biography, Heilpern lists the opening as Easter Monday 1951, and lists the title as *The Devil Inside*. Osborne's memory of holding hands with Stella is tinged with nostalgia, although Stella's presence on stage playing the servant girl suggests its accuracy is questionable.

<sup>27</sup> Anonymous, 'Brilliant acting in a new play', *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, 30 May 1950.

<sup>28</sup> Desmond (as in n. 9).

<sup>29</sup> Osborne, *Looking Back*, p. 216.

*The Devil Inside Him* had a brief afterlife when Desmond revived it in Croydon without Osborne's permission as *Cry for Love* in 1961,<sup>30</sup> but it has otherwise made little impression on Osborne studies, and Osborne's brief references to it in his autobiography seem not to have dissented from the opinion of the official censor, who dismissed it as: 'a conventionally gloomy play about the Welsh as I hope they are not?'<sup>31</sup> Positioned intriguingly between two theatrical eras, *The Devil Inside Him* is however far more absorbing than either its author or the censor gave it credit for, and is revealing of Osborne's early influences and ambitions.

### A good slosh of Eliot (*Happy Birthday; The Great Bear: or Minette*)

Between the end of the 1948 tour of *No Room at the Inn* and the 1950 premiere of *The Devil Inside Him*, Osborne had enjoyed a halcyon year living with Stella in Brighton: 'Terrence Rattigan was around the corner, stars were above and around us.'<sup>32</sup> While living in Desmond's flat on Arundel Terrace, the lovers began to collaborate on a new play, *Happy Birthday*. The text has not survived, but in unpublished drafts of his autobiography Osborne hints at the direction of his writing. Ironically for a writer whose uncompromising prose is often seen to have displaced the previous generation of verse-dramatists, in 1949 Osborne's attachment to poetic drama was growing. His discovery of Christopher Fry was revelatory: 'I remember seeing *The Lady's not for Burning* with some excitement, thinking at least here was something different and that perhaps this was a path I might take', and he also enjoyed 'the freshness and blessed change from the drawing room in Loamshire' of Peter Brook's production of verse drama *Dark of the Moon*. Stella was 'scornful' of this direction, which 'was not theatre and it was not commercial'; indeed Osborne became increasingly aware that 'Pat and Stella were intent upon producing plays that would out-Binkie Binkie in their Binkiness' (a reference to Hugh 'Binkie' Beaumont, the most important West End producer of the period).<sup>33</sup>

*Happy Birthday*, therefore, was destined to be an uneasy melding of Osborne's experimentation with verse drama, and Stella's more straightforward ambitions for a family drama based on memories of her own mother. Osborne 'despised her natural reliance on ... outmoded and shoddy formulas', and soon realized: 'we had little common ground after all professionally and it may well have begun to affect our emotional life in the process.'<sup>34</sup> *Happy Birthday* was never completed, and Stella and Osborne separated in the autumn of 1949. While Osborne's writing at this stage was strongly influenced by verse drama, his confidence in having found an authentic voice should not be overestimated, and it appears he alighted on the genre primarily as an escape from stultifying post-War drawing-room naturalism:

Although I was not sure that Fry and foreign plays were necessarily the alternative to the succession of polite middle class plays I sat through week after week, I had little idea of what should replace them.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> A copy of this text, lightly revised from the original version, is also in the Lord Chamberlain's play-scripts collection, attributed to 'Robert Owen'. BL, *Cry for Love*, Lord Chamberlain's Plays 1961/65.

<sup>31</sup> BL, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence, *The Devil Inside Him*, 1950/1608.

<sup>32</sup> Osborne, *Looking Back*, p. 201.

<sup>33</sup> Harry Ramsom Center, John Osborne Papers, Tape Transcriptions for *A Better Class of Person*, Box 6 Folder 5, Tape 34/3. Loamshire was an invention of Kenneth Tynan that he employed to typify the inward-looking vacuity of much immediate post-War indigenous writing for the commercial theatre.

<sup>34</sup> Osborne, *ibid.*, Tape 34/5.

<sup>35</sup> Osborne, *ibid.*, Tape 34/3.

After the short run at Huddersfield of *The Devil Inside Him* in May 1950, Osborne joined an actor called Anthony Creighton at his shoestring Saga Repertory Company; although the group soon disbanded, Osborne remained friends with Creighton, and would later collaborate with him on two plays. The following year, acting in Bridgwater, he fell in love with – and married – the actress Pamela Lane, and the bitter unravelling of their relationship over the next few years (they divorced in 1957) was to be acutely charted in *Look Back in Anger*. However, before their marriage was staged with muscular realism in *Look Back*, Osborne chronicled it in an altogether more oblique way in his third documented play, *The Great Bear: or Minette*, written in London public libraries between engagements during 1952. Two handwritten notebooks have survived in the Ransom Center, comprising the first two acts, as well as thirty-nine pages of the third act (which breaks off with the unfulfilled promise: 'Continued in Book III'). The play marks an intriguing amalgamation of influences: what Jimmy Porter described sardonically as 'a good slosh of Eliot' runs through much of the play's blank verse, and yet the structure, narrative, characters and rhetorical tropes closely mirror *Look Back in Anger*.<sup>36</sup>

*Look Back in Anger*'s carefully assembled three-act structure is mirrored by the tripartite arrangement of *The Great Bear* (A Celebration; A Night Out; A Mourning After), and the love triangle played out between Jimmy, Alison, and Helena appears to replicate the dynamic that leads *The Great Bear*'s male protagonist, Owen, from Cordelia to Dawn, and (it is suggested) back to Cordelia in the extant pages of Act III. Moreover, both plays begin with Cordelia/Alison doing the housework (peeling vegetables in *The Great Bear*, and famously doing the ironing in *Look Back*), while Owen/Jimmy navigate their female relationships through the mediation of a reliable, grounded male friend (in *The Great Bear*, the analogue of *Look Back*'s Cliff is a garrulous bar-man).

Other structural themes reoccur: Jimmy Porter's jazz music propels the energy of *Look Back in Anger*, and the power of the jazz playing in the bar in Act II of *The Great Bear* is described by Owen in terms that would not sound out of place in Jimmy's mouth: 'Jazz passing through the system like a depth charge' or 'one great glorious gush of musical diarrhoea'.<sup>37</sup> Intriguingly, the image of bears and squirrels (the nicknames Osborne and Pamela gave each other in real life) runs strongly through both plays. *The Great Bear* was originally titled *The Animal's Nest*, and the animal metaphors and language are both a refuge ('I played with you first as an animal, and I was happy') and at the same time a paradise constantly menaced: 'O those are traps of steel for you to blunder into ... these are men to manacle you monsters, to make you dance pathetically, fastened to a chain'.<sup>38</sup> The bear and squirrel sequence that concluded *Look Back* was the only aspect of the play to be criticized by Kenneth Tynan in his legendary encomium, and would also cost the play an immediate West End transfer, yet the image was clearly one that Osborne had been engaging with in his writing for several years, and no whimsical, artificial graft.<sup>39</sup>

The sole extant text is however clearly an early draft, as much an experiment with dialogue as a sustained narrative, but what emerges most strongly from the surviving text is the visceral ferocity of the language. One review of *Look Back in Anger* described how Osborne 'draws liberally on the vocabulary of the intestines and laces his tirades with the steamier epithets of the tripe butcher', and the same bodily intensity (which equally recalls Huw's more literal descriptions in *The Devil Inside Him*) is found in Owen's protests against a lack of affect in *The Great Bear*.<sup>40</sup> 'I'll give my sympathy to any man as long as he has a belly full of tripe inside him', declares Owen, contrasting this with:

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<sup>36</sup> John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (London, 1957), p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> Harry Ransom Center, John Osborne Papers, *The Great Bear*, Box 13, Folder 1, Book I, Act II, f. 9.

<sup>38</sup> *The Great Bear*, Box 13, Folder 2, Book II, Act II, f. 33.

<sup>39</sup> For Tynan's verdict, and the abortive transfer, see Osborne, *Looking Back*, p. 302.

<sup>40</sup> The review by Eric Keown in *Punch* is quoted in Taylor, *Look Back in Anger: A Casebook* (as in n. 1), p. 55.

The deathly army of bank clerks and their allies ... the Educated English, that mighty shower of bloodless bastards without the rage or tears to live without compassion's belt.<sup>41</sup>

However, despite a shared intensity of feeling and language, the blank verse of *The Great Bear* lacks *Look Back in Anger*'s assured command of demotic idiom. Nor has Osborne entirely left behind the Grand Guignol excesses of *The Devil Inside Him*, such as Cordelia's admission that she murdered her late husband, Duncan; this plot detail – surely overloading the Shakespearean inter-textual referencing – was not mapped onto the structure of *Look Back in Anger*, and is in any case undercut later in *The Great Bear* by Cordelia's highly metatheatrical 'performance' ('Poor bears! You've been acting well enough tonight in the just scene of our love') in which she suggests that the story was merely 'improvisation'.<sup>42</sup>

### Am I wasting my own and other people's time? (*The King is Dead*)

Although Pamela was unimpressed by *The Great Bear* ('dull and boring', a refrain that marked him for years),<sup>43</sup> Osborne continued to write while she was away on tour, and by January 1953 he had completed *The King is Dead*. The same urgency to position his writing against the prevailing theatre scene is evident in letters exchanged in 1953 with the writer Richard Findlater, to whom Osborne had begun to send his work. Describing himself as a 'poor Jonah ... groping about inside, in the mad jungle of the belly', Osborne's analysis was unequivocal:

The Theatre Industry is corrupt and complacent. It is the jolly playground of free enterprise, and the burial ground of art and integrity ...<sup>44</sup>

Intriguingly, he alludes to his continuing uncertainty over verse drama as a possible way out, describing himself as 'soured by pointing disregarded poetic fingers to the tomb'.<sup>45</sup> In a later letter enclosing the manuscript of *The King is Dead*, Osborne mentions rare encouragement he had received from 'dear old Dame Sybil [Thorndike]', but appears otherwise to lack confidence in his work: 'When the bailiffs are battering on the door – I really wonder. Am I wasting my own and other people's time?'<sup>46</sup>

Osborne continued to look for a theatre for *The King is Dead* throughout 1953 and early 1954, sending the text (and, somewhat ingenuously, some admiring quotes from Findlater and Dame Sybil) to the Edinburgh Festival, Michael Redgrave, and Kenneth Rose, who ran the Playhouse, Kidderminster, where Osborne had acted the previous summer. Rose was unimpressed by the letters of support, claiming to have seen at least a dozen recent plays with 'Sybil Thorndike's blessing attached to them', but his reaction to the work hints at the nature of the play, the text of which has not survived.<sup>47</sup> Osborne's search for a form to enclose his strength of feeling and language appears to have led him from contemporary verse drama towards the great Elizabethan and Jacobean texts, echoes of which resonate in the title of the play. In a letter to Anthony Creighton sent from Derby, where he had briefly

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<sup>41</sup> John Osborne Papers, *The Great Bear*, Box 13, Folder 1, Book I, Act I, f. 48.

<sup>42</sup> Osborne, *ibid.*, Act II, f. 71.

<sup>43</sup> Osborne, *Looking Back*, p. 245.

<sup>44</sup> Harry Ramsom Center, Letters from John Osborne to Richard Findlater (uncatalogued), Reg. no. 13380, 23 April 1953.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 July 1953.

<sup>47</sup> The letter from Kenneth Rose to Osborne, also quoted below, is dated 21 March [1954] and is filed with letters from John Osborne to Anthony Creighton, Harry Ramsom Center, Reg. no. 13436, Folder 9/10.

joined Pamela at the Playhouse, Osborne described his readings of Elizabethan drama in the local Library: 'I am becoming fascinated by the Elizabethans. What giants those men were.'<sup>48</sup> *The King is Dead*, from Rose's reaction, appears to have been a dynastic tragedy channelling the dark poetry of Shakespearean tragedies and the plays of John Webster (the latter is referenced in *Look Back in Anger* as the name of Jimmy's unseen friend, who is 'the only person who spoke your [Porter's] language').<sup>49</sup> Although Rose was initially enthusiastic ('by Page 29 I was thinking this is IT, this is GREAT, at last THE play has turned up'), the text must have seemed too threatening for provincial rep:

You out Webster-Webster but times have changed. People no longer lap up these horrors with avidity. In films and books perhaps, but not in plays – which thanks to censorship are twenty years behind all other mediums.

Equally remiss, Osborne had also forgotten the practical lessons of his craft that he must have absorbed (however reluctantly) ever since his first work with Stella and Patrick Desmond. Rose criticized the inclusion of a dozen elderly men (courtiers, presumably) in the cast as being impractical for a rep company, as was the decision to incorporate young children in the cast: 'I hate children on the stage ... and your rep experience ought to have told you that this was another of those things to avoid.' Always scenting betrayal, Osborne was privately disappointed by Rose's reaction ('I should know by this time that no one is prepared to help one in a practical way – or any other way for that matter'),<sup>50</sup> but nonetheless took the reply as a prompt to send the script to Robert (Bob) Gaston, a director who worked for Rose at Kidderminster. No reply from Gaston survives in the archive, and it appears that Osborne was in any case shifting his energies to a new play, concluding a letter to Anthony Creighton: 'Of course they'd [Kidderminster] love PE.'<sup>51</sup>

### **A queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs** *(Personal Enemy)*

'PE', or *Personal Enemy*, was a play that Osborne and Creighton started researching together in the American Library in Grosvenor Square in autumn 1953, and it was to be Osborne's second play, after *The Devil Inside Him*, to be produced (and to survive as a complete draft). Unlike *The King is Dead*, the play is strikingly contemporary, and is set in small-town America in August 1953 – in the middle of Sylvia Plath's 'queer, sultry summer'<sup>52</sup> – when Cold War tensions within the United States were intensifying. These tensions are addressed through the microcosm of the Constant family, who live unremarkable lives in an imaginary all-American town, Langley Springs. Even in the suburbs, however, the Cold War is never far away: the family's elder son, Don, has been reported killed in Korea, while back home, his sister describes the all-pervasive atmosphere of fear ('You can feel it everywhere, Mom. People are frightened').<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Harry Ramsom Center, Letters from John Osborne to Anthony Creighton, Reg. no. 13436, Folder 8/10, undated.

<sup>49</sup> Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, p. 18.

<sup>50</sup> Harry Ramsom Center, Letters from John Osborne to Anthony Creighton, Reg. no. 13436, Folder 8/10, undated.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., Folder 7/10, undated.

<sup>52</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London 1963), p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Osborne, *Before Anger*, p. 139.

The narrative is driven by the revelation that Don ('the shining star of the town')<sup>54</sup> is not dead as thought, but is refusing repatriation from Korea, and the play explores the consequences of this decision for the Constant family. For the shadowy Investigator, who arrives from Washington in Act Two, Don's refusal to return raises serious questions for the Constants ('it doesn't make it look too good for you, does it, Mr Constant? Or you, Mrs Constant'),<sup>55</sup> and as the news spreads, Langley Springs closes ranks against the family: the Reverend Merrick asks Mrs Constant to step down from chairing the weekly prayer group, while Mr Constant is to be called in front of 'the Committee' and promptly dismissed from his job in advertising as a consequence.

Whereas *The Devil Inside Him* was set in a cloying, almost symbolic, *huis clos*, *Personal Enemy* achieves a more rounded portrait of a society, with impressive attention to Cold War actuality. The Investigator employs the criteria and terminology of the immediate post-War anti-Communist purges in his interrogation of the Constants, while the phenomenon of non-repatriation is identified, and its consequences convincingly incorporated into the narrative. If Arthur Miller was not entirely correct in his identification of an early 1950s English theatre 'hermetically sealed against the way society moves',<sup>56</sup> the attention to socio-historical detail – especially North American – is certainly extremely rare.<sup>57</sup> However, what makes Osborne and Creighton's play uniquely acute in its depiction of the period is the ambiguous representation of the sexuality of the Constant sons.

The play overloads descriptions of Arnie's long, soft hair, his 'refined' nature, his 'long and delicate' hands, even his gardening style ('I've never seen a man handle flowers the way he does'), all semiotic clues commonly employed to connote homosexuality in a theatre still subject to the strictures of the Lord Chamberlain.<sup>58</sup> Such signalling is necessarily imprecise, but more concrete 'proof' is introduced into the play's diegetic space when Caryl discovers an inscribed copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* ('to Arnie – with love from Ward') belonging to her brother, and which reminds her of a similar inscription she had previously seen in a book belonging to the late Don.<sup>59</sup> The discovery of the book prompts Caryl to accuse Arnie of getting 'mixed up' with Ward Perry, the town librarian, and she makes veiled references to knowing 'for years what Don was, and all the other nice things that little boys are made of.'<sup>60</sup> Later, in Act Two, Ward Perry is summoned to the Constant House for what swiftly develops into a brutal parody of McCarthyite interrogation techniques.

Listen – glamour boy – I have a little news to lay at your doorstep too. I have witnesses who would be willing to be called who have seen you at the drug stores with your arm round Arnie's shoulder.<sup>61</sup>

Significantly, this internal family witch-hunt, which seeks to root out anything not 'clean and decent', is paralleled by the Investigator, who combines accusations of deviant political sympathies with intimations about Don's homosexuality.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted by Christopher Bigsby, *Remembering Arthur Miller* (London, 2005), p. 124.

<sup>57</sup> Other (little-known) plays from this period that address the phenomenon of McCarthyism include Eric Paice and William Bland, *The Rosenbergs* (Unity Theatre, London, 1953), Howard Fast, *Thirty Pieces of Silver* (Little Theatre, Gateshead, 1954), Harold Stansbury, *The New Romans* (Q Theatre, Brentford, 1955).

<sup>58</sup> Osborne, *Before Anger*, pp. 116–17.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 128. The title of the book, *Leaves of Grass*, was seen to be dangerously suggestive, and was disallowed by the Lord Chamberlain's Reader.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 132–3.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

MRS CONSTANT: They were very good friends. Mr Perry used always be asking Don to –  
INVESTIGATOR: To dances? To go on dates with girls?  
MRS CONSTANT: Why – no. Not really. They seemed much too busy–  
INVESTIGATOR: Doing other things?  
MRS CONSTANT: I don't understand.  
INVESTIGATOR: Don't you?  
MR CONSTANT: Just what are you implying?  
INVESTIGATOR: (*With deliberation.*) You know just what I mean, Mr. Constant – they go together: Communists and –<sup>63</sup>

If a character in 1955 was unable to pronounce the word 'homosexual' on stage, there is no doubt as to the authors' intentions in this exchange (and indeed the Lord Chamberlain's reader himself seemed clear as to the implication, and disallowed the final line). The Investigator is clearly linking Don's subversive political inclinations with a no less subversive sexual orientation. While the Lord Chamberlain's reader sometimes found this complex interplay of signifiers hard to assess ('this could be political not sexual', the censor writes at one point in the margin),<sup>64</sup> Osborne and Creighton's development of this plot-line was historically astute and accurate. From the late 1940s the American authorities had pursued a determined persecution of homosexuals within the Federal Government, and this so-called Lavender Scare was often conflated in the public imagination with the anti-Communist witch-hunts of the better-known Red Scare.<sup>65</sup> The suggestion of these twin fears ('they go together: Communists and –') informs the suspicion directed towards the activities of the Constant sons and their older mentor, the bookish Ward Perry, and introduces additional layers of personal ambiguity into the Cold War political narrative.

However, this nuanced plot-strand inevitably ran up against the limits of theatrical representation set down by the office of the Lord Chamberlain, who, in 1955, was attempting to uphold an absolute ban on the representation of homosexuality on stage (relaxed three years later, in the wake of the Wolfenden Report).<sup>66</sup> When the complexities of the signifiers proved too much for the first Reader, the text was passed to the Senior Examiner, who found that 'the perverted element seems to be a gratuitous addition to an anti-Communist theme' and would only issue a Licence if the authors agreed to 'remove all traces of this from the play'.<sup>67</sup>

After Osborne had failed to interest a number of London agents and producers in *Personal Enemy*,<sup>68</sup> Patrick Desmond agreed to stage the play at the Opera House, Harrogate, in March 1955, but submitted the text to the Lord Chamberlain's Office just a few days before the intended opening. This late submission led to chaotic scenes in rehearsals as cast and author attempted to 'remove all traces' of homosexuality from the text before the play

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 148-9.

<sup>64</sup> BL, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence, *Personal Enemy*, 1955/7672. The implication is that a political reference would have been less dangerous than a suggestion of homosexuality.

<sup>65</sup> For the definitive account of this lesser-known aspect of Cold War hysteria, see David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago, 2004).

<sup>66</sup> See Dominic Shellard and Steve Nicholson with Miriam Handley, *The Lord Chamberlain Regrets: A History of British Theatre Censorship* (London, 2004), pp. 154-60.

<sup>67</sup> Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence, *Personal Enemy*, 1955/7672. The senior examiner appears to have been sufficiently fazed by the suggestions of homosexuality that he misdiagnosed the political instincts of the play.

<sup>68</sup> Osborne had believed that heightened geopolitical tensions augured well for the play, and in March 1954 he wrote to Creighton with excitement: 'Last October the McCarthy affair hadn't reached anything like its height now – outside left wing circles. THIS IS THE MOMENT FOR PE.' Harry Ramsom Center, Letters from John Osborne to Anthony Creighton, Folder 1/10, 16 March 1954.

opened, and make sense of the narrative without the disallowed vital plot device. The consequent incoherence of the censored play, including an awkward pregnancy in Act Three, which attempts to re-establish an acceptable heterosexual status quo, was remarked on by the reviewers. *The Stage* noted 'some confusion in the story', while the *Harrogate Advertiser* wondered if the narrative obscurity was 'perhaps because of the censor's hand', and these forced alterations were seen to detract from what was otherwise praised as a 'sincere and sometimes dramatic expose of encroachments on personal liberty in the United States'.<sup>69</sup> In such unpropitious circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the play was quickly forgotten after its brief run, although Osborne's later claims of indifference to the work are belied by entries in his diary attesting to the fact that he was still sending the script to theatres, including the Bristol Old Vic, in the weeks following the Harrogate production.

Nonetheless, the play is of interest in the development of Osborne's oeuvre: the play dramatizes a repressive community not dissimilar from the village in *The Devil Inside Him*, but invests this depiction with far more attention to historically observed reality.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, Osborne demonstrates an increased restraint over his language since the 'flashes of poetry' of his earlier plays, writing in a (mostly) unostentatious yet forceful demotic style, with appropriate incorporation of American idiom. At the same time, the conventions of the repertory thriller have not been entirely discarded, and shadowy figures appear at the door, whilst revelations fall conveniently at curtain lines.

Yet the play equally transcends its carefully observed social realism in the concluding scene, in which Mr Constant undergoes a moment of anagnorisis, and decides to fight back against the Committee: 'I've been doing a lot of thinking and I think it's time somebody made a stand against all this being kicked around.'<sup>71</sup> While Osborne is most often remembered for the frustrated yearning for authentic revolt that Jimmy Porter expresses in the well-known tirade from *Look Back in Anger* ('we had all that done for us, in the thirties and the forties, when we were still kids'),<sup>72</sup> *Personal Enemy* offers its characters a clearer path to resistance, and in choosing Cold War America as his backdrop, Osborne had discovered a powerful dramatic situation in which his characters can act against the forces of society that seemed to render Jimmy Porter impotent. In considering this concept of 'successful' revolt, it is also intriguing to compare the sympathetic portrayal of a persecuted homosexual minority in *Personal Enemy* with Jimmy Porter's often quoted speech in which he acknowledges that the only people to 'have a cause' are 'old Gide and the Greek chorus boys'.<sup>73</sup> If Huw's act of resistance in *The Devil Inside Him* was ultimately isolating, the resolution shown by Mr Constant appears transformative, and his final words to his wife before he goes to testify are politically but also personally affirming: 'You know another thing? We haven't been so close together in years, as we are now.'<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Anonymous, 'White Rose Premiere', *The Stage*, 10 March 1955 and Anonymous, 'Sign of the Times?', *Harrogate Advertiser*, 5 March 1955. Clearly, the Lord Chamberlain had not entirely removed 'all traces' of homosexuality, for the *Harrogate Advertiser* review identified a second theme alongside the political witch-hunts ('one's guess is sexual perversion').

<sup>70</sup> The similarities between the language of the medieval witch hunts in both plays is striking. In *The Devil Inside Him*, the Minister tells Huw 'The devil is inside you, Huw. Can you feel him?', while *Personal Enemy* includes references to 'the devil's work' and 'so many witches leaving their tall hats and brooms around'. Osborne, *Before Anger*, pp. 62, 171, and 177.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>72</sup> Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, p. 84.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35. This speech is considered by Rebellato, *1956 and All That* (as in n. 2), p. 220.

<sup>74</sup> Osborne, *Before Anger*, p. 183.

**Reform ...will have to be forced down the monster's throat from outside (*Epitaph for George Dillon* and *Look Back in Anger*)**

A few weeks after the staging of *Personal Enemy*, Osborne recorded in his diary that he had completed *Epitaph for George Dillon*, his second collaboration with Creighton, to whose basic plot Osborne had added dialogue, and the title. The play was produced in London and New York after Osborne had made his name with *Look Back in Anger*, and so is the only one of Osborne's early plays to have received sustained critical attention. Parallels between the dissatisfied outsider figure of George Dillon and Jimmy Porter have been identified since the opening night reviews (Kenneth Tynan described Dillon behaving 'à la Jimmy Porter'), and in his biography John Heilpern saw Dillon as 'Osborne's modern anti-hero in the making' and evidence of 'the first signs of Osborne's authentic voice.'<sup>75</sup>

However, as the examination of Osborne's long apprenticeship in the theatre demonstrates, it is necessary to Look Back further than *Epitaph for George Dillon* to appreciate fully the genesis of Osborne's work and career, something Osborne himself alluded to through sly references to his own theatrical past in the play: one of *Epitaph's* characters, the shiftless impresario Barney, is modelled on Patrick Desmond, while an actor called George Dillon was a neighbour of Stella and Osborne in Brighton in 1949, and played in Desmond productions the following year.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, the 'modern anti-hero' is a figure that Osborne had been developing since the frustrated rebellion of *The Devil Inside Him's* Huw Prosser, a personal revolt that Osborne had begun to square with the demands of history and society by the time of *Personal Enemy*. If Osborne's 'authentic voice' is certainly evident in *Epitaph*, it is arguable that the first signs of a more controlled (if no less vital) language rooted in contemporary speech had equally been apparent in *Personal Enemy*, when Osborne had left behind the inflated exuberance and 'sloshes of Eliot' that had dominated his earlier plays. Moreover, rather than tracing a direct narrative line from *Epitaph* to *Look Back in Anger*, the latter appears more of a synthesis of the characters' personal frustration in *The Great Bear* and the professional doubts of the actor-playwright George Dillon.

However, bringing light to Osborne's early work is of more significance than simply highlighting antecedents of Jimmy Porter, and correcting the myth of the 'breakthrough' in May 1956 opens up the full narrative of Osborne's sentimental education in the repertory system, and the compromises and calculations that had been necessary to navigate it as an actor and writer. Throughout his uncertain wanderings through provincial rep, Osborne had been conscious of the necessity of challenging the theatrical establishment, but thought that 'if there is to be any reform, it will not come from within. It will have to be forced down the monster's throat from outside'.<sup>77</sup> That *Look Back in Anger* had the explosive impact Osborne had been advocating is undeniable; what an analysis of Osborne's early years makes clear, however, is that far from exploding 'down the monster's throat from outside', *Look Back in Anger* grew out of several years of collaboration, frustration, and experimentation from within the very theatre that *Look Back's* success was to condemn to obsolescence.

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<sup>75</sup> Heilpern, *John Osborne: A Patriot for Us* (as in n. 6), p. 109. For Tynan's review of 16 February 1958, see Malcolm Page (ed.), *File on Osborne* (London, 1998), p. 22.

<sup>76</sup> For the modelling of Barney, see Osborne, *Looking Back*, p. 186, and for the real-life Dillon, see BL, Peter Gill Archive Accession 2009 (uncatalogued), Sylvia-Ann Dwen to Peter Gill, 31 August 2005. Gill had directed a revival of *Epitaph for George Dillon* at the Comedy Theatre, London, in 2005, and had received an unsolicited letter from Dwen, Dillon's daughter.

<sup>77</sup> Harry Ramsom Center, Letters from John Osborne to Richard Findlater (uncatalogued), Reg. no. 13380, 23 April 1953.