‘Unwavering, to sea’: Departure and Destination in Causley’s *Secret Destinations*  

ROSEMARY WALTERS

‘All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveller is unaware.’

—Martin Buber

The poet Charles Causley published his collection *Secret Destinations* in 1984. Causley, a lifelong resident of the north Cornish town of Launceston, died in 2003. Both in his lifetime and afterwards, his poetry has usually been categorised as ‘Cornish’, ‘Christian’, or ‘for children’. This paper asserts an alternative approach. It claims that, in relation to Martin Buber’s enigmatic quotation above, which prefaces the collection, Causley’s *Secret Destinations* can be located within the critical engagement with the exploration of self-identity in post-war British poetics. Causley’s use of a quotation from Buber places this engagement within the latter’s journey of the self from the objectifying and static ‘I-It’ relationship, relegating people and the material world to mere objects, to the energies of perception and imagination released in the ‘I-Thou’ of holistic, fluid and relational consciousness. In the second half of the twentieth century when Causley was publishing, critical inquiries into the possibility of establishing self-identity within a unified ‘I’ voice were challenged by the fluidity of

the postmodern concept of the self and the increasingly prominent issues of power, gender and exploitation in literary representation.

This paper focuses on poems that contextualise four journeys and their destinations, claiming that these journeys can be interpreted in relation to Buber’s quotation in the preface to Secret Destinations. These journeys are: the journey into language in early childhood, the journey into war in adolescence, journeys away from Cornwall in retirement, and finally the poet’s journey in his sixties to the summit of Launceston Castle, from which he reflects on the physical landscape of his lived experience spread out before him. All these journeys had destinations which Causley could not have foreseen at their beginnings; destinations, which, in his old age, Causley realised that he could never fully comprehend. The poems in this study probe identity through language from experiences of childhood, through survivor’s guilt after conflict, through displacement in travel and through reflection on place in old age. In his sixties, Causley struggled to articulate how perception, language and imagination in his poetry might finally yield a sense of who he was and had become. Journeying towards ‘secret destinations’, Buber viewed perception, language and imagination as emancipatory in the search for integrity. The four contexts of Causley’s journeys in the collection, as in all his work, are encompassed by the shadows of existential guilt arising from the effect of two world wars. The consequent loss of humanity’s innocence, and its rejection of love, was amply demonstrated for him in these wars. These shadows are accompanied by the relentless passage of time leading to the inevitability of death.

Buber looked to the potential of creativity in all language. He emphasised creativity as one sign of the search for authentic living relationships with the self and others. Reading this in tandem with Causley, the latter articulates his journeys in poetry in order to probe further his sense of personal integrity amidst the fluidity of various identities, using the agency of poetic form to impose order on language, memory and experience. Donald Moore quotes Buber’s argument: ‘We help to convey truth to each other, and in doing so we are confirmed.’ In the introduction to his anthology of Christian verse, The Sun, Dancing, Causley asserted that ‘poetic truth’ goes beyond the empirical: ‘What is of the greatest value here is poetic truth: something, hopefully, ever more salutary and meaningful as we

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reflect on the mysteries of human experience than a mere recital of factual evidence.\textsuperscript{6}

For Causley, the articulation of the mysteries of identity and reality through poetic truth constituted an attempt to discover his own identity and the possibility of forming relationships through language. The confirmation of a sense of self and the ordering of experience through language leading to the realisation of meaning in personal wholeness and profound interpersonal relationships are implied by Buber’s dialogic principle. Causley’s poems in \textit{Secret Destinations} bear witness to his search for the confirmation of the value of his identity through the ordering of his experience in the content and structure of the verse and for a realisation of meaning in those experiences.

Buber’s writings on education may well have influenced Causley’s training as a teacher.\textsuperscript{7} His Jewish heritage resonated with Causley’s admiration for the Old Testament stories with which he grew up as a child and his horror, after the Second World War, at the revelation of the Holocaust. He admired the Jewish poet Karen Gershon and included her work in his anthology, \textit{The Sun, Dancing}.\textsuperscript{8} Causley had been brought up in an environment shaped by both Church of England and Methodist liturgy and ethics. The distinction between Judaism and Christianity according to Buber in \textit{Two Types of Faith} has been summarised by David Flusser as ‘one kind of faith, trust in God, characterises Judaism, Christianity and Islam alike, […] while the second kind of faith, a salvific believing in Jesus, is peculiar to Christianity.’\textsuperscript{9}

Causley lost any orthodox faith during adolescence. In middle age, he returned towards a sense of transcendence in nature and the arts rather than a doctrinal, institutionalised faith that would emphasise solely Christian interpretations of incarnation and salvation.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{7} Buber, \textit{Between Man and Man}, especially chapters 3 and 4.
\textsuperscript{8} The \textit{Sun, Dancing}, pp. 64, 66.
to *The Sun, Dancing*, describes his openness to a variety of world views in expressing this sense of transcendence and his conviction that creative activity in the arts is a response by the artist to the ‘divinely mysterious and wholly unidentifiable imaginatively creative element within them’. That this creative element is ‘mysterious’, ‘wholly unidentifiable’ and ‘within’ resonates with Buber’s ‘secret destinations of which the traveller is unaware’.

Throughout his publishing history Causley remained outside the categorisations that emerged in British poetry during the second half of the twentieth century. He lacked the academic and journalistic networks of The Movement literary group, the rebellious disposition of the underground, or an impetus towards the experimental. In 1968, P. J. Kavanagh described Causley as a poet of ‘ballad-type doggerel, spiced with surprising words.’ The critic Christopher Ricks was scathing towards Causley’s task of returning to previous poetic tradition and his ability to mould past conventions into any degree of meaning for the second half of the twentieth century:

> his poetry embarks upon a task which is beyond its talents [...] it is beyond talent to tap again the age-old sources which have become clogged, cracked, buried. But in Causley’s poetry, the past each time becomes the pastiche time.’

The prevalent critical verdict on Causley during his lifetime and beyond can be summed up in David Mason’s rather less blunt appraisal of him as a ‘marginal curiosity rather than a writer of significant importance’. However, *Secret Destinations* received critical attention in *Poetry Magazine*, the *London Review of Books* and in newspapers. It was also a Poetry Book Society recommendation. In a review in *The Times Literary Supplement* it was hailed by critic Simon Rae as ‘a radical departure’. Rae

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11 *The Sun, Dancing*, p. 15.
'unwavering, to sea'
referred to Causley’s departure from the ballad form and a ‘greater sense of the numinous’.\textsuperscript{17} In \textit{The Observer}, Peter Porter remarked on ‘powerful images of disquiet’.\textsuperscript{18} Both the numinous and the disquiet are present in the departures, journeys and destination of the poems in \textit{Secret Destinations}. Causley’s voices in \textit{Secret Destinations} emerge from inward reflections, expressed in this case in a move away from the narrative voice of the storyteller so prominent in his earlier work. The less formal rhyme and metre indicate an openness to alternative modes of expression in the articulation of ‘poetic truth’. 

Causley returned to Launceston to teach after his Second World War naval service and lived there for the rest of his life. His poetic preoccupations remained rooted in a childhood dominated by the death of his father from the effects of gas in the First World War, his mother’s subsequent struggle with poverty, and the survivor’s guilt which arose from his own experiences and return home from the Second World War. In terms of content, \textit{Secret Destinations} includes some new autographical material in which memory is rooted in family characters and events, the coming of war, reflections on travels away from Cornwall following retirement, and an expression of his emotional anchor in Launceston. These points of departure arise from deeply personal recollections of childhood and adolescence and from a physical location that remained important to Causley throughout his life. ‘In the beginning,’ says Buber, ‘is relation.’\textsuperscript{19} The four journeys, into language, guilt, displacement and place, powerfully explore Causley’s relationship with himself, others, and the world around him.

\textit{The journey into language: identity and childhood}

The first struggle to establish the relationship that Causley the poet had with his own sense of reality and hence his relationships with those around him, was in conquering the potentially chaotic medium of language. The struggle is set in early childhood. Language, as Buber argued, is only ‘a sign and a means for it all’.\textsuperscript{20} ‘The Boot Man’ pictures the young Causley

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Peter Porter, ‘Sleeping Beauties’, \textit{The Observer}, 2 June 1985, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{19} Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, p. 13.
being sent on an errand by his mother. He is to take some worn soles to the Boot Man for repair.

Causley’s mother was a determining influence on his life. Following his father’s death, his mother cleaned and took in laundry and lodgers to keep the household afloat. In her sacrifices on his behalf lay the first stirrings of Causley’s guilt, brought about in this instance by the family’s circumstances originating directly from the results of the First World War. His mother looms over the start of this childhood experience through the ominous and violent comparison of the soles to sliced bacon. There is an atmosphere of menace in the child’s panic, not just in being potentially unable to articulate the purpose of his journey when he reaches his destination, but in the reflections of his failure to master speech and reading at school:

She didn’t know
That given speech, to me, refused to come.
I couldn’t read aloud in class; sat dumb
In front of howling print;

His tongue is worried by the phrase, italicised in the poem, ‘Please, soled / And heeled by Saturday.’ It is the ‘given speech’, the imposed communication of both his mother’s words and the ‘howling print’ he encounters in the classroom which is a violation of his sense of self. The Boot Man himself reinforces this estrangement. The description of their encounter implies that the effort to create meaning and reach out through language corresponds to unpleasant physical symptoms such as retching, associated with extreme internal disorder:

Somehow the Boot Man stanched my speeches more
Than all the rest. He’d watch me as I tried
To retch up words

In the course of the poem, pauses provided by commas and full stops midway through lines provide a pace which mirrors the child’s reluctant progress towards his goal. As he makes his way there the layout of the text moves with him through the winding journey to Crab Lane by means of the simple device of beginning the second and fourth verses midway through the first lines of each.

The consciousness of the child in the poem, mercilessly analysed by the adult poet through the lens of memory, expresses the suppressed fears

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of his identity as it fails to establish a relationship with those who people the world the poem is set in. There is a hint of hesitant and nervous communication in the alliteration of the ‘s’ sound in ‘Somehow’, ‘stanch’ and ‘speeches’. Language is the only medium that seems able to forge this relationship and language is what the child finds impossible to manipulate. To add to the horror, the violence of his childhood world, communicated through his mother’s comparison of the thin soles to the product of slaughtered animals, is reinforced with the comparison of the Boot Man with his gassed father:

Once again my dead
Father stood there...
Offering me a hand as colourless
As phosgene.

The everyday circumstance of a journey to the Boot Man, so much a part of the material poverty of Causley’s childhood where shoes must be repaired time and time again, is transformed into a testimony of his lifelong wrestling with ‘The irresolute tongue’. This conflict remains with him as he journeys through life and is still present when he reaches the ‘secret destination’ of sixty years later and is writing the poem. The final lines make it clear that he has continued to ‘meet again upon the faithless, sly / And every-morning page, the Boot Man’s eye’. ‘The child’, as Maurice Friedman argued in his survey of Buber’s thought, ‘establishes what is “objective” reality for him through the constant comparison of his perceptions with those of others.’ Causley’s childhood encounter with the Boot Man, as portrayed in the poem, implies that the ‘secret destination’ of his struggle to achieve a voice remains in a lifelong lack of confidence in his own ability to use the signification of language to relate to the other and move beyond Buber’s ‘I-It’.

This same vein of lifelong vulnerability surfaces in the poem ‘Richard Bartlett.’ Bartlett was Causley’s grandfather and he was killed in an accident in the local stone quarry when he was ‘About to split a stone, trying to find / A place to insert the wedge’. The account of his grandfather’s death was a family story familiar to Causley from childhood. At the start of the poem, Causley the adult is reading an account of the accident in ‘the ninety-year old paper singed / By time’. At the end, he closes the paper and bends over the poem ‘Trying to find a place to insert the wedge.’

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22 Friedman, *Martin Buber*, p. 165.
Throughout his life, Causley was trying to find the place of language as the wedge which moulded and sustained his identity by bringing together the emotional consequences of his childhood, his naval service in the Second World War and his life in Launceston. The effect of two world wars, the sacrifices made by his mother for his material benefit and his own survivor’s guilt at returning from active service when others whom he knew never came back, reinforced his sense of existential guilt. Such guilt violates the unified self, imposing elements of self-doubt and anxiety on the individual consciousness which impede the possibility of ‘I-Thou’ relationships. In ‘Richard Bartlett’, Causley describes how, after the accident,

Richard Bartlett
Never spoke after he was struck. Instead
Of words the blood and brains kept coming.

In ‘The Boot Man’ and ‘Richard Bartlett’ these temporal, historical circumstances with the suggestion of human or natural violence, are a wedge that block rather than heal division. The child wants to speak and make his voice heard in ‘The Boot Man’. The blood and brains overcome the words in ‘Richard Bartlett’.

Strangely, the formidable Aunt Dora, who ‘Held / Life at arm’s length’ instigates an ‘I-Thou’ encounter with the child. With her ‘winter’s eye’ she is dying and has no need to protect her identity or ignore her destiny with artifice or pretence. ‘My last Aunt, Dora Jane, her eye shrill blue,’ sees through the inevitable destination which finally thwarts all attempts to foster relationship and identity through language:

Our only death, said Dora, is our first.
And she turned from me. But her winter’s eye
Spoke every word that I had left unread.24

Although she turns away from the child, he can apprehend what has been ‘left unread’ in the language of her eyes. The profound interaction of the child and his dying aunt witnesses the human destiny which supersedes all communication and all categories of subjectivity or objectification. The secret destination remains hidden and the words will always be left unsaid.

Buber’s description of the failure of the lifeless form of the ‘I-It’ encounter as it reduces the other to an object to be manipulated, is the fear behind

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the young child’s desperation for a destination which forges deep relationships through language and interaction. Causley realises many years after his departure from childhood that he has spent, and is still spending his life seeking, to use poetry as the transition towards making sense of the experiences which constitute his various selves. Buber’s theoretical stance suggests that it is only in this search and in its recognition in others that ‘I-It’ is transformed to ‘I-Thou’.

**The journey into war: identity and guilt**

The shadow of war haunted Causley’s journeys from his past and into his future. Moore identified the ‘dread of abandonment’ and ‘the foretaste of death’ in Buber’s thinking. These elements are persistently present in Causley’s poetry, even in his *Collected Poems for Children*. The tension between distancing and relating is part of Buber’s process of the concept of realisation. In Causley, this tension is intensified by the sense of guilt brought about by the historical events of his generation, which had profound effects on his family, childhood and adolescence, and was further intensified by his father’s death and his own survival. He needed to distance himself from these horrors yet relate to his own grief and that of others, including his mother’s, and to himself as a survivor. For Causley, humanity had learnt no lessons from the two world wars. His personal innocence had been violated. He had lost any hope that the lessons of the consequences of rejecting love, symbolised for him in the Christian narrative, would be learnt. Buber expressed similar fears during the Cold War when he warned that the potential for real human dialogue had been destroyed by a lack of trust.

The adult Causley continued the struggle to reach out in relationships and come to a sense of his own integrated self, but the innocence in that pursuit was lost at an early age in the presence of death and cannot be reversed. This innocence continued to be violated for Causley by the adult experience of war, no matter what may be promised by the refuge of poet-

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26 Friedman, *Martin Buber*, p. 34.

ry, upon which he focused during his five year naval service in the Second World War. He knew he wanted to write. It was in the Navy that he realised being on a small ship or in a shore establishment somewhere meant that you had a job to do and that you could not write a novel or a play, you simply didn't have the time or the physical space. But poetry can be written in the head, without anyone having the faintest idea of what's going on, and I've gone on writing my poems in my head like that ever since.²⁸

The privacy and reticence which were to characterise the tone of much of Causley’s verse and his frequent use of ‘I’ voices as reflections addressed to himself, are hinted at in his ‘writing my poems in my head’. They are ‘my’ poems in ‘my’ head. The restrictions on space, time and privacy led directly to Causley’s decision to write poetry. Much of his poetry of war is experience in recollection. In this way, life-changing experiences are removed from the immediacy of pain, once the passage of time has enabled deep and personal reflection. That the privacy of this internal consciousness was shared with his readers in poetry illustrates that, for Causley, a vital part of any ‘I-Thou’ relationship was essentially one between himself and that poetry, with the reader listening in on this dialogue. The adjective ‘Secret’ in the title of the collection is an indication that the essential privacy of poems written ‘in my head’ remained.

The journey to war was a journey to a ‘secret destination’ for Causley. He could have no idea of the outcome. The poem ‘1940’, is explicitly dated and timed as ‘June 13th, nine forty-five’.²⁹ It chronicles Causley leaving home for the first time, apprehensive of an unknown destiny. Boarding the train at Launceston station as a twenty-three-year-old, neither he nor his fellow conscripts had any idea what was in store for them. They are, as he comments, ‘Glassed in the space between two lives’ as they ‘Wait for / The land to move; the page of war to turn’. The poem exemplifies the use of the sonnet in the context of the personal and global circumstances of the time. Causley describes the beginnings of the journey into violence that will include, for many, the horrors of physical suffering and the anguish of its aftermath. The events that will shatter lives start quite prosaically as the

²⁹ Causley, ‘1940; Secret Destinations, p. 13.
train pulls out of Launceston Station. He describes the everyday elements of the community he is about to leave behind as they are swallowed up in the movement of the land; the train playing its part in turning the page of war.30

The basic sonnet construction of fourteen lines, here addressing the experience of war, is disrupted by short, jagged descriptive phrases with irregular rhyming patterns, and with a divide in content midway as the observed, seemingly impersonal impressions give way to the subjective and inclusive ‘we’ of the last eight lines. The communal subjects, establishing a bond with the reader and inviting self-identification are in the middle of this turmoil, are travelling due to circumstances entirely beyond their control. They are second class passengers and have third class cases. They have no possibility of determining the course of events. The function of the conscripted combatants, whose lives are ‘glassed in’ as the prospect of any privacy and a life untouched by external events recedes, is solely to learn robotically what has been designated for them on their Travel Warrant. In the railway compartment they see each other only as objects swept along by the force of circumstance. They are joined through a common destination but make no attempt to form a common bond through language or relationship.

Published in 1984, ‘1940’ portrays, at a later period, the dislocation Causley experienced in his consciousness, during the war years. The elapse of a significant period between event and articulation in circumstances dealing with his personal life is Causley’s characteristic distancing device for diluting the pain of the moment while expressing that it has remained with him, albeit in a less acute degree. ‘1940’ combines personal experience with identification as a participant in conflict against a background of external public events. This journey was to prove one whose effects stayed with him throughout his life and consolidated the childhood traumatic experience of loss and vulnerability which arose from the death of his father. War took away innocence and replaced it with the loss of family, friends, and colleagues. The outcome of this journey as a force in his personality and its profound effect on his sense of self and emotional life is the key to the hermeneutic of all his poetry. When he boarded the train in 1940 this outcome was indeed a ‘secret destination’.

30 For a fuller analysis of ‘1940’, see Walters, Zig Zag: Cultures in Common and the Poetry of Charles Causley, especially chapter 2.
The journey from home: identity and displacement

Survivor’s guilt and the existential dilemma of justifying one’s own right to exist which came with it, influenced not only the retrospective poems from wartime but the travel poetry, written much later, which Causley included in *Secret Destinations*. The poetry inspired by the more extensive travels he was able to undertake following his retirement from employment as a primary school teacher provides the third context for Causley’s reflection on the elements which forged his identity. These particular travels came late in middle age, but departure from Cornwall was always an ambiguous venture. In the poem ‘Returning South’, he records the time that has passed since his departure in the very first line: ‘Five days since I left Cornwall.’ There is never a comfortable time to depart and seek a new destination, as he comments on take-off from Heathrow: ‘Am launched too late, too soon / At forty-five degrees against the moon.’ The wrench of travelling out of Cornwall is a severe disruption to his sense of self. As he unpacks in Singapore, he ends the poem with the question, ‘Dear Christ, what’s this? Myself.’ In one sense he is ‘Returning South’ to the locations which he was familiar with in the Second World War. But the destinations of this literal flight away from the precarious security he has found in his life in Launceston after the war only prompt a sense of alienation from himself in the form of fear. In travelling away from Cornwall Causley is brought uncompromisingly up against two fears from which he cannot escape by retreating to the security of the known and the familiar. These fears prevent the unity of past and present which Buber sees as the goal of self-realisation.

The first fear is centred on the ever-present threat of death and extinction. The effects of his exposure to death in childhood and active service in war can be neither erased nor accommodated. This emerges in Causley’s travel poems as he meticulously dissects his impressions and experiences. In recording this fear, he uses the imagery which underpins all his work: burning sun, freezing snow, and the constantly timeless and indifferent sea, which announces the arrival and inevitability of death. The sun ostensibly brings light and life but also burns. In Australia in ‘Glen Helen’, ‘It glows in fifty shades of red. The day ignites.’Ironically for a location of cultural significance, the sky has a ‘heavy light’ in ‘Hussar’, the ‘Cultural Centre of

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32 Causley, ‘Gen Helen’, *Secret Destinations*, p. 54.
Western Canada’. Death is foretold by the presence of snow with its ‘first frail leaves’ in the Canadian setting of ‘Bankhead’. The sea is always a malign presence for Causley. Water frightened him as a small child when the cottage he lived in was threatened by flooding. Despite this, he joined the navy rather than the army in Second World War because of the legacy of his father’s slow death from lung disease after the First World War. As he writes the poems in Secret Destinations sixty years after his childhood and forty years after the end of the Second World War, the imagery of the sinister implications of the power of water is still a potent force.

Sinister forces are not confined to water. Causley reveals a terrifying experience in his travels in retirement. He visits Beechworth in Australia, a town preserved as witness to the gold rush. The verse abruptly describes the physical elements of the location and the poet’s reactions with short impressionistic phrases running into each other. Seemingly innocuous artefacts give way to the set-piece of the town prison. During this attempt to fossilise the past for tourists, Causley comes across a prison cell, familiar in its granite construction to the physical materials of his home in Cornwall. Here he reads that Ned Kelly was first imprisoned at Beechworth, aged sixteen. Kelly was eventually hanged in Melbourne. To Causley’s horror the prison in Beechworth conjures up:

A presage innocent, unspoken,
Of the death-mask, and how the rope
Squirmed tight-shut underneath an ear:
‘The bulge shows where the neck was broken’:

This scene is too much for Causley. He leaves the prison and ‘Quietly resumes the sun’. He rushes around the rest of the visit. He imagines Kelly’s final moments. The risen Ned finally declares to him, ‘Such / Is life. But knows that it is not.’ The journey to Beechworth has proved an all too intrusive reminder of the instinctive desire for life in the face of the fear of cruelty, death and extinction. This fear continually shakes the foundations of Causley’s hold on his identity. It is the prison which confines and yet splits apart his precarious sense of self. The prison setting reappears in

34 Causley, ‘Bankhead’, Secret Destinations, p. 35
'Pinchgut'. This was a convict island near Sydney. Causley missed seeing it during his war service but thirty-six years later it comes into view as a ‘punishing lump’, and he imagines the scene

where convicts
Putrefied or, attempting to escape,
Were shark snapped or strangled
By ropes of water.

Although he is able in both ‘Beechworth’ and ‘Pinchgut’ to look with horror at the suffering inflicted by human beings on their fellow humans in these places, the result of this empathy is to drive him deeper into the fragmentation which isolates his own being from reaching out.

During his travels, Causley’s second fear emerges. He suspects that others can see what he really is, and just like Aunt Dora and The Boot Man’ realise his desperation, his thirst, to centre himself and overcome his vulnerability. The Gypsy from the Trianas in ‘Flying’

Rubs through me with brilliant and uncasual glance
Sees me for what I was, for what I am.
Offers a cup. Having observed my thirst.

The ‘what I was, for what I am’ relates powerfully to Buber’s call for the integration of ‘historically and biologically given situations’, and an end to self-contradiction. Causley has a thirst for a resolution to the nihilistic panic of guilt, disintegration and death brought on by his journeys into memory and experience, but runs away from the implications it brings every time it surfaces. In ‘Beechworth’ it is the story of the hanged Australian outlaw Ned Kelly which prompts Causley to:

...pick a smash of mirror up.
It shows me who I’m not: hides what’s
To be

He can see who he is not, others can see who he is. He is continually asking the question he posed to himself in ‘Returning South’: ‘what is myself?’.

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38 Causley, ‘Pinchgut’, Secret Destinations, p. 43.
This is Buber’s central question and for Causley travel has revealed the uncomfortable instability of the answer, away from the security of ‘home’ in Launceston. He is still hiding from his fears and the secret destination of wholeness still eludes him.

The journey into self: identity and place

The final destination, which continually haunted Causley, was death. Moving towards this destination, he struggled for an awareness of the influences which would integrate the identities of childhood, war, travel and rootedness. Secret Destinations moves from his early life to the person standing on Launceston Castle some sixty years later. In ‘On Launceston Castle’, Causley attempts to confront his fears in the security of his hometown.\(^{41}\) He does not have to physically journey far to reach the summit of Launceston Castle.\(^{42}\) Although it was written almost twenty years before his death, this is the poem in which Causley brings together all the elements of a life’s struggle to encounter and impose some order on his thoughts about the reality of who he was and has become. By 1984, Causley is aware that the precarious hold which he has on his sense of his own identity, whatever this search for identity reveals, will be extinguished at death, so he must search for it urgently. As old age comes nearer, he journeys to and locates the destination of this lifetime quest on the summit of Launceston Castle. The poem is an articulation of his use of the locality to combine both the written placing of the verse in a physical location and what James Chandler, referring to Wordsworth, describes as the ‘unwritten text which comprises the mind itself’, read through the lens of that second nature where the past survives into the present to become more than just history.\(^{43}\) The ‘present scene and the scenes remembered’ link memory with the subliminal.\(^{44}\) In a sense, space and time are irrelevant in themselves but are the agents holding together intense experiences of past and present consciousness through the structure of language. This exemplifies Buber’s two concepts of ‘ordering’ and ‘realising’: ‘realisation refers to that enhanced meaning of life which springs from moments of

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\(^{42}\) See Walters, On the Border: Charles Causley in 20th Century Poetics, especially chapter 3.


intensified existence and intensified perception. This is what it means to realise: to relate experience to nothing else but itself.  

Historically, the Castle began as a symbol of the power of the invading Normans over the surrounding countryside. It later continued as a place of imprisonment and execution. It was the executioner’s bell from the Castle Green which became the school bell at Causley’s childhood primary school. The Castle both squats over the town and reveals from its summit views of the patchwork of buildings, streets, hedges and fields which make up the material constructs in which human consciousness and relationships are lived out. Causley’s life has been lived out against the background of the Castle, the remaining motte, keep and bailey still a towering physical expression of conquest by the Normans. Its size and position dominated the lives of all who lived in the small town which had grown up around the ruins, just as the two world wars also dominated his life. Buber argued that the phenomenon is always the gateway to the noumenon, just as the noumenal cannot be encountered other than in and by way of concrete phenomena. Causley chooses a viewpoint to scan his conscious experiences of life in the town, sums up and puzzles over the outcome of his post-war struggles with loss, separation and the end of innocence from the literally phenomenal viewpoint of the Castle’s summit:

Winded, on this blue stack  
Of downward-drifting stone,  
The unwashed sky a low-  
Slung blanket thick with rain[.]

Causley has climbed to the top of Launceston Castle; the effort of the climb, rather than any experience of spiritual elevation, exhausts him. His vision is drawn downwards and inwards as he searches through the dense cloud and rain for the key to the interpretation of his lifetime’s daily experience of ‘being’ in this place. The wider context of the scene is the unyielding granite of the moor and the inevitable destination of the stream. Against these harsh elements are contrasted the gentler wood, water and rocks with the vernacular clay, suggesting his writings slowly being washed away. The summit of the Castle is a typical setting for the Romantic tradition of the mountain as the definitive place for visions, where the mind can confront nature. It is an image for the ascent of life’s journey to its resting place.

45 Friedman, *Martin Buber*, p. 36.  
46 Breiterman and Zank, ‘Martin Buber’.  
But Causley’s solitary resting place at the summit engenders only a sense of bewilderment and even the terror is muted, primarily with a weariness of resignation. The use of lines flowing from one to another in every second line draws the eye down to the scene below. The tone is one of restrained rationality and sober reflection, despite the dramatic location and heightened perspective.

Herbert Lindenberger argued that, in Romantic imagery, fog may cut off the location from an earthly sphere before a higher vision is attained and that a sense of solitude is a precursor for a visionary mood. Despite choosing the setting of the Castle summit for his reflection on nature, interiority and mortality, Causley is unable to reconcile the tropes of romantic poetry with the alienation and destruction from the legacy of his experiences of childhood poverty and two world wars. He is both affirming yet transitioning away from the impulses of romantic imagination in the same way that the works of essayist Charles Lamb moved towards the more earthy contexts of Dickens. Furthermore, in contrast to Tintern Abbey as the location for Wordsworth’s ‘dwelling place of memory’ where the mind is ‘above the flow of time’, Causley cannot escape the destructiveness of time at his location. The memories stimulated by looking downward from the mound of the keep do not provide a dwelling place, a place to be, which provide him with a ‘spot in time’ that transcends the fear of loss, separation and mortality which has haunted his past and present since the war. He is still struggling in his ‘winded’ state, unsuccessfully as he himself admits, to make sense of his meditation on the powerful perspective from the crown of the castle.

From there he can see the significant physical elements of his whole life; moor, granite, stream and woods spread out before him. These are set among the environment that has featured in his life: the town hall, the quarry, the school, and the allotments. There is no movement in the

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verse towards ‘the imagination as a creative sensibility which alters the landscape’. To external perception, the landscape remains as it is but is altered from what it was in Causley’s youth, not by enchantment, but by the passage of time which brings decay and change in various forms. The town’s carousel of figures and bells, which marked the regular passage of time from the town hall clock, has stopped. The peaceful dove and the bullying jackdaw vie for supremacy, the quarry is long dry, and filled with brambles, the school he taught at is torn by ivy and lichen. There is natural decay around the allotments with symbols of death from nature; the poppy and the sinister valerian ‘bleed by the lean lake side.’ Despite the blanket obscurity of the sky, from his vantage point Causley can see the decay of those features of his life which seemed once to indicate permanency and significance. Finally, ‘The shut pond slowly dies.’

The list of decay finishes and the movement of the poem stops dramatically with the presence of the sun. This could be a healing and a turning point. However, the sun in Causley’s poems usually indicates an intense indifference to the scenes it is witness to. ‘The hour is alchemised. / The hurt sun mends. It shines.’ Here, there is the possibility that this indifference and hurt can be mended and turned into gold. But this potential resolution does not occur. There is no emotional healing as an outcome of the potentially numinous experience rooted in landscape. Causley displays the vulnerability of the child confronting the Boot Man. Metaphor, as Ronald Gaskell comments, is a way of seeing and feeling in which similarity is expressed through dissimilars. Causley is still ‘too unsure’ to read the ‘hard metaphor’ of the town, which is the oppressive dominating presence of the Castle in juxtaposition with benign leaf and hard stone and the joy of ‘summer play’ in childhood. He senses the inexorable progress of time towards what he is unsure of and may or may not turn out to be a transcendent reality which will validate and resolve his struggle with all those insecurities which have permeated his life: ‘I cannot read between / The lines of leaf and stone.

In the final verse, Causley admits that there is no restitution of the ‘summer’ of childhood assurance of immortality, when ‘time was far away’; no resolution of his fear of death and oblivion now that the passage of time is only too obviously leading to one outcome. Childhood remains a fable and the ‘swift light’, any sense of freshness of vision, has gone. The ingredients

of the grandeur of nature and memory, combined with this significant moment, are all present, but he is still obsessed by the incessant sense of time moving to a climax of what may be oblivion. There is no sense of his experience on the Castle leaving behind a lasting redemptive power. He is faced with the movement of unstoppable water, breaking free from the ‘moored’ wall and running from his birthplace, therefore from the beginning of his life, to its final destination, the sea:

By my birth-place the stream
Rubs a wet flank, breaks free
From the moored wall; escapes,
Unwavering, to sea.

_The final destination: unwavering, to sea_

Buber’s philosophy implied a search for an integrated destination of the human personality:

the holding on to new, humble knowledge that the person one once was, is identical to the person one is now. The goal must be to restore oneself by using one’s capacity to work within historically and biologically given situations.\(^5^3\)

Through the lens of childhood memory, service in the Second World War, travel abroad and the attempt to find some integration of the self, prompted by the physical landscape, in _Secret Destinations_, Causley gave voice to his unfulfilled aspirations towards this goal of restoration of wholeness.

But where Causley ends is not where Buber’s vision leads in two respects. Firstly, although poet and reader can be active participants in the act of interpretation, Causley remains essentially solitary as creator in these journeys. He makes claims upon himself to journey towards a sense of self but makes no existential demands of his readers. This impedes the potential of a fulfilled ‘I-Thou’ existence. The reader cannot personally reciprocate. The poems remained the ‘Thou’ to which Causley related. In his translator’s preface to Buber’s _I and Thou_, Ronald Gregor Smith describes ‘a kind of directness which lays a special claim upon the reader’.\(^5^4\) The claim in these journeys is primarily on Causley himself and the reader is

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53 Pettersen, ‘Buber’s Theory of Existential Guilt and Shame’.
54 Buber, _I and Thou_, p. xi.
witness. Secondly, in contrast to Buber’s dimension of a relationship with God, the sea is a symbol of extinction for Causley. Gregor Smith expected that a reading of I and Thou would prompt the reader to consider Buber’s central question: ‘how may I understand my experience of a relation with God?’\(^55\) The possibility of an eternal ‘Thou’, is the final destination of being in a relationship for Buber. ‘Every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou.’\(^56\) This destination is not explicitly apparent in Causley. Jason Cowley commented that ‘Causley has been rightly called a religious poet but his is an inchoate theology, in which redemption appears endlessly deferred, transcendence endlessly out of reach.’\(^57\) Applying Cowley’s analysis to Secret Destinations allows for the potential of this deferment and an openness to reaching this transcendence, but its realisation is not apparent in this collection.

Despite these two caveats, the journey to the sea may be ‘unwavering’ in Causley, but Buber’s assertion in the preface that the traveller is unaware of his destination hints that, even for Causley, there may yet be a resolution to this mystery. Cowley argued of Causley that ‘his words, his particular flesh are his immense gamble against death, imperishably carrying his name into the future.’\(^58\) The struggle for identity through language, guilt, displacement and location and the ‘secret destination’ of the individual self are illuminated by Buber’s dialogic principle.

In the four types of journey found in Causley’s poetry in Secret Destinations are the rationale for his choice of a quotation from Buber. In his introduction to Buber’s Between Man and Man, Maurice Friedman comments that ‘the genuineness of man’s existence is seen as dependent upon his bringing all his separate spheres of activity into “the life of dialogue”’\(^59\) The struggle to confirm a sense of self, to achieve the quality of relationship implied by Buber’s ‘I-Thou’, and the attempt of poetry to orientate experience and realise an eventual sense of meaning beyond the individual are variously present in the selection of poems chosen for this paper. Causley struggles to find an integration of personality and to sustain his sense of humanity in relationship through language and poetry, to live with the despair of the effects of war, to face his sense of identity through travel and to search for the significance of his life from the van-

\(^55\) Ibid.
\(^56\) Buber, I and Thou, p. 53.
\(^58\) Ibid.
\(^59\) Maurice Friedman, ‘Introduction’ in Buber, Between Man and Man, pp. xi–xx (p. xvii).
tage point of the Castle. Causley’s achievements in probing the identity of self, so often belittled by critics obsessed with his seeming indifference to more experimental approaches to post-war poetry, are clearly shown in the collection Secret Destinations.

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