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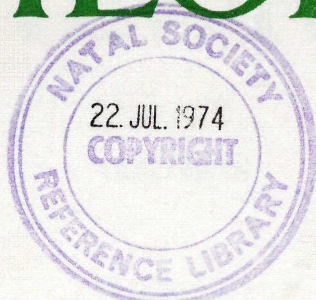

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Our first issue for the year again consists of literary articles. Among these we offer studies of writers who are deeply concerned with their own national or racial group and their own country. Voices of the twentieth century predominate and problems on which their interest centres are modern, an urgent and crucial part of the world we know. How poets and novelists look at these problems gives another dimension as we try to assess events of the moment.

It is with pleasure that we include criticism of earlier writers, Shakespeare and Dickens, whom we regard as 'gods of harmony and creation' of the English Parnassus although there may be readers who feel that 'giants of energy and invention' no less fittingly designates their character.

THE EDITORS

HOW IRISH ARE THE IRISH WRITERS?*

by ALAN WARNER

'We have heard much of the wrongs of Ireland, the miseries of Ireland, the crimes of Ireland: every cloud has its sunny side; and, when all is said, Ireland is still the most beautiful island in the world, and the Irish themselves, though their temperament is ill-matched with ours, are still among the most interesting of peoples.'

Those words were written about a hundred years ago by the English historian, James Anthony Froude. They still apply very aptly today; and one proof that the Irish are indeed among the most interesting of peoples is the large number of interesting and able writers that this small but beautiful island has produced. But before I discuss some of them I had better explain what I mean by the term 'Irish writers'.

For the purposes of this talk, 'Irish writers' really means Anglo-Irish writers, or in other words, Irish writers of English. It does not mean writers in Irish, as 'French writers' would mean writers in French. There are many writers of Irish, past and present, and every year some plays in Irish are performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin; but because very few people outside Ireland know Irish — indeed not many inside Ireland know it either — there is very little scope for Irish literature in Irish. So when you buy *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse* you will find that the verse is all in English, even though some of it is translated from Irish.

The term 'Anglo-Irish' is more accurate than 'Irish' to describe the writers I intend to discuss today and this term is increasingly coming into use in the best academic circles. In the *New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* there is a section headed 'Anglo-Irish Writers', and two years ago in Dublin there was held the first Conference of IASAIL — the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature. But for the moment I prefer the simpler and more familiar term 'Irish' writers, to include such figures as Swift, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Burke, Yeats, Joyce, Synge, Lady Gregory, O'Casey, and Patrick Kavanagh and, among lesser known names — Carleton, Mangan, Ferguson, Allingham, O'Brien, O'Connor, O'Donnell, O'Faolain and O'Flaherty.

I hope I have now established roughly what I meant by Irish writers. It is less easy to offer a definition of the first 'Irish' in my

*This is the text, slightly revised, of the Hugh le May lecture delivered at Rhodes University in 1972, when Professor Warner was the Hugh le May Fellow at that university. The lecture was subsequently repeated at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

title — 'How *Irish* are the Irish Writers?' In fact the aim of my talk is largely to suggest the kind of meanings this word may have. Perhaps I can clear away at the outset one sense of the word that I do *not* wish to apply. We frequently hear the colloquial expression 'how very Irish', meaning 'how very illogical and absurd and contradictory'. I suspect that this usage developed out of the term 'Irish Bull', an expression that contradicts or defeats itself. A famous example is the remark: 'Why should we be so concerned about posterity? What has posterity ever done for us?' Or we might take a piece of dialogue from Brendan Behan's play, *The Hostage.*

P. Where were you in 1916?
M. I wasn't born.
P. Ah, you're full of excuses.

According to the Oxford dictionary the word 'bull' had long been in use before it came to be associated with Irishmen. It was common in England in the seventeenth century, and seems only to have become Irish towards the end of the eighteenth century. Perhaps this tells us something of the attitude of the English to the Irish at that time. A good Irish Bull is not necessarily nonsensical. The truth is often paradoxical as we can discover from the New Testament. As an Irish wit remarked: An Irish Bull is always pregnant'.

To return to the Irish writers. Even before we get clearer about their 'Irishness' we can say quite definitely that some are more Irish than others. I have in front of me a publisher's list of Irish writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Bucknell University Press of Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, is issuing a series of monographs on these writers. Their current list contains 67 names. Of these I personally would exclude two on the grounds that they are more English than Irish — namely Elizabeth Bowen and Iris Murdoch. There are four doubtful cases — Oscar Wilde, George Moore, Louis MacNeice and Samuel Beckett. All of these were born and brought up, or partly brought up, in Ireland, but not all of them had any significant relationship with Ireland and the Irish. Oscar Wilde belongs to London rather than Dublin; *The Importance of Being Earnest* is in no sense an Irish play. I would not admit Oscar Wilde to the ranks of the Irish writers, in spite of the fact that he was born in Dublin of Irish parents and educated first at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, and then at Trinity College, Dublin. After a year at Trinity he went to Oxford where he sailed into his own special orbit. His rooms at Magdalen College overlooking the Cherwell were notorious for their exotic splendour, and here he cultivated his aesthetic doctrines, his love of wit and his reputation for being an

idler. Later he moved to London and later still to Paris. Although Yeats tried to see in his life and work an extravagant Celtic crusade against Anglo-Saxon stupidity, and quoted one of his remarks — 'I labour under a perpetual fear of not being misunderstood' — to prove it, yet Wilde never reflected Irish life in his poetry or prose, never became involved in Irish issues, and cannot, in my opinion, be considered an Irish writer.

Another big fish to come out of Irish waters is Samuel Beckett. It is not surprising that the Irish try to claim him. He was born in Dublin and he followed in the footsteps of Oscar Wilde by going to Portora Royal School and to Trinity College, Dublin. He didn't, however, go on to Oxford but he did go to Paris and his most important play was written in French — *En Attendant Godot*. Some producers have seen the characters in *Waiting for Godot* as Irish: two Irish tramps waiting at the edge of a bog; Pozzo an Anglo-Irish landlord and Lucky a down-trodden peasant. It is possible to interpret them in this way, but there is really nothing in the play to indicate that this is the *right* way to interpret them. The characters are basic, symbolic, universal rather than local. Beckett is writing in a European rather than an Irish tradition.

All that Fall, which was written for radio, does have an Irish setting and Irish characters, and it is correct to play it with Irish accents, but it has really nothing to do with Ireland or the Irish situation. Its theme is a general human one, the misery and transience and futility of human life. Maddy Rooney is an Irishwoman and was brilliantly played by Mary O'Farrell, but she is basically any elderly female despairer 'destroyed with sorrow and pining and gentility and church going and fat and rheumatism and childlessness'. Her sorrows are unrelated to the sorrows of Ireland and have little to do with the village she lives in. In the sense of the word that I am working towards, *All That Fall* is not an Irish play and Beckett is not an Irish writer.

My last two cases, George Moore and Louis MacNeice, are more complex. Before examining them I would like to recall Conor Cruise O'Brien's definition of what constitutes an Irishman. '*Irishness*' he wrote, '*is not primarily a question of birth or blood or language: it is the condition of being involved in the Irish situation, and usually of being mauled by it.*' Oscar Wilde and Beckett are not involved in the Irish situation; George Moore and Louis MacNeice, in very different ways, were involved, and both were to some extent mauled by it.

As soon as he could, George Moore moved out of Ireland. When his father died and he inherited the Moore estate in Co. Mayo he went to live in Paris as an absentee landlord, where his quarters

outrivalled Oscar Wilde's in exotic splendour. He had a rude shock when his rents ran out and he was forced to work for his living. He went to work, not on his estate in Ireland, but as a writer in London, where he wrote *The Mummer's Wife*, a novel about the pottery district in England, and later *Esther Waters*, about an English servant girl who has an illegitimate child. There is no hint of Irishness in either of these books. During the eighties Moore did write a book about Ireland,which he later suppressed. It was called *Parnell and his Island* and it expresses his general disgust with Ireland, where the smell of poverty clings to the cabins like the smell of paraffin oil. Then, about the turn of the century Moore had a conversion. He became involved with Yeats and others in the Irish literary revival and he heard supernatural voices calling him to go to Ireland. He went to Ireland and he became deeply involved in the Irish situation. He was to some degree, mauled by it. He wrote two books, *The Untilled Field* and *The Lake*, which are indisputably Irish. These two and one other earlier book, *A Drama in Muslin*, establish his claim to be considered an Irish writer.

Louis MacNeice was born in Ireland but went to school in England and then to Oxford, where he was a contemporary of Auden and Spender. Later he taught Classics at Birmingham University and then worked for the B.B.C. The bulk of his life was lived in England but he made periodic returns to his home in Ulster and he was to some extent involved with the Irish situation. A substantial portion of his poetry is haunted by Irish ghosts. He wrote poems on Belfast and Dublin and the west of Ireland.

> In doggerel and stout let me honour this country
> Though the air is so soft that it smudges the words

He is locked in a love-hate relationship with Ireland and the Irish past, ever since his childhood was darkened by the shadows of Irish hatred. He expresses it vividly in his 'Autumn Journal'.

> And I remember, when I was little, the fear
> Bandied among the servants
> That Casement would land at the pier
> With a sword and a horde of rebels;
> And how we used to expect, at a later date,
> When the wind blew from the west, the noise of shooting
> Starting in the evening at eight
> In Belfast in the York Street district;
> And the voodoo of the Orange bands
> Drawing an iron net through darkest Ulster,

Flailing the limbo lands —
  The linen mills, the long wet grass, the ragged hawthorn.
And one read black where the other read white, his hope
  The other man's damnation:
Up the Rebels, To Hell with the Pope,
  And God Save — as you prefer — the King or Ireland.
The land of scholars and saints:
  Scholars and saints my eye, the land of ambush,
Purblind manifestoes, never-ending complaints,
  The born martyr and the gallant ninny;
The grocer drunk with the drum,
  The land-owner shot in his bed, the angry voices
Piercing the broken fanlight in the slum,
  The shawled woman weeping at the garish altar.
Kathleen ni Houlihan! Why
  Must a country, like a ship or a car, be always female,
Mother or sweetheart? A woman passing by,
  We did but see her passing.
Passing like a patch of sun on the rainy hill
  And yet we love her for ever and hate our neighbour
And each one in his will
  Binds his heirs to continuance of hatred.
Drums on the haycock, drums on the harvest, black
  Drums in the night shaking the windows:
King William is riding his white horse back
  To the Boyne on a banner.
Thousands of banners, thousands of white
  Horses, thousands of Williams
Waving thousands of swords and ready to fight
  Till the blue sea turns to orange.
Such was my country and I thought I was well
  Out of it, educated and domiciled in England,
Though yet her name keeps ringing like a bell
  In an under-water belfry.
Why do we like being Irish? Partly because
  It gives us a hold on the sentimental English
As members of a world that never was,
  Baptised with fairy water;
And partly because Ireland is small enough
  To be still thought of with a family feeling.
And because the waves are rough
  That split her from a more commercial culture;
And because one feels that here at least one can
  Do local work which is not at the world's mercy

And that on this tiny stage with luck a man
  Might see the end of one particular action.
It is self-deception of course;
  There is no immunity in this island either;
A cart that is drawn by somebody else's horse
  And carrying goods to somebody else's market.
The bombs in the turnip sack, the sniper from the roof,
  Griffith, Connolly, Collins, where have they brought us?

MacNeice has two faces as a poet. He is an English poet of the thirties, of the pre-war years of depression, unemployment, anxiety and disillusion; he is also an Irish poet who never finally severed his Irish roots.

I hope that I am beginning to point towards a meaning for the first Irish of my title, but so far I have been largely occupied with categories. Who should we put in a list of Irish writers, or include in an Irish anthology? This is an interesting question but not vastly important. There are bound to be border-line cases, whose position will be settled by custom or convenience. I would like to turn to the more important question of how far there is a link between literature and nationality, how far Irish writers are concerned with a national identity or awareness. Yeats once remarked that there was no great nationality without literature and no great literature without nationality. Like many striking epigrams, this is a half-truth rather than a whole truth. And it is probably truer for the past than the present. Today we live in an international world where the concept of nationality becomes increasingly irrelevant. But in the course of the nineteenth century in Ireland there were two conscious attempts to combine literature and nationality. The first was part of the Young Ireland movement in the forties; the second was largely the work of W. B. Yeats himself at the end of the century.

In 1842 *The Nation* newspaper was founded by Charles Gavan Duffy and Thomas Davis. This is the Davis whom Yeats included in his holy trinity of Irish poets. In his poem 'To Ireland in the Coming Times', he asks to

be accounted one
With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson
. . . .
True brother of a company
That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong,
Ballad and story, rann and song.

Davis was young, romantic, intensely patriotic. His poems were

propaganda for the national cause. One of them is entitled 'A Nation Once Again', and begins

> When boyhood's fire was in my blood
>   I read of ancient freemen.
> For Greece and Rome who bravely stood,
>   Three Hundred men and Three men.
> And then I prayed I yet might see
>   Our fetters rent in twain
> And Ireland, long a province, be
>   A Nation once again.

Another poem celebrates the heroic courage of the Irish Brigade at the battle of Fontenoy in Flanders in 1745 when they helped the French to defeat England and her allies. Davis's stirring words roused the republican enthusiasm of the Irish people. The Very Reverend Father O'Burke wrote:

> I remember with what startled enthusiasm I would arise from reading Davis's Poems; and it would seem to me that before my young eyes I saw the dash of the Brigade at Fontenoy; it would seem to me as if my young ears were filled with the shout that resounded at the Yellow Ford and Benurb — the war-cry of the Red Hand—as the English hosts were swept away, and, like snow under the beams of the rising sun, melted before the Irish onset.

This kind of reaction must have been experienced by many other young readers; Davis's poetry had a simple but stirring patriotic appeal.

Although Yeats admired and revered Davis, he was aware of the limitations of his poetry.

> No man was more sincere, no man has a less mechanical mind than Thomas Davis, and yet he is often a little insincere and mechanical in his verse. When he sat down to write he had so great a desire to make the peasantry courageous and powerful that he half believed them already 'the finest peasantry upon the earth' . . . and today we are paying the reckoning with much bombast.

Yeats wanted a literature that should be truly national and local but of the highest possible quality, a literature that should not be provincial in outlook but aware of the great masters of other nations, such as Homer and Balzac and Ibsen. He also wanted people to be

aware of an Irish tradition of writing, and he consciously set out to promote this tradition. He founded the Irish Literary Society in London in 1892; he wrote articles in Irish journals on the neglected Irish writers of the nineteenth century, Sir Samuel Ferguson, James Clarence Mangan, William Carleton, and William Allingham. He reviewed current Irish writers and he drew up lists of the best Irish books. He parted ways with Douglas Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League and later first president of the Irish Free State, because he did not believe that Irish nationality could be attained through a revival of the almost forgotten Irish language. He was as anxious as Hyde was to de-Anglicise Ireland, but he hoped to do it by translating and re-telling the old legends, and by promoting a new kind of writing in English. 'Can we not,' he wrote, 'build up a national tradition, a national literature, which shall be none the less Irish in spirit from being English in language?'

The result of Yeats's enthusiasm and effort was a literary revival in Ireland in which there was a conscious turning to Irish themes in legend and history, and a conscious reflection of contemporary Irish life. Yeats helped to turn Synge away from French and Italian poetry to the Aran islands; he encouraged him to express a life that had never been expressed. The result was Synge's fine journal, *The Aran Islands*, and his peasant plays. The result of Yeats's work and that of his collaborators, Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, George Moore, AE and others, was the growth of an Irish dramatic movement in a country where there had previously been no drama at all, not so much as a miracle play. *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and *The Playboy of the Western World* are Irish plays in a way that *The Rivals* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* are clearly not.

The nineteenth and early twentieth century Irish writers did consciously try to create a national literature, and to a considerable extent they succeeded. How can we account for this success? We know that literature cannot be written to order, at the command of the will. A genuine writer, who is not simply a patriotic hack, must work from sources deep within himself, from his own experience and emotion. None of the great Irish writers is a simple patriot. But for reasons which are difficult to isolate, (they may be partly historical and geographical) Irish writers became passionately involved in the Irish situation and emotionally concerned with their relationship to Ireland. English writers are rarely concerned with their Englishness or South African writers with their South Africanness, though they may be concerned with particular aspects of life in England or South Africa. But most Irish writers are trapped in a deep love-hate relationship with Ireland itself. Auden said of Yeats: 'Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry', and Yeats himself said:

Out of Ireland have we come.
Great hatred, little room,
Maimed us at the start.
I carry from my mother's womb
A fanatic heart.

The bitterest sayings about Ireland have come from Irishmen. It was Joyce who said: 'Ireland is an old sow that eats her own farrow', and 'Irish art is the cracked looking glass of a servant', and yet Joyce for all his exile and cunning, and his refusal to be caught in the nets of church or race or fatherland, is tied fast by the navel-cord to Ireland. His writing is Irish in spirit and flavour; he lived in Trieste and Paris but he wrote about Dublin.

In one of his essays Yeats said: 'Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry.' Some Irish poets have made rhetoric out of the quarrel with England, but most of them have made poetry out of the quarrel with themselves. This quarrel or conflict is usually concerned with the Irish situation in which they find themselves. Let us take, for example, the Ulster poet, John Hewitt. He was born in Belfast of Protestant parents and he inherited that city's sharp divisions. The religious experience of his childhood mingled hate with love. He voices it in a poem called *The Green Shoot.*

In my harsh city, when a catholic priest,
known by his collar, padded down our street,
I'd trot beside him, pull my schoolcap off
and fling it on the ground and stamp on it.

I'd catch my enemy, that errand-boy
grip his torn jersey and admonish him
first to admit his faith, and when he did,
repeatedly to curse the Pope of Rome;

schooled in such duties by my bolder friends;
yet not so many hurried years before,
when I slipped in from play one Christmas Eve
my mother bathed me at the kitchen fire,

and wrapped me in a blanket for the climb
up the long stairs; and suddenly we heard
the carol-singers somewhere in the dark,
their voices sharper, for the frost was hard.

My mother carried me through the dim hall
into the parlour, where the only light
upon the patterned wall and furniture
came from the iron lamp across the street;

and there looped round the lamp the singers stood,
but not on snow in grocers' calendars,
singing a song I liked until I saw
my mother's lashes were all bright with tears.

Out of this mulch of ready sentiment,
gritty with threads of flinty violence,
I am the green shoot asking for the flower,
soft as the feathers of the snow's cold swans.

Later he asserts, a trifle self-consciously, his own Irishness in a poem celebrating his awareness of ancient pre-Christian tradition in holy well and harvest rite.

Above my door the rushy cross
the turf upon my hearth
for I am of the Irishry
by nurture and by birth
So let no patriot decry
or Kelt dispute my claim,
for I have found the faith was here
before St Patrick came.

Later still, when he had moved to a post as Curator of the Coventry Museum and Art Gallery, Hewitt wrote a poem entitled *An Irishman in Coventry*. It reveals very clearly the love-hate relationship with Ireland. He exposes the weakness of his 'creed-haunted God-forsaken race', but the last two lines express his yearing towards Ireland.

A full year since, I took this eager city,
the tolerance that laced its blatant roar,
its famous steeples and its web of girders,
as image of the state hope argued for,
and scarcely flung a bitter thought behind me
on all that flaws the glory and the grace
which ribbons through the sick, guilt-clotted legend
of my creed-haunted, Godforsaken race.

My rhetoric swung round from steel's high promise
to the precision of the well-gauged tool,
tracing the logic in the vast glass headlands,
the clockwork horse, the comprehensive school.

Then, sudden, by occasion's chance concerted,
in enclave of my nation, but apart,
the jigging dances and the lilting fiddle
stirred the old rage and pity in my heart.
The faces and the voices blurring round me,
the strong hands long familiar with the spade,
the whiskey-tinctured breath, the pious buttons,
called up a people endlessly betrayed
by our own weakness, by the wrongs we suffered
in that long twilight over bog and glen,
by force, by famine and by glittering fables
which gave us martyrs when we needed men,
by faith which had no charity to offer,
by poisoned memory, and by ready wit,
with poverty corroded into malice,
to hit and run and howl when it is hit.

This is our fate: eight hundred years' disaster,
crazily tangled as the Book of Kells;
the dream's distortion and the land's division,
the midnight raiders and the prison cells.
Yet like Lir's children banished to the waters
our hearts still listen for the landward bells.

Hewitt's poetry reveals another recurring theme in Irish writing, another aspect of the conflict over Irish identity, another form of involvement in the Irish situation. He was born and bred in the city and yet he loves the country and country ways, but he feels an alien, an outsider amongst the country people and the peasants. In his week-end country cottage he remains for ever divided from them. He addresses them in a poem called 'O Country People'.

O country people, you of the hill farms,
huddled so in darkness I cannot tell
whether the light across the glen is a star,
or the bright lamp spilling over the sill,
I would be neighbourly, would come to terms
with your existence, but you are so far;
there is a wide bog between us, a high wall.

I've tried to learn the smaller parts of speech
in your slow language, but my thoughts need more
flexible shapes to move in, if I am to reach
into the hearth's red heart across the half-door.

You are coarse to my senses, to my washed skin;
I shall maybe learn to wear dung on my heel,
but the slow assurance, the unconscious discipline
informing your vocabulary of skill,
is beyond my mastery, who have followed a trade
three generations now, at counter and desk;
hand me a rake, and I at once, betrayed,
will shed more sweat than is needed for the task.

It is true that poets outside Ireland have expressed this sense of distance between themselves and the country people. It is a major theme in the work of R. S. Thomas, the Welsh poet, who lives as a sensitive parson amongst the backward peasant-farmers of the Welsh hills. But in Ireland the theme has a particular importance because Ireland is more than half identified with peasant Ireland. Yeats glorified the peasantry and the nobility and ignored the middle classes.

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
All that we did, all that we said or sang
Must come from contact with the soil, from that
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
We three alone in modern times had brought
Everything down to that sole test again,
Dream of the noble and the beggar-man.

Every Irish writer has to determine in some way or other his attitude to rural Ireland and the peasantry. This is true of those writers who belong to the peasantry as well as those, like Synge and John Hewitt, who belong to the middle-class Protestant world. A striking example is Patrick Kavanagh, who was born and bred in the little fields of Monaghan in the North of Ireland. He hated to be called a peasant poet, but in a sense he was perhaps the last peasant poet in Europe. He left his village school at the age of 13 and worked on the land until he was nearly 30. He had no literary education beyond his school poetry books and began by writing verse — very bad verse—for the poet's corner of local newspapers. He eventually moved into literary circles first in London, then in Dublin, and he became probably the most important poet in Ireland after the death of Yeats. One of his achievements was to free Irish writers from the

overpowering influence of Yeats. He reacted violently to the whole ethos of the Irish literary revival, which he said was a myth invented by Yeats and Lady Gregory. He rejected the whole notion of Irishness, which he thought encouraged a folksy tourist literature for the English and American markets, and he raged furiously against those journalists who had the effrontery to call him an Irish poet.

At the same time all his best poetry springs out of his deep and passionate conflict with his Irish environment in Monaghan. He loves it and hates it. He loves the fields, the weeds, the hedges and the little hills with a mystical intensity.

> The Holy Spirit is the rising sap
> And Christ will be the green leaves that will come
> At Easter from the sealed and guarded tomb.

In the streets of Dublin he recalls his country tasks, spreading dung, cleaning ditches, spraying the potatoes, and he writes of them with deep love and affection

> And over that potato-field
> A lazy veil of woven sun.
> Dandelions growing on headlands, showing
> Their unloved hearts to everyone.

But his mood suddenly changes and in the very next poem he is crying out against the stony grey soil of Monaghan.

> You sang on steaming dunghills
> A song of coward's brood,
> You perfumed my clothes with weasel itch
> You fed me on swinish food
>
> You flung a ditch on my vision
> Of beauty, love and truth
> O stony grey soil of Monaghan
> You burgled my bank of youth!

His most sustained and dramatic poem about the little fields of Monaghan, *The Great Hunger*, presents a view of the peasant farmer and his stunted loveless life that is as harsh and grim as anything in Crabbe. The Great Hunger is not the Irish famine but the peasants' unsatisfied hunger for life and love that is sacrificed to his little fields. He is 'the man who made a field his bride'

> Watch him, watch him, that man on a hill whose spirit
> Is a wet sack flapping about the knees of time.

> He lives that his little fields may stay fertile when his own body
> Is spread in the bottom of a ditch under two coulters
> crossed in Christ's name.

The central figure in 'The Great Hunger' is not only tied to his fields, he is also tied to his harsh aging mother, who lives on until it is too late for her son to take a wife.

> Poor Paddy Maguire, a fourteen-hour day
> He worked for years. It was he that lit the fire
> And boiled the kettle and gave the cows their hay.
> His mother tall hard as a Protestant spire
> Came down the stairs barefoot at the kettle-call
> And talked to her son sharply: 'Did you let
> The hens out, you?' She had a venomous drawl
> And a wizened face like moth-eaten leatherette.

The poem becomes a cry of protest, against the sad, twisted, blind life of the peasant who is locked in a stable with pigs and cows forever. The coin of Maguire's destiny is bent so that it sticks in the slot.

But against this harsh vision of peasant life, which Kavanagh himself later rejected as 'too strong for honesty' we have to set many earlier and later poems that breathe a deep peace and happiness in the little fields of Monaghan.

In spite of his impatient rejection of the Irish label, no writer was more deeply involved in the Irish situation, or more completely mauled by it, than Patrick Kavanagh and this is true of his life and writing in Dublin as well as his experience in the country.

I am getting towards the end of my talk and I still don't seem to have arrived at a clear definition of the first Irish in my title. What I have loosely called the Irish situation has too many facets to be neatly assessed and labelled. But I hope my examples have made it clear that there are some specific Irish aspects of Irish writers that do make it meaningful for Ireland to claim them as her own, so that when I say that Wilde and Beckett are not Irish writers, but that Yeats and Joyce and Synge and Kavanagh and Hewitt are, this is more than a merely arbitrary act of classification. Although it is not easy to sum it up there is an Irish experience and an Irish situation that is specific and real, and out of this Irish writers emerge. Whether self-consciously Irish, like Yeats and Hewitt, or just naturally Irish like Synge,who was sceptical about a national literature, or belli ge-rently anti-Irish like Kavanagh, they are all undoubtedly and unmistakeably Irish.

To put it another way round, many so-called Irish writers are

Irish only by courtesy and accepted tradition. Oliver Goldsmith, is an example. Yeats, in his attempt to forge links with eighteenth-century Ireland, 'that one Irish century which has escaped darkness and confusion' claimed spiritual kinship with Goldsmith, Swift, Berkeley and Burke. But Goldsmith, although he sometimes wrote nostalgically in his letters of his boyhood in Ireland, was not really an Irish writer. He belonged to the literary world of London, where he was a member of the famous Club that included Johnson and Boswell. *The Vicar of Wakefield* cannot be considered an Irish novel, though some critics have tried to see Irish traits in the character of the unworldly vicar. But Dr Primrose has more in common with Fielding's Parson Adams, who was even more unworldly, than he has with characters in Irish fiction. *The Deserted Village* recalls an English village more than an Irish village. The inn described there is a snug English inn, not an Irish shebeen.

> The white-washed wall, the nicely sanded floor
> The varnished clock that ticked behind the door . . .
> The pictures placed for ornament and use,
> The twelve good rules, the royal game of goose.

William Allingham, who was by no means anti-English, thought *The Deserted Village* was 'a very elegant and finished piece, as by an English Virgil', but he complained that there was 'not a single Irish touch from beginning to end'.

With Swift, Yeats has much more Irish ground to stand on, and it is not surprising that he meant much more to Yeats than Goldsmith did. In fact Yeats was haunted by Swift. His spirit, brought into contemporary Dublin by a spiritualist medium at a private séance, fiercely dominates one of Yeats's later plays, *The Words Upon the Window-Pane.*

Swift, though much against his will, was involved in the Irish situation of his time, and he was considerably mauled by it. He was the author of the anonymous Drapier letters, attacking the British Government's plans for the Irish coinage. A reward of £300 was offered for information about the author, but none of the Irish poor would inform on the Dean of St Patrick's. *Gulliver's Travels* is unrelated to Ireland (though there are people prepared even to dispute this) but '*A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from being a Burden to their Parents or Country; and for making them beneficial to the Public,*' is very clearly and bitterly related to Ireland. Swift resented having to live in Ireland, but he had a deep compassion for the Irish poor, and a passionate hatred of the way the English government mismanaged Irish affairs.

Time forbids further discussion of the other three hundred or so Irish writers of English. I would like to consider very briefly one other aspect of Irish writing.

Can Irish writing be distinguished from English writing by its style? Broadly the answer is 'No'. Maria Edgeworth's style has more in common with Jane Austen than with William Carleton. Some Irish writers make considerable use of a special Anglo-Irish dialect, but others don't use it at all. In poetry there is some evidence that Gaelic rhythms and verse forms have influenced English writing. Such features as internal rhyme and assonance are found in the poetry of Mangan and others, but this is a relatively minor influence. Professor Dowden is said to have remarked that you could tell an Irish book by its smell (I think he was referring to the quality of the glue in the binding of some books printed in Dublin), but, except when there is obvious use of Anglo-Irish idiom, you cannot tell it from its style.

It seems to me impossible to find a formula for the 'Irishness' of Irish writing that is more specific or precise than the definition offered by Conor Cruise O'Brien, on which this talk has been based. I can only hope that the meaning of involvement in the Irish situation has been made clearer by the examples I have given.

Finally, although the Irish situation may at times seem quite lunatic and incomprehensible, it is only a variation of the human situation. We read Irish writers not primarily in order to understand Ireland, but because they have something worth saying about human life. A writer must start from the local life and the local situation he knows; but if his vision is profound it will take on universal significance. As Bernard Shaw pointed out, the man who ignores his own time and place and tries to write for all time will be rewarded by being unreadable in all ages. I would like to conclude by reading a sonnet from Patrick Kavanagh which offers a variation on the same theme. It is called *Epic*.

I have lived in important places, times
When great events were decided, who owned
That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land
Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims.
I heard the Duffys shouting 'Damn your soul'
And old McCabe stripped to the waist, seen
Step the plot defying blue cast-steel —
'Here is the march along these iron stones!
That was the year of the Munich bother. Which
Was more important? I inclined
To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin

Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind
He said: 'I made the Iliad from such
A local row.' Gods make their own importance.

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TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY ISRAELI WRITING

by LEAH BRONNER

Contemporary Israeli writing manifests diverse literary and ideological trends, each drawing from different sources and focusing on different issues. When reviewing the current literary scene in Israel, one may ask, how much does this literature draw from the local environment, how much from the Jewish past, and how much from foreign literary influences? I cannot believe that a literary work is in no way indebted to the external world of the author and draws artistic strength only from the self-generating dynamism inherent in the language itself. Due attention must be paid to the contextual subtleties of language, but that does not mean that we must ignore the historical setting in which the author has placed his character, and in which the story unfolds. All literature, poetry or prose, must respond to the inner and outer world of man, if it is to endure.[1]

Now that 25 years have elapsed since the emergence of the first generation of native Israeli authors one becomes increasingly aware of new Hebrew writers, who have grown up in the accomplished fact of Jewish sovereignty in a state of siege, and whose attitudes toward language and literary tradition as well as towards the social reality around them are often strikingly different from those of their predecessors. When modern Hebrew literature arose it was greatly influenced by German, French, and Russian literary trends. The poets and prose writers of contemporary Israel look to British and American literature for inspiration. For Israeli literature today, as in previous stages, is far from being provincially self-contained and is an integral part of the much wider life stream of twentieth-century literary creativity. Contemporary Israeli writing gives expression to the mood of modernism, man's alienation from his work, from his world, from his religion, and his sadness at the loss of his uniqueness in a scientific and technological age. The young Israeli avant-gardists jealously defend their rights to express the experiences of the individual even during periods of most extreme political tension, and they are not prepared to consider a purely one-dimensional political model of Israel. They want Israeli literature to be an experiment in real human problems, and not a Zionist slogan or an anti-Zionist battle cry. They reject the publicistic attitude of their forebears. They judge a work by its literary quality and not for its ideological — political or historical — values.

However, a study of modern Hebrew letters cannot be confined to the later schools, since not only are the writers and poets of earlier generations still with us, but the quality of their contribution sur-

passes anything produced by those who came after them. Any historical survey of local writing can thus be regarded as one link in a long chain of literary production. Concepts such as conservatism and innovation do not apply, for example, in the work of Nobel Prize winner Agnon, who was born in 1888 and died in 1970. By European standards Agnon is an outstanding modernist, while Shamir, born in 1921, a central figure among the Palmach writers, remains, in spite of forays into modernism, a naturalist. The poetry of Zach, who was born in 1930, is not more modern than that of Alterman, born in 1910.

The progress of contemporary Israeli letters may, perhaps, best be described, in the bounds of this essay, by a brief discussion of the works of several of the major writers, who exemplify phases in this process of evolution.

The first protagonists of native Israeli writing are the generation of the Palmach who were either born or brought up in the language and landscape of Israel. They grew up in Mandatory Palestine, in a socialistic youth movement, worked for a while in a kibbutz, fought in the Israeli army or earlier in the British army, and supported themselves with a variety of odd jobs ranging from manual labour to journalism to high-school teaching. The act of writing fiction was frequently the direct critical response of a troubled individual consciousness to the political and social realities of his world. Writers like Meged, Shaham, Shamir in prose, and Guri, Gilboa, Kovner in poetry wrote positively about war, illustrating the potential it offers for developing the qualities of heroism, sacrifice, and friendship.

On the other hand, their works are often haunted by the terror of a situation where the individual is called upon to murder in the name of the state, as in Kaniuk's novel, '*The Acrophile*', or Yizhar's short story, '*The Prisoner*'. The danger of the obliteration of conscience by war becomes a living reality.

Yizhar's striking story '*Hirbat Hizeh*' describes the moral dilemmas facing the fighter in his meeting with the Arab soldier. Paradoxically, Yizhar's hero realizes the destiny of his own people and the traumatic experience of exile, only when it is reflected in the destiny of the defeated and exiled Arab enemy. His sympathy for the Arab is not just the result of a humanitarian predisposition; it is made possible, and is emotionally coloured, by the collective past experience of the Jewish people.

In his story, '*Bountiful Rains*', Meged described the ideological crisis that prevailed after the shooting was over, and the soldier found that the national dream had faded with the gunsmoke; idealism had vanished and was replaced by opportunism, and corruption, bureaucracy and hypocrisy.

More successfully than their predecessors of the 1920's, namely Shlonsky, Alterman, Shalom, Goldberg and others, the Palmach writers completely freed themselves from the shackles of the Jewish past, and sang about the new life being fashioned in Israel. Occasionally they touched on a Jewish theme, as did Meged in his short story '*The Name*'. The choice of a name for an expected child of a young Sabra couple becomes the concrete expression of the conflict between the new Israeli generation and the old European Jew. Grandfather Susskind wants them to name the child 'Mendele' after his grandson who perished in the holocaust. The young Sabra couple refuse not only to call him 'Mendele' but reject even the Hebrew counterpart 'Menachem'. To the new generation, 'Mendele' has the pathetic ring of the submissive medieval Jew, and that is just what they are revolting against. The new born child is called 'Ehud' and grandfather Susskind reverts to mourning 'Mendele'. Contemporary Israel has consciously refused to follow the tradition of the past.

Yizhar's novel, '*The Days of Ziklag*', caused a veritable revolution in Hebrew writing, because, instead of celebrating the heroic young fighters, it decried heroism as a thing of the past, and claimed that the aspirations of the pioneer are a distraction for the individual seeking salvation for his own soul.

This novel caused Israeli fiction to change drastically. It becomes less specifically Israeli, and begins to show the characteristics and tone of contemporary European literature. The typical hero is now not so much a figure within collective Israel as an individual at odds with his society, trying to work out a personal solution for his own unique problems, problems unique within society as he sees it, but shared with other lone individuals in the contemporary world.

The influences of moderate Russian modernism, from Blok to Mayakovsky in poetry, and 'socialist realism' in prose, alongside of American war naturalism as in Jones, Mailer, and even Hemingway, begin to give way to the influence of English and American poetry and prose, Eliot, Auden, Joyce and also Kafka and Camus. Modern poetry, the stream of consciousness, and existentialist symbolism begin to replace the romantic verse and social realism of the Palmach generation. The didactic approach to literature which plagued Hebrew letters since its inception gives way to a refreshing modernistic approach inspired by the great European avant-garde between the two world wars. The writers focused their sensibility on personal, perhaps, existential, experience — the concrete utterly unheroic actuality and the individual search rather than communal and collective concerns.

This new direction was characterized by the rapid flourishing of

poetry, prose and literary criticism and the appearance of avant-garde magazines such as *Likrat*, *Achshav* and *Yochani*.

The most significant poet of this generation was Amichai, a predominantly lyrical poet, whose writings recall the tone of some of the poetry of Auden and Thomas. His use of daily speech, his irony, his 'metaphysical' metaphors and existential ennui have become hallmarks of contemporary writing. His shorter lyrics, intensely elaborating a single image, generally have a strong immediate impact. The deceptively simple war poem for example:

> It rains on my friends' faces,
> On my live friends' faces,
> Those who cover their heads with a blanket.
> And it rains on my dead friends' faces,
> Those who are covered by nothing.[2]

Amichai loves to juxtapose Biblical or liturgical phrases with modern colloquialisms. For instance, a poem entitled *A Kind of Millenium* opens with the line, 'The man sitting under his fig tree telephoned the man sitting under his vine.' Amichai writes his tenderest poetry about his parents but frequently the attitude towards his Jewish childhood becomes ambivalent. There is a straightforward nostalgia that is combined with a strong feeling of guilt for having deserted his parents' way of life. For Amichai once explained that when he was fifteen he stopped believing in God and was very unhappy about it, for he had not only lost God but also his father whom he loved very much. His poem, called *God of Compassion,* illustrates his sceptical attitude toward religious values. He writes:

> Oh God of compassion —
> If God weren't so full of compassion
> The world could have some of it too . . .[3].

The tension between religion and secularism is very often present in the poetry of this most modern and innovating of Israeli poets, and this, I believe, adds a special character and charm to much of his work. Many of the younger poets like Zach, Pagis, Ravikovitch, and others are greatly influenced by Amichai.

The work of the young contemporary Israeli prose writers also inclines towards the 'small print' of individual experience, and shows a predilection for abstract symbolism through which both that experience and the 'big print' of the social, religious and national themes are conveyed.

Even the nightmare of the holocaust is not approached directly

either as in Weisel's metaphysical garb or through the realism of other writers, but indirectly. Appelfeld does not write about death camps, crematoria, or even Nazi brutality. Appelfeld usually prefers to depict the shattered mental world of the victims, after the war has ended, as they emerge again into 'normal' society. Even in stories like *Kitty*, in which the victim does not survive, death is transfigured into pathetic martyrdom.[4]

The young guard of the modern generation realize that the horrors of 'the planet Auschwitz' cannot be conveyed by pseudometaphysical means as in the works of Wiesel and others.

Appelfeld, together with writers like Yehoshua, Oz, Orpaz, and a few others are the prose writers of the Israeli avant-garde. Yehoshua is a master of the short story in the abstract symbolist mode, greatly influenced by Agnon, Kafka and Camus, but he never loses his singularly fierce approach in the descriptions of the local urban scene against a blackcloth of arid and rocky Israeli terrain. In Yehoshua's stories certain aspects of Israeli society are interpreted in terms of individual reality. Yehoshua often sees animal instincts lurking beneath the façade of civilized man; his educated, ostensibly pacific, ineffectual personages frequently harbour a murderous impulse to destroy whatever stands in their way, or whatever is associated with those who have given them pain. His stories have unique themes as, for instance, *Three days and a child*, is an account of a bachelor who agrees to care for his former mistress' son and then struggles in quiet ambivalence, never overtly, with the desire to do away with the child as an act of vengeance against its mother, who has dared to prefer another man. It is interesting that all the protagonists in the story have animal names. Thus, Wolf, the father brings his little son (whose garbled name we never learn) to Bear, his wife's former lover. Bear has a new mistress, Gazelle, a naturalist devoted to the collection of thorns. They have a gentle friend named Hart, who gets bitten by one of his snakes during the course of events because he refuses to crush it when it slithers away. Towards the end of the story, the Bear tells the child a story about a bear, a fox, a wolf, a hart, and their wives who go off to the forest where they carry on 'cruel wars'. The boy is specially moved by the little wolves that are drowned in the river; and at the end of the tale, when the teller decides to destroy every living creature, leaving only one little wolf cub, we infer that an ambiguous reconciliation has been effected between the man and the child he thought of killing. The symbolic function of names is clear — humans are relating to each other in animal terms — passionately not rationally, cruelly not kindly.

In the story, *Opposite the Forest*, the hero is a badly-blocked

graduate student in history who has taken a job as a fire watchman of a JNF forest so that he can have uninterruped solitude to write an essay on the Crusades. The subject of the crusades is politically explosive in modern Israel because the Arabs often compare the Israelis to the medieval crusaders and describe the Jews as a foreign invader uprooting the indigenous population. There in the forest, 'he breaks off all contact.' The only people within reach are a mute Arab and his daughter, who bring him food.

Yehoshua like Yizhar displays sympathy for the Arab cause. But Yehoshua is interested primarily in a human mood, and the political struggle is not the main issue in the story. The student tries to return to his normal way of life after having failed as a ranger and, not having finished his thesis, he is condemned to loneliness, 'a wet dog begging for light and fire'.[5] The subject of the story is really self-liberation and flight from social environment to loneliness, and thus away from responsibility.

In his next story, *Continuous Silence of a Poet*, Yehoshua's central characters are the poet and the poet's son. Both are defective. The poet has ceased to write and the poet's son is feeble-minded. The poet admits that he has 'lost the tune', and that he can no longer understand young poetry: 'the young poets and their new poetry bewildered me, maddened me. I tried to imitate them secretly and managed to produce the worst things I have ever written'.[6]

The poet's weak-minded son is the epitome of absolute loneliness, isolated by his handicap from all his fellow comrades. But, he gradually substitutes for his father on learning what was once his vocation. The mad son begins to write — but madly. He even puts his father's name at the head of his poems. Once again we see symbolism in the writings of Yehoshua. Madness has replaced silence in this story. It seems that it is impossible to write rationally any more in our chaotic nuclear-ridden civilization. Yehoshua's stories are peopled by men and women who cannot complete projects they undertake — a love affair, a thesis, a poem. Most of his stories are models of the difficulties of communication; as we have seen he delights in juxtaposing mutually incomprehensible figures, a bachelor and a three-year-old, an Israeli student and an old Arab mute, a poet father and a retarded son. In each of these stories, communication of some sort does take place, but it is generally an ambiguous, troubling communication, sometimes with ominous results, destruction becoming the final language. He frequently alludes to the fact that aloneness is modern man's condition, for the instruments of human dialogue have broken down. Contemporary man spans the universe by the most efficient modes of travel, yet he is unable to establish spiritual contact with his fellow man.

Yehoshua is an exciting writer who emulates the literary trends of contemporary world and Hebrew literature, but he does not slavishly imitate. His appearance on the literary scene bears witness together with other writers like Oz, Orpaz, Appelfeld, to the ability of Israeli society to maintain, under the shadow of the sword, a complex culture that is both a medium of self-knowledge and an authentic voice in the larger culture of man.

Nevertheless, by common consent of critics, Agnon is the greatest prose writer and Greenberg the most powerful poet of contemporary Hebrew literature. Their genius lies in their ability to blend western and traditional forms and conventions.

Greenberg's poetical work, *Reaches of the River*, proclaims with moving power the awesome polarity of destruction and rebirth. Greenberg draws his inspiration from the authentic well of Hebrew poetry, namely prophecy. By the searing quality of his vision, by the prophetic pathos of his castigation and noble lyric tenderness of his words of encouragement and consolation, he becomes the most important poetic interpreter of his people's fate during the past three decades. Notwithstanding its national theme, it is very personal in tone, and in its poetic climax it gives expression to Jewish destiny throughout the ages. The past and the present, the remote and the near at hand, the life of the founders of the people, the exaltation and degradation of the nation, all are fused into a single, meaningful synoptic vision of the poet. Greenberg proclaims a vision of Israel's pre-eminence, of its religious mission among the nations, that demands the reward and establishment of the Kingdom of Israel:

What will come again has ever been;
What has not, never will.
I trust in the morrow
For I face the image of the past:
This is my vision and song.
Selah, Hallelujah, Amen.[7]

From the point of view of form and structure, *Reaches of the River*, manifests all the distinguishing marks of ecstatic expressionism: the broad rhythm, the mixed metaphor, the polarization of ideas. They fuse in this work to produce a Hebrew elegy, so far unsurpassed, on the modern Jewish tragedy.

Agnon more than any other Hebrew writer, with the possible exception of Bialik, shows us in his works the Jewish past, the Jewish present and the ominous future. The fundamental transition from the traditional way of life to that of secular technological Israeli society presented a formidable problem reflected over a period

of six decades in the works of Agnon. His early novels offer a panorama of Jewish experience in Eastern Europe when the Jew, though physically dispossessed, was spiritually secure, and dwelt under the 'canopy' of faith. The kaleidoscopic dimensions of Agnon's writings, reflecting many levels of reality, are represented in his blending of realistic, critical and modernistic approach, ranging from the descriptions of the decaying diaspora in the novel *A Guest who Tarries*, to the almost Kafkaesque symbolic stories of *The Book of Deeds,* to the psychological Freudian stories in *On the Handles of the Lock*.

But, of all Agnon's achievements in adapting the materials of Jewish tradition to his own means of expression, the most important has been his remarkable success in weaving the legendary tapestry of medieval Midrash into the texture of the twentieth century world lived in and experienced by Agnon.

Thus, for instance, the short story, *The Doctor's Divorce*, is a psychological tale par excellence, recording the minutiae of the life of the emotions. The doctor sums up the tragedy of his own life and of his contemporaries by stating the ambivalence that lurks within the deep recesses of modern man's heart: 'We are enlightened individuals, modern people, we seek freedom for ourselves and for all humanity, and in point of fact we are worse than the most diehard reactionaries.'[8]

The hero of *The Whole Loaf*, is alone, his wife and family are away and he has not prepared food for the Sabbath. He finally decides to go and eat at a restaurant on Saturday afternoon. On the way he meets Yekutiel Neeman (faithful), who asks him to post some letters. Then the protagonist meets Mr Gressler (a Mephistophelean figure) who once brought calamity upon him. The power of the story stems from the fact that the hero seems to be in conflict about mailing the letters or eating his meal; both activities generate intense anxiety. He also manifests modern man's ambivalent nature and inability to make decisions. The man, in short, is caught between God and evil and cannot decide whether to hearken to the call of Yekutiel who symbolizes tradition, or Gressler who symbolizes the lust for worldly pleasures, especially the erotic ones.[9]

This story, like the other stories in *The Book of Deeds*, manifests some of the Kafkaesque features. Terrible things are waiting to spring from the shadows of experience. Instead of receiving 'the whole loaf' he remains alone, locked in the isolated, cold restaurant all night. The Hero tells us: 'I made an effort to fall asleep and closed my eyes tight. I heard a kind of rustling and saw that a mouse had jumped on to the table and was picking up the bones. Now, said I to myself, he's busy with the bones. Then he'll gnaw the

tablecloth . . . then he'll gnaw at me. First he'll start on my shoes, then on my socks, then on my foot, then on my calf, then on my thigh, then on all my body . . .'[10]. The gnawing of the rats symbolizes the gnawing of conscience caused by tension between modern man's desire to fulfil his obligations toward tradition and society, and his inability to put his thoughts into action.

Though Agnon has pronounced affinities with Kafka, there are outstanding differences as well. The invisible supreme authorities who lurk above the actions of *The Trial*, or *The Castle*, inspire the same kind of anxiety, and one cannot know their intentions; but one is never to have faith in their goodness or to see any proof of their wisdom. And Kafka cannot finish his fables, he cannot determine their upshot, whereas Agnon can save the situation in the case of a deserving man and woman by contriving the occurrence of some miracle. Kafka exemplifies the distress of the rootlessness that characterizes so many Jews in modern times. Agnon's uniqueness derives from the fact that he is deeply rooted in tradition. In effect he has found in this tradition the solution to a problem that has typically concerned modern writers beginning with Yeats, Eliot and Joyce: the need for a living body of mythology from which the artist can draw symbols meaningful to his audience to use in his own work. Agnon discovered a virtually untapped reservoir of symbolic richness in Jewish tradition, and most particularly in the Midrash. A novel or a short story by Agnon, though dealing wih the most modern theme as in the story, *A Face within a Face*, turns out to be amongst other things an extended variation on several symbolic themes, frequently themes he has taken from the Midrash.

In short, Agnon's work reflects the anxiety of our age of transition in a world in which the acute crisis of faith gives rise to a sense of insecurity and guilt. His writings reveal him as a modern writer concerned with the issues that beset, burden and provoke contemporary man — the confusion of our times, the tension between materialistic and spiritual values, the problem of homelessness, alienation, divorce, bureaucratic entanglement, the failure of communication. The setting for his later stories is usually Israel, the time is indefinite, but the problems are ageless.

Contemporary Israeli writing faithfully reflects the dynamics of modern Israel. Yet the young Hebrew writers do not regard their works as didactic devices which are bound to propagate political convictions. It is through the prism of individual experience that the realities of Israeli life are conveyed in poetry and prose.

Compared with the traditions of Europe, Israeli literature is young and struggling hard to develop along distinctive lines, notwithstanding the powerful pollination from Europe and America. The

problems that face contemporary Israeli writing are shared by all small nations trying to assert their cultural freedom in the shadow of more powerful neighbours. Hebrew letters, however, have an advantage. Their roots go back to antiquity. Hebrew is one of the three classical tongues of the West together with Classical Greek and Latin, and yet is the only living language whose basic vocabulary was already in use in the 3rd millenium B.C. Hebrew is a language with more historical layers than any other living language, and is replete with sacral associations and complex connections between ancient eras and shades of meaning and the most modern ones. There is nothing like Hebrew for ironical juxtapositions between meanings in their literal and syntactic combinations. (Almost all these possibilities are represented in their fullest in the work of the master par excellence of modern Hebrew prose — Agnon.) Israeli writing, then, is confronted with a dual problem. On the one hand, it has come to terms with the past, and on the other hand, it must try to carve out for itself a place in the universal culture of the present. This experiment is charged with great opportunity. Significantly the works of two outstanding figures, Greenberg and Agnon, indicate that the future of Hebrew literature lies in just such a synthesis. Contemporary Israeli writing manifests continuous growth, and its deep themes express the common dilemmas of our age, gaining a distinctive place in the storehouse of human culture.

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NOTES

[1] R. Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, Yale University Press, 1963.
[2] Yehuda Amichai, 'Rain on the Battlefield', from *Selected Poems*, Penguin, Modern European Poets, 1971.
[3] Y. Amichai, 'O God of Compassion', translation taken from *Orod, Journal of Hebrew Literature* 2, p. 39, 1966.
[4] A. Appelfeld, 'Kitty', p. 220 f. *Modern Hebrew Stories*, Bantam Dual-Language Book, 1971.
[5] A. B. Yehoshua, 'Facing the Forest', p. 174 *Three Days and A Child*, Peter Owen, London, 1971.
[6] A. B. Yehoshua, 'The Continuous Silence of a Poet', p. 254, *Modern Hebrew Stories*, A Bantam Dual-Language Book, 1971.
[7] U. Z. Greenberg, *Rehovot Hanahar*, (Reaches of the River), p. 37 in the Hebrew version of this work.
[8] *Twenty-one Stories* edited by N. N. Glatzer, 'The Doctor's Divorce', p. 146, 1970.
[9] Different interpretations for this story, 'A Whole Loaf' are offered by A. J. Band in his book *Nightmare and Nostalgia* and B. Hochman, in *The Fiction of S. Y. Agnon*.
[10] *Twenty-one Stories* edited by N. N. Glatzer, 'The Whole Loaf', p. 94, 1970.

IN DEFENCE OF PHILIP ROTH

by J. OPLAND

Philip Roth is clearly a force to be reckoned with in contemporary American fiction.[1] In 1960, at the age of 27, he received the National Book Award for his collection of short stories, *Goodbye Columbus*. Since then he has been awarded a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship, a Guggenheim grant, a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the Daroff Award of the Jewish Book Council of America, an Epstein Award and an Aga Khan Prize for Fiction. Yet with two major and a few minor exceptions, all his works are banned in South Africa; his writing has been denounced as anti-Semitic; and his recent work, *Portnoy's Complaint*, has been labelled by one of the most eminent of American critics merely 'a pop novel'. It is on these three counts that I should like to defend Philip Roth.

Naturally enough, I feel that his works should not be banned in this country; certainly there is more crudity in Erich Segall's *Love Story* than in anything Roth published before 1969. But I am not going to attack our Publications Control Board, although if a bill becomes law soon, this may be one of my last opportunities to do so. Rather, I am going to argue that far from being a smutty writer, as his consistent banning insidiously implies, Roth is a distinguished artist; that his achievement as a writer of fiction far outweighs his potential as a corrupter of innocence. That over-subtle and quite ineffectual line of argument must serve as my defence against his banning. Any deeper level of comment on the matter would undoubtedly induce me to imitate the language of Roth's post-1969 published work.

The attacks on Roth by critics — invariably Jewish — who see anti-semitism in his works have been particularly malicious and snide. After the publication of one of his stories in *The New Yorker*, Roth received the following letter: 'Mr Roth: With your one story, "Defender of the Faith", you have done as much harm as all the organized anti-Semitic organizations have done to make people believe that all Jews are cheats, liars, connivers. Your one story makes people — the general public — forget all the great Jews who have lived, all the Jewish boys who served well in the armed services, all the Jews who live honest hard lives the world over . . .'[2]. Saul Bellow — no less — has written that the Jews 'do not need stories like those of Philip Roth which expose unpleasant Jewish traits.'[3] One reviewer of *Portnoy's Complaint* concluded 'My objection is not primarily to the superficiality of the treatment since Roth is

innocent of any effort to suggest the depth and intensity of the Jewish experience in the modern world. You can't judge Al Capp by Rembrandt. But there are all kinds of cartoons, some funny, some vicious. "Spring me from this role I play of the smothered son in the Jewish joke," cries Portnoy. Roth's hero need not worry. He also plays another part. Within the trappings of the old-hat Jewish joke lurks a savage anti-Jewish stereotype, even more old-hat, and not at all funny.'[4] Now all this I find quite ironic. Not merely because no Non-Jew has yet seen the need to denounce Roth for anti-Semitism, but because Roth in fact takes a very healthy attitude in his Jewish stories. Far from seeking to destroy Jewishness and the values of Jewish life, Roth asserts time and again in his fiction that the Jew cannot deny his roots; faced with the problem of assimilation, the desire to cast off his traditions and to merge with the Gentile, the Jew can in fact retain his integrity only by coming to terms with his Jewishness. This is a recurrent theme in Roth's works. In the words of one perceptive critic (himself a Jew), 'The unusual thing, Mr Roth's achievement, is to locate the bruised and angry and unassimilated self — the Jew as individual, not the individual as Jew — beneath the canopy of Jewishness.'[5] This is the point I shall stress in my defence of Roth against the charge of anti-semitism.

I suppose it is easy to dismiss Philip Roth as the author of *Portnoy's Complaint*, the pornographic, sensational bestseller of 1970. *Portnoy's Complaint* raised many a storm about it, but perhaps the most curious is the dust storm that left critics who should have known better with their heads buried in the sand. The book is much more than merely a best-seller. It represents the culmination of a very promising career, a convergence of themes recurrent in Roth's work, and a literary achievement deserving of serious consideration. In defence of *Portnoy's Complaint*, I hope to show that, while the book *is* funny, Jewish and dirty, it is not, as Leslie Fiedler claims in addition, a 'pop novel', superficial, a book that won't stand up to a second reading;[6] it is in fact a logical step in the literary career of Philip Roth.

Let's begin with *Goodbye Columbus*, a collection of stories originally published between 1957 and 1959. The title story is a novella that describes a love affair between two young Jews. With it in the same volume are five short stories. 'The Conversion of the Jews' tells of Ozzie Freedman, a young Jewish boy who is puzzled about the Christian myth: if God could create the world in six days, as the rabbi maintains, why couldn't he also engineer a virgin birth? His legitimate query evokes unsympathetic responses from his mother and the rabbi. He rushes to the roof of his school where, by threatening to jump, he succeeds in getting his classmates, his mother

and the rabbi to kneel and confess their belief in Jesus Christ. 'Defender of the Faith' depicts Nathan Marx, a Jewish war veteran, a sergeant in a training camp, succumbing to increasingly unreasonable demands for privileges from three Jewish recruits. He gives way against his better judgement, perhaps out of a feeling of guilt that his way of life in the army has made him undistinguishable from other non-Jewish soldiers — he has ignored his traditions. Ultimately, when he comes to realise that he has granted too many concessions to the Jewish recruits, he turns about and redeems himself by ensuring that his principal tempter is dispatched on combat duty to the Pacific. 'Epstein' tells of a 59-year-old Jew whose wife is no longer attractive to him. Lying in bed one night he hears his daughter making love to her fiance downstairs. Tormented, he goes downstairs and discovers it is not his daughter but his nephew. After he returns to bed he hears the front door closing, and the sounds of more activity. This time it *is* his daughter.

> The whole world, he thought, the whole young world, the ugly ones and the pretty ones, the fat and the skinny ones, zipping and unzipping! He grabbed his great shock of grey hair and pulled it till his scalp hurt. His wife shuffled, mumbled a noise. 'Brrr . . . Brrrrr . . .' She captured the blankets and pulled them over her. 'Brrr' Butter! She's dreaming about butter. Recipes she dreams while the world zips. He closed his eyes and pounded himself down down into an old man's sleep.

This kind of pressure forces Epstein to embark on an adulterous love affair before it is too late and in the process he suffers a heart attack. The final story in the collection, 'Eli the Fanatic', is one of the finest things Roth has done. Eli is a Jewish attorney living in a predominantly Gentile suburb who is asked to evict a group of orthodox Jews.

Before I return to a fuller discussion of both 'Eli the Fanatic' and 'Goodbye, Columbus' let met note some general points. Most of the stories display a satirical sense of humour and a sure ear for the nuances of Jewish dialogue. More important, they explore the minds of their protagonists under pressure. Little Ozzie on the roof threatening to jump because orthodox Judaism fails to resolve the problems he has with religion; Sgt. Nathan Marx, particularly susceptible to temptation because he has lived a life that ignored his Jewish traditions; and ageing Lou Epstein surrounded by sexually energetic young people, taking a last fling before he sinks into infirmity — the story of each of these characters is especially the story of what goes on in his mind. Roth has written[7] that he seems

to be interested 'in how — and why and when — a man acts counter to what he considers to be his "best self".' Time and again his fiction explores a mind under pressure, frequently succumbing to the pressure, and letting go of all responsibility in the process. In his Jewish stories this pressure often takes the form of a subconscious knowledge that a Jew has denied his roots, a guilt at forsaking his traditions. The psychiatric interest in the processes of the mind and the Jewish attraction to assimilation with the Gentile are recurrent preoccupations of Roth's fiction; they are central concerns of both 'Eli the Fanatic' and 'Goodbye, Columbus'.

Here are the opening paragraphs of 'Goodbye, Columbus':

> The first time I saw Brenda she asked me to hold her glasses. Then she stepped out to the edge of the diving board and looked foggily into the pool; it could have been drained, myopic Brenda would never have known it. She dove beautifully, and a moment later she was swimming back to the side of the pool, her head of short-clipped auburn hair held up, straight ahead of her, as though it were a rose on a long stem. She glided to the edge and then was beside me. 'Thank you' she said, her eyes watery though not from the water. She extended her hand for her glasses but did not put them on until she turned and headed away. I watched her move off. Her hands suddenly appeared behind her. She caught the bottom of her suit between thumb and index finger and flicked what flesh had been showing back where it belonged. My blood jumped.
>
> That night, before dinner, I called her.
>
> 'Who are you calling?' my Aunt Gladys asked.
>
> 'Some girl I met today.'
>
> 'Doris introduced you?'
>
> 'Doris wouldn't introduce me to the guy who drains the pool, Aunt Gladys.'
>
> 'Don't criticize all the time. A cousin's a cousin. How did you meet her?'
>
> 'I didn't really meet her. I saw her.'
>
> 'Who is she?'
>
> 'Her last name is Patimkin.'
>
> 'Patimkin I don't know,' Aunt Gladys said, as if she knew anybody who belonged to the Green Lane Country Club. 'You're going to call her you don't know her?'
>
> 'Yes,' I explained. 'I'll introduce myself.'
>
> 'Casanova,' she said and went back to preparing my uncle's dinner.

The precision and humour of Roth's dialogue you will have noted, but notice also how skilfully he has established the basic tension that underlies all that is to follow, the distance between Aunt Gladys in Newark and the Patimkins in Short Hills. (For Capetonians over 40: read 'Gardens' for 'Newark' and 'Sea Point' for 'Short Hills'; those under 20 read 'Sea Point' for 'Newark' and 'Constantia' for 'Short Hills'.) Aunt Gladys is the stereotypical Jewish mother; the Patimkins are courting assimilation. They are members of a country club and have left the Jews of Newark far below them. This tension is always present as the love affair between Brenda and Neil develops.

> 'Did you remember me from holding your glasses?' I said.
> 'Now I do,' she said. 'Do you live in Livingston too?'
> 'No. Newark.'
> 'We lived in Newark when I was a baby,' she offered.
> 'Would you like to go home?' I was suddenly angry.

The Patimkins are Jews at the opposite end of the social scale from Aunt Gladys. They have had their Jewish noses straightened, they have settled in Short Hills and joined the club, they even own a Volkswagen. But for Neil it is never a short step from Newark to Short Hills. Brenda talks of her mother:

> 'Money! My father's up to here with it, but whenever I buy a coat you should hear her. "You don't have to go to Bonwit's, young lady, Ohrbach's has the strongest fabrics of any of them." Who *wants* a strong fabric! Finally I get what I want, but not till she's had a chance to aggravate me. Money is a waste for her. She doesn't even know how to enjoy it. She still thinks we live in Newark.'

Later, Neil feels his sympathies lying with Mrs. Patimkin.

> I did not intend to allow myself such unfaithful thoughts, to line up with Mrs. Patimkin while I sat beside Brenda, but I could not shake from my elephant's brain that she-still-thinks-we-live-in-Newark remark.

However much Neil desires Brenda, she represents a different morality, and ultimately he must make his choice: Newark or Short Hills, Jewishness or assimilation?

Neil works in a library in Newark. Before work one day he pauses and thinks of his childhood. 'Sitting there in the park, I felt a deep knowledge of Newark, an attachment so rooted that it could not help but branch out into affection.' This is some distance from the dis-

comfort he felt in Short Hills the previous day when he had to let Brenda's sister beat him at basketball: 'So I learned how the game was played. Over the years Mr Patimkin had taught his daughters that free throws were theirs for the asking: he could afford to. However, with the strange eyes of Short Hills upon me, matrons, servants and providers, I somehow felt I couldn't. But I had to and I did'. Here, clearly, though Neil may not know it yet, is someone 'acting counter to what he considers to be his "best self".'

The symbolical counterpoint to Neil's relationship with Brenda is his relationship with a Negro boy, who comes to the library from the slums of Newark. He is as out of place in this refuge of the White man's culture as Neil is in Short Hills. At his timid request Neil directs him to the Art section. Later, Neil is asked by a fellow librarian:

> 'Has a little Negro boy passed the desk? With a thick accent? He's been hiding in the art books all morning. You know what those boys *do* in there.'
>
> 'I saw him come in, John.'
>
> 'So did I. Has he gone *out* though?'
>
> 'I haven't noticed. I guess so.'
>
> 'Those are *very* expensive books.'
>
> 'Don't be so nervous, John. People are supposed to touch them.'
>
> 'There is touching,' John said sententiously, 'and there is touching. Someone should check on him. I was afraid to leave the desk here. You know the way they treat the housing projects we give them.'
>
> '*You* give them?'
>
> 'The city. Have you see what they do at Seth Boyden? They threw *beer* bottles, those big ones, on the *lawn*. They're taking over the city.'
>
> 'Just the Negro sections.'
>
> 'It's easy to laugh, you don't live near them. I'm going to call Mr Scapello's office to check the Art Section. Where did he ever find out about art?'

Neil finds the boy in the art section.

> 'Hey mister,' the boy said after a minute, 'where is this?'
>
> 'Where is what?'
>
> 'Where is these pictures? These people, man, they sure does look cool. They ain't no yelling or shouting here, you could just see it.'

> He lifted the book so I could see. It was an expensive large-sized edition of Gauguin reproductions. The page he had been looking at showed an $8\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 print, incolor, of three native women standing knee-high in a rose-colored stream. It *was* a silent picture, he was right.
>
> 'That's Tahiti. That's an island in the Pacific Ocean.'
>
> 'That ain't no place you could go is it? Like a ree*sort*?' . . .
>
> 'Who took these pictures?' he asked me.
>
> 'Gauguin. He didn't take them, he painted them. Paul Gauguin. He was a Frenchman.'
>
> 'Is he a white man or a colored man?'
>
> 'He's white.'
>
> 'Man,' the boy smiled, chuckled almost, 'I knew that. He don't *take* pictures like no colored men would. He's a good picture taker . . . *Look*, *look*, look here at this one. Ain't that the fuckin' life?'
>
> I agreed it was and left . . .
>
> The rest of the day was uneventful. I sat at the Information Desk thinking about Brenda and reminding myself that that evening I would have to get gas before I started up to Short Hills, which I could see now, in my mind's eye, at dusk, rose-colored, like a Gauguin stream.

The parallel is underlined: the Negro is courting the White man just as the Newark Jew is flirting with the assimilated Jew.

Briefly, tension develops in their affair when Neil urges Brenda against her will to have a diaphragm fitted. Summer soon ends. Brenda returns to school and Neil to the library.

> Days passed slowly; I never did see the colored kid again, and when, one noon, I looked in the stacks, Gauguin was gone . . . I wondered what it had been like that day the colored kid had discovered the book was gone. Had he cried? . . . What had probably happened was that he'd given up on the library and gone back to playing Willie Mays in the streets. He was better off, I thought. No sense carrying dreams of Tahiti in your head, if you can't afford the fare.

If the boy is better off in the streets, Neil is better off in Newark. It is with a sense of relief, one feels, that he returns to the library after the final break-up with Brenda, precipitated by her mother's discovery of the diaphragm.

> I . . . took a train that got me to Newark just as the sun was rising on the first day of the Jewish New Year. I was back in plenty of time for work.

Neil has chosen to resist assimilation and to return to his roots: for him the sun rises on a New Jewish Year.

This desire of the contemporary American Jew for assimilation in the Gentile world receives its finest expression in Roth's 'Eli the Fanatic'. The story is set in an elite suburbian community called Woodenton (and the name is relevant), where newly-arrived Jew lives with long-established Gentile. 'There's a good healthy relationship in this town because it's modern Jews and modern Protestants,' says one of Eli's Jewish friends. 'The way things are now are fine — like human beings. There's going to be no pogroms in Woodenton.' The Jewish residents are at pains not to draw attention to any differences between themselves and their Gentile neighbours; their children even attend Sunday school. Imagine their distress when a Yeshivah is established in the community, a school for eighteen orthodox Jewish refugee children. Worse still, the school attendant, a man dressed in black with a tall black hat, actually walks about the town. The Jews of Woodenton appeal to Eli to evict the orthodox Jews.

> 'Eli,' [said] Harry Shaw, 'it's not funny. Someday, Eli, it's going to be a hundred little kids with little yarmulkahs chanting their Hebrew lessons on Coach House Road, and then it's not going to strike you funny.'
>
> 'Goddam fanatics,' Ted said, 'This is the twentieth century, Eli. Now it's the guy with the hat. Pretty soon all the little Yeshivah boys'll be spilling down into town. Next thing they'll be after our daughters.'

To the assimilated Jew, the orthodox Jew is a fanatic. At the start of the story Eli is an ordinary resident of Woodenton; at the end he too is a fanatic. The story charts Eli's return to his roots, his coming to terms with what he has denied in himself, his Jewishness.

The symbol of the balance is the structural principle of the story: Eli is the pivot with the Yeshivah on one hand and the Woodenton Jews on the other. Symbolically the Yeshivah and orthodoxy are represented by dark colours, Woodenton and assimilation by light. Watch the play of dark and light as Roth describes Eli's first visit to the principal of the Yeshivah. There are no lights in the office.

> [Eli] was not feeling as professional as usual — the place was too dim, it was too late. But down in Woodenton they would be waiting, his clients and neighbours. He spoke for the Jews of Woodenton, not just himself and his wife.

'You understood,' Eli said.
'It's not hard.'
'It's a matter of zoning . . .' and when Tzuref did not answer, but only drummed his fingers on his lips, Eli said, 'We didn't make the laws . . .'
'You respect them.'
'They protect us . . . the community.'
'The law is the law,' Tzuref said.
'Exactly!' Eli had the urge to rise and walk about the room.

But Eli is wrong: they have not reached agreement, for by law he means civil law, by which he lives (he represents the Jews of Woodenton), whereas by law Tzuref means Talmudic law by which *he* lives. Tzuref cannot comprehend how to a Jew the Talmud should be subservient to any other system of values.

'And then of course' — Tzuref made a pair of scales in the air with his hands — 'the law is not the law. When is the law that is the law not the law?' He jiggled the scales. 'And vice versa.'
'Simply,' Eli said sharply. 'You can't have a boarding school in a residential area.' He would not allow Tzuref to cloud the issue with issues. 'We thought it better to tell you before any action is undertaken.'
'But a house in a residential area?'
'Yes. That's what residential means.' The DP's English was perhaps not as good as it seemed at first. Tzuref spoke slowly, but till then Eli had mistaken it for craft —or even wisdom. 'Residence means home,' he added.
'So this is my residence.'
'But the children?'
'It is their residence.'
'*Seventeen* children?'
'Eighteen,' Tzuref said.
'But you *teach* them here.'
'The Talmud. That's illegal?'
'That makes it school.'
Tzuref hung the scales again, tipping slowly the balance.
'Look, Mr Tzuref, in America we call such a place a boarding school.'
'Where they teach the Talmud?'
'Where they teach period. You are the headmaster, they are the students.'

> Tzuref placed his scales on the desk. 'Mr Peck,' he said 'I don't believe it . . .' but he did not seem to be referring to anything Eli had said.

Tzuref cannot believe that any Jew can subscribe to the values that Eli stands for. There can be no agreement between them as long as Eli chooses to deny the importance of his Jewish heritage.

> 'Mr Tzuref, that is the law. I came to ask you what you intend to do.'
>
> 'What I *must* do?'
>
> 'I hope they are the same.'
>
> 'They are.' Tzuref brought his stomach into the desk. 'We stay.' He smiled. 'We are tired. The headmaster is tired. The students are tired.'
>
> Eli rose and lifted his briefcase. It felt so heavy packed with the grievances, vengeances, and schemes of his clients. There were days when he carried it like a feather — in Tzuref's office it weighed a ton.
>
> 'Goodbye, Mr Tzuref.'
>
> 'Sholom,' Tzuref said.

And with this slight touch of admonishment from Tzuref, Eli leaves the principal's office. In the symbolic blackness of orthodox Jewishness, Eli feels a stranger, and he needs at this stage the light of assimilated life in Woodenton:

> Eli opened the door to the office and walked carefully down the dark tomb of a corridor to the door . . . Keeping his eyes on the lights of Woodenton, he headed down the path.
>
> And then, seated on a bench beneath a tree, Eli saw him. At first it seemed only a deep hollow of blackness — then the figure emerged. Eli recognized him from the description. There he was, wearing the hat, that hat which was the very cause of Eli's mission, the source of Woodenton's upset. The town's lights flashed their message once again: 'Get the one with the hat. What a nerve, what a nerve . . .'
>
> Eli started towards the man. Perhaps he was less stubborn than Tzuref, more reasonable. After all, it was the law. But when he was close enough to call out, he didn't. He was stopped by the sight of the black coat that fell down below the man's knees and the hands which held each other in his lap. By the round-topped, wide-brimmed Talmudic hat, pushed onto the back of his head. And by the beard, which hid his neck and was

> so soft and thin it fluttered away and back again with each heavy breath he took. He was asleep, his sidelocks curled loose on his cheeks. His face was no older than Eli's.
>
> Eli hurried towards the lights.

Gradually, without understanding why, Eli proceeds to change identity with the man in black. Ultimately he exchanges clothes with him and walks aimlessly through Woodenton dressed in the black suit and black hat, symbols of Jewish orthodoxy. His friends fear he is having a breakdown. They confront him:

> In a moment they tore off his jacket — it gave so easily, in one yank. Then a needle slid under his skin. The drug calmed his soul, but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached.

I have dwelt on these two stories to show that Roth's attitude to his characters is anything but anti-Semetic. If he portrays the harsher aspects of Jewish life, baring the soul of the Jew in America, this is not to set the Jews up as weak or deformed, but rather to demonstrate that a Jew cannot lead a full life unless he comes to terms with his Jewishness instead of running away from it. In looking at these two stories in depth, I hope I have shown too that Roth displays in his writing a sophisticated control of literary technique. Now I should like to flash quickly through some of his subsequent published work to show how *Portnoy's Complaint* must be considered a logical development rather than a commercial sell-out.

In 1962 his first novel, *Letting Go*, was published. Strongly autobiographical, it tells of the involvement of four people, Gabe Wallach and his mistress Martha, Paul Herz and his non-Jewish wife Libby. Although many of the scenes are vividly realised — especially those dealing with academic life — the book is overlong, depressing and ultimately unsuccessful. Rather prophetically, one reviewer wrote that Roth's talent 'is simply not suited to the kind of exploration in depth that he attempts with Gabe and Paul and Libby. Roth is so much the born satirist, so naturally driven by an instinct for seizing on those gestures and traits of personality by which people expose their weaknesses and make themselves ridiculous, that he has the greatest difficulty in seeing the world from any other point of view . . . In my opinion, Roth has it in him to develop into a satirist of the very first rank, but never the big tragic novelist he is struggling to be in *Letting Go*.'[8] This comment looks forward to the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, for Roth tried once more to grapple with the serious, full-length novel before he

returned in *Portnoy's Complaint* to satire and the compression of the short story. One other comment must be made on *Letting Go*, and that is to note in it Roth's attempt to chart Libby's loss of mental control. The book ends on a feverous pitch as Gabe tries to help the Herzes with the adoption of a baby. This frantic conclusion in which a character starts 'letting go' recurs in Roth's work; it found a place in 'Eli the Fanatic', and it forms part of the structure of Roth's next novel, *When She was Good*, published in 1967. This incidentally, apart from his latest book, is the only novel of Roth's that is not banned in this country — with such a title, how could it miss?

Set in the Mid-west, *When She was Good* represents Roth's attempt to prove he can be a serious novelist without writing about Jews, for there is not one Jewish character in it. It tells rather sensitively the story of the young daughter of a drunkard who moves into an early marriage, passes through growing feelings of alienation and persecution to loss of mental control and death. Roth was surprised at the cool reaction of the critics. Although he worked hard on the book, it has never found general favour. Yet it is well written and at least interesting in the light of Roth's career. The movement towards mental chaos is more smoothly effected than in *Letting Go*, and the psychiatric history of Lucy Nelson is more convincing. Especially interesting is the use of Lucy herself in the final section as the narrator who chronicles her own breakdown.

Roth's interest in the psychiatry of his characters is seen again in one short story published in 1962, and two in 1964. 'Novotny's Pain'[9] tells of a soldier scared of combat duty who develops a pain which the doctors cannot diagnose and who is ultimately dishonourably discharged. We are left to decide for ourselves whether the pain was real or imaginary. This is an unsuccessful story, which is weakened still further by a coda on Novotny's later life structurally reminiscent of the weak coda in Hawthorne's story 'Young Goodman Brown'. More effective are 'The Psychoanalytic Special' and 'An Actor's Life for Me', both available in this country in *Penguin Short Stories*, Vol. 3. The first deals with a nymphomaniac's struggle to control herself, and especially with the fantasies she constructs about a stranger she travels with on a train, the second deals with a playwright's fears and suspicions about his wife's fidelity. Both succeed in describing a mind responding too strongly to innocent suggestions; the second shows once again the controlled movement towards a chaotic climax.

So we come to the late 1960's. Philip Roth has published two novels, both promising, but both unsuccessful. He has had more success with the short story, especially when dealing with Jewish characters. He has shown a preoccupation with matters psychiatric, a

flair for dialogue and humour, and a penchant for the satiric. His third novel, *Portnoy's Complaint* exploits all these strong points of his talent. It takes the form of a monologue delivered by a 33-year-old Jew lying on a psychiatrist's couch and talking about himself. This single scene gives to the novel the unity and compression of a short story. It is at times viciously satirical of Jewish life, and penetrating in its examination of Portnoy's mind. Admittedly the novel is crammed with violent sexual language, but the very hysteria of the accounts, the hyperbolic style, evokes laughter rather than shock. Certainly, I find the book neither erotic nor pornographic. Did Roth sell out? Did he write a dirty book for financial gain? His earlier published work suggests that there might be some serious purpose behind the sensational trappings. And, to be sure, there is. Nor does it turn out to be an unexpected theme. Alexander Portnoy is a man under pressure, a Jew who has denied his Judaism and is now desperately trying to come to terms with himself. Portnoy has tried, but failed, to have satisfactory sexual relations with Jewish girls. So he denies his Jewish background and turns to Gentile girls for satisfaction. His yearning for assimilation is thus expressed symbolically in his sexual contacts with *shikses*. He rants against his Jewishness as he chronicles his progressive aberrations. These aberrations, on the symbolic level, plot his growing isolation from his roots. The culmination is a three-way orgy with his mistress and a Roman prostitute; Portnoy has reached his nadir, and Roth shows us yet another character letting go. Portnoy flees blindly to Israel, where he finds he cannot make love to a sabra. To the tune of Lullaby in Birdland, he sings 'Impotent in Israel Da da dah'. And Portnoy *is* impotent in the Jewish state: his yearning for assimilation has left him dead as a Jew. Only from this point and with this realization can he move back towards a healthy acceptance of his Jewishness. The last line of the book is spoken by the psychiatrist, his first and only contribution: 'So. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?' Yes. For Portnoy can now follow Neil back to Newark, once he has apprehended, like Eli, the undeniable Jewishness in his soul.

A book full of dirty words? Yes. Anti-semitic? Shallow? No. Ban it if you wish: perhaps it would corrupt innocent minds. But *Portnoy's Complaint* is not cheap sensationalism. It is a gifted writer's honest — and successful — attempt to treat a theme that has preoccupied him for the past ten years in a style that best exhibits his abundant talent. It is a grievously misunderstood novel, but one whose literary qualities make it imperative that one should stand up and speak in defence of Philip Roth.

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NOTES

[1] In its original form, this paper was read to the Cape Town branch of The English Association on 24th February, 1971.
[2] Quoted by Roth in his article 'Writing about Jews', *Commentary*, xxxvi (1963), p. 449.
[3] In the Introduction to his edition *Great Jewish Short Stories* (New York, 1963), p. 14.
[4] Marie Syrkin, 'The Fun of Self-Abuse', *Midstream*, xv (1969), p. 68.
[5] Alfred Kazin, 'Tough-minded Mr. Roth', *Contemporaries* (London, 1963), p. 259.
[6] This opinion was expressed by Fiedler during a symposium on *Portnoy's Complaint* at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association of America in Denver, Colorado, in 1969.
[7] 'Writing about Jews', p. 447.
[8] Norman Podhoretz, 'The Gloom of Philip Roth', *Doings and Undoings* (New York, 1964), p. 239. This comment is particularly interesting in view of Roth's latest book, *Our Gang, starring Tricky and his Friends* (New York, 1972), a heavy-handed satire of President Nixon. This book, unfortunately, can be considered as nothing less than a cheap commercial sell-out.
[9] Anthologised in John Hollander (ed.), *American Short Stories since* 1945 (New York, 1968).

SOME REFLECTIONS ON SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS NOS 33, 34 AND 35

by C. O. GARDNER

I

Shakespeare's sonnets were published by Thomas Thorpe in 1609. We cannot be sure that Shakespeare approved of the ordering of the sonnets within the volume, or indeed of the publication itself. In many respects, however, Thorpe's arrangement of the sonnets is a reasonable one; certainly it seems on the whole preferable to the innumerable alternative arrangements that have been proposed since 1609. And — to come swiftly to my subject — we can assume without much hesitation that sonnets 33, 34 and 35 belong together, and probably in the order in which Thorpe placed them.

I am particularly concerned with sonnets 33 and 34.

33

Full many a glorious morning have I seen
Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,
Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy;
Anon permit the basest clouds to ride
With ugly rack on his celestial face,
And from the forlorn world his visage hide,
Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace.
Even so my sun one early morn did shine,
With all triumphant splendour on my brow;
But out alack, he was but one hour mine,
The region cloud hath mask'd him from me now.
  Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth:
  Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth.

34

Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day,
And make me travel forth without my cloak,
To let base clouds o'ertake me in my way,
Hiding thy bravery in their rotten smoke?
'Tis not enough that through the cloud thou break,
To dry the rain on my storm-beaten face,

For no man well of such a salve can speak,
That heals the wound, and cures not the disgrace.
Nor can thy shame give physic to my grief;
Though thou repent, yet I have still the loss.
Th' offender's sorrow lends but weak relief
To him that bears the strong offence's cross.
  Ah but those tears are pearl which thy love sheds,
  And they are rich, and ransom all ill deeds.

It is immediately clear that both sonnets have the same theme: the poet, or the speaker, has in some way been deceived and betrayed by his friend. (It is not a part of my purpose to consider either the possible identity of the friend or the exact nature of the offence that has been committed.) The very close relationship between the two sonnets is established unequivocally by the repetition, or the continuation, of the image of the sun's splendour being suddenly darkened by cloud — an image which is taken up again briefly in line 3 of sonnet 35:

Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun.

All this is clear. What may not be immediately clear, however — it is something that, to my surprise, has been noticed by only one of the critics of the sonnets that I have come across[1] — is the fact that in these two sonnets the betrayal is viewed from two very different points of view, and the image of the sun is used in two remarkably different ways. It is this fact, and what I take to be some of its implications, that forms the subject of this article.

II

Sonnet 33 evokes vigorously the power of some of the forces of 'nature'. The first quatrain presents a memorable picture of the sun's regal, transforming benevolence. The second quatrain, which is of course more muted, in showing the masking of the sun indicates the energy of the 'basest clouds' which are responsible for that masking.

The poet's sense of the aliveness, the activeness, of the sun and the clouds inevitably expresses itself through that imaginative and linguistic process which we call personification. Yet the effect is not anthropormorphic. If the sun and the clouds are in fact endowed with any degree of human personality, their humanness is so inaccessible, so far from any scale of explicable values that we might normally feel ourselves able to share with them, that the link hardly

creates a sense of intimacy. It might perhaps be argued that the sun *is* viewed in human terms, even from a standpoint of human sympathy, in lines 7 and 8:

> And from the forlorn world his visage hide,
> Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace.

But I don't think such an argument provides a true account of the effect the personification produces. The sun is seen here as possessing even in eclipse a force that we are bound to conceive of as somehow personal; and a human onlooker cannot but think in terms of an analogy with the eclipse of human splendour. But of course we *know* that the sun can never be a proper object for human sympathy. The lines seem to me to convey a sense that the analogy is, from the human point of view, no more than an analogy. Or perhaps one might say that the personification points towards the personality not of mortals but of titans or pagan deities. In the first quatrain the poet is willing and able to imagine that the phenomenon he is evoking is one that he as a human being is capable of being fairly fully in sympathy with; but in the second quatrain he has to admit — he permits us to feel — that the vocabulary of human actions and reactions is not adequate to the reality of vast non-human forces. The sun is incapable of experiencing moral disgrace, though it may seem to suffer ignominy, and it may indeed undergo the (to us) aesthetically painful process of disfigurement — and 'disfigurement' may be taken to be one of the meanings of 'disgrace' in line 8.

It is into the lively world of amoral 'nature', then, that the friend and his act of betrayal are drawn in lines 9-12. The glory and the gloom of the first eight lines are reflected and refracted into the sphere of human relationships:

> Even so my sun one early morn did shine,
> With all triumphant splendour on my brow;
> But out alack, he was but one hour mine,
> The region cloud hath masked him from me now.

The personifications of the first two quatrains have of course formed stepping-stones into this poetic statement; but — though there is some tension and some ambiguity between the human and the non-human realms — for the reasons that I have given the earlier personifications provide, paradoxically, the basis for our sense of the dominance of 'nature'. Sun and cloud do not become truly personal; instead the friend is *de*personified. His love and generosity are seen as akin to the mysterious bounty of the sun; and the sudden shutting-

off of these emotions is felt to be the result of a movement in the skies, an alteration in the disposition of natural forces, which lies beyond any human control. The friend is not guilty; he is himself partly a victim:

> The region cloud hath masked him from me now.

In the face of such powerful facts, the poet can feel neither anger nor any sort of moral indignation: his 'alack' simply represents grief and regret. But he then goes on to realise that the changeableness in his friend is not merely uncontrollable; it is an indication that the friend does indeed participate in the very processes of 'nature', and that these processes, though they may distress us, are awe-inspiring, in their way magnificent. The friend's betrayal becomes finally a new reason for admiring him, and thus for loving him. The last line of the poem has, surprisingly, something of the élan of the opening line:

> Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth:
> Suns of the world may stain, when heaven's sun staineth.

One notices that the somewhat strange intransitive verb 'stain' (no doubt it was less strange to an Elizabethan reader than it is to us) is not primarily a *human* word: it means, of course, to grow dim or to become obscured.

III

The next sonnet plunges us straight into another world, another dimension, with the word 'why'—'Why did you do it?' What is being demanded is an explanation for what in the previous poem was regarded as inexplicable:

> Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day,
> And make me travel forth without my cloak,
> To let base clouds o'ertake me in my way,
> Hiding thy bravery in their rotten smoke?

The image of the glorious sun and of the ugly clouds is once again vividly before us, but now the process that we saw in the previous sonnet is reversed: the sun and the clouds are drawn into the distinctively human world, the world of morality. Indeed here they *are* human; it is the friend himself who is being addressed. This is significant. In sonnet 33, the friend was in the third person, the poet's relationship with him was one that Martin Buber would have put almost into the 'I — it' category; the first three words of sonnet

34 proclaim an 'I — thou' relationship. Externally, visually, nothing is altered: splendour is clouded over disappointingly. But the spirit and the meaning of the lines are quite different: the 'promise' in line 1 is felt to have been a real promise, not merely the loosely metaphorical promise that we sometimes associate with the weather; the link between the 'sun' and the poet in line 2 is a truly personal one; and the sun's permissiveness, in line 3, involves not only himself (as in lines 5-8 of the previous sonnet) but the poet too. 'Rotten' in line 4 has a distinctly *moral* charge.

The world in which the poem has placed us is an ethical world; clearly the image of the amoral sun and its clouds cannot survive. The image does in fact continue into lines 5 and 6, but by now it is completely humanized, allegorized. We hardly notice as the suggestions of the external world of 'nature' give way to evocations of such human concerns as physical and spiritual healing.

The contrast between the two sonnets is as great as it could possibly be. Sonnet 34 does not merely represent values which sonnet 33 negates; it expresses these values with remarkable delicacy and profundity — as if the poet knew no other scale of significances.

Lines 5-14 seem to me to dramatize the phases through which the relationship between the poet and the friend passes immediately after the act of betrayal. At first the friend recognizes that the poet has been saddened, and attempts to cheer him up in a rather insensitive and patronizing way:

> 'Tis not enough that through the cloud thou break,
> To dry the rain on my storm-beaten face,

(How well those words suggest smiling condescension!)

> For no man well of such a salve can speak,
> That heals the wound and cures not the disgrace.

The poet records doggedly but honestly the inadequacy of a superficial remedy.

> Nor can thy shame give physic to my grief . . .

The friend has begun to realize that the poet's sorrow is serious; shame takes the place of the smile. But still the response doesn't pierce deeply enough. In reacting as he does, the poet is not being self-indulgent: he is showing a fine intuitive awareness of the fact that a close relationship cannot be built on any sort of inequality.

> Though thou repent, yet I have still the loss . . .

This line may represent an elaboration of the perception contained in the previous line; but it's more likely that it gives us the next stage in the evolution of the friend's feeling. Repentance is a more inward, a more morally alert condition of the mind and heart than shame. Yet still it is not enough. Nor even is the sorrow that follows it. Sorrow is the emotion felt when repentance begins to possess the whole being:

> Th' offender's sorrow lends but weak relief
> To him that bears the strong offence's cross.

The poet is observing carefully and precisely the development of the friend's mood; but he cannot help recording accurately the state of his own feelings. The friend's betrayal has hurt him deeply; it would be not only dishonest but futile for him to pretend that this is not so or that the friend, for all his concern, has succeeded in making amends. The suffering that he has endured and still endures is strange, unmanageable: it is no coincidence that the thought of Christ's suffering on the cross appears in the poem at this point and takes up a commanding position at the end of the third quatrain. Maybe there is for them no way out of this dilemma; maybe after such a betrayal there *can* be no atonement . . .

> Ah but those tears are pearl which thy love sheds,
> And they are rich, and ransom all ill deeds.

The conclusion comes as a surprise, but a clinching, fulfilling surprise — to us, and (within the drama) to the poet, and to the friend. The transforming and revelatory power of tears depends of course upon a lack of premeditation; indeed premeditated tears, or tears that have been deliberately provoked, prove nothing but the insincerity of the weeper or the cruelty of the other person. (The poet *as actor* is taken by surprise; of course the poet *as poet* has himself made the surprise.) Suddenly, then, all is resolved, as if by miracle: the body has provided the answer that the mind could not reach; the friend's grief becomes unmanageable, and in this moment it acquires depth and echoes exactly the grief of the poet. The bond between them is re-established. The tears are like the water of grace: they are the product of love, they are rich, and they 'ransom all ill deeds'. Shakespeare never made a more dramatic use of the final sonnet couplet.

IV

For all the similarities of word and image, the contrast between the two sonnets is (as I have said) absolute. Sonnet 33 offers us the world of 'nature', with its amoral power and its arbitrary movements; the criteria by which we make assessments in this world are essentially aesthetic. Sonnet 34 presents the world of human morality, in which man is free to choose and responsible for his actions, and love and goodness are the end of all striving. The first poem ends with almost a celebration of impurity as a sign of power; the second culminates in an image of the re-creation of enriching purity.

The links between the poems serve to highlight the differences. I have shown how the image of the sun and clouds is used in opposite ways — how in the two poems it moves (so to speak) in opposite directions. In the same manner words that appear in both poems tend to face in different ways. 'Base', in line 5 of sonnet 33, has a mainly aesthetic and social connotation (as the word 'ugly' in the following line emphasises), whereas in line 3 of sonnet 34 the moral implication of 'base' is more important (as is further suggested by 'rotten' in line 4). 'Disgrace' is the final word of line 8 in both poems: in the first poem perhaps its primary sense is aesthetic; in the second it suggests a more inward condition. Both poems describe magical transmutations: in the first sonnet we see the triumphant sun

> Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy;

in the second, the tears become pearl, but the 'heavenly alchemy' is of a wholly different sort.

I have said that I think the order in which Thorpe placed these two sonnets is probably right, and I have seen the movement from one to the other as a chronological one. But I think it would be wrong to suggest that the second poem in any sense supersedes or cancels out the first. Each poem is impressively successful — and can of course, incidentally, be read without reference to the other. The worlds of the poems coexist mysteriously and tantalizingly: each poem seems to challenge the other, to throw down the gauntlet to it. Both visions, clearly, are valid. Yet each denies the other. How can this be so? It is, simply, one of the mysteries, perhaps even from some points of view the central mystery, of human life.

Let me say a little more about the links and similarities between the poems. I have pointed out that these highlight the differences; but of course this cannot be the whole truth of the matter. Obviously the links draw meanings together even as they push them apart. Shakespeare is showing how the different tendencies of human life

and of human evaluation may be caught sometimes within a single word. In fact, of course, a large part of our vocabulary is somewhat ambiguous, just as the reality that it attempts to express is constantly apt to be impregnated with a variety of meanings, and open to a variety of interpretations.

V

In Chapter XV of the *Biographia Literaria*, talking about *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, Coleridge says:

> 'I think I should have conjectured from these poems, that even then the great instinct which impelled the poet to the drama was secretly working in him . . .'

What I hope to suggest — and perhaps I have already largely made my point — is that on the evidence of these two sonnets alone one might reasonably have guessed not only that Shakespeare had it within him to be a dramatist (he may well in fact have produced a fair number of plays by the time he came to write these sonnets) but that he was potentially a dramatist of unusual range and complexity. These two sonnets seem to me to provide a premonition that is significant and instructive.

Every literary artist of any stature displays an awareness of the coexistence and the interpenetration of ethical and non-ethical forces and evaluations. Most writers, however, tend to place their main emphases towards one end of the spectrum rather than the other. It is the special achievement of Shakespeare, of course, to have been remarkably open to so many of life's paradoxical possibilities, and to have possessed, furthermore, that 'negative capability' which Keats ascribed to him, that quality which made him 'capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'

The issue that I have now opened up has, for the critic, two important and perhaps disqualifying disadvantages: first, it is flabbily large and therefore rather intractable; second, it is in some respects familiar and obvious. Nevertheless there are a few specific aspects of the question that I shall discuss briefly.

Keats is certainly right in saying that Shakespeare was 'capable of being in uncertainties . . . without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.' Shakespeare did not look for philosophical or scientific solutions to the problems that had been raised by his poetic imagina-

tion. It would surely be wrong to suppose, however, as some critics have done, that Keats was implying that Shakespeare's intellectual and emotional life was of an unruffled serenity, and that he found his primary enjoyment in being in 'uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts'. A sensitive reading of the plays must leave one with the impression that Shakespeare's imaginative life was buoyed up and urged forward by a series of fierce tensions (and one of the central tensions was that between the ethical and non-ethical visions of reality), and that the impulse perhaps most clearly discernible in all his plays is the desire to resolve these tensions — even though he was of course wonderfully able to respond to the full range of the possibilities that lay before him.

The tension between, and the interweaving of, those things which fall within the scope of ethical assessment and those which lie outside it are central to the experience of tragedy. In some respects a tragic protagonist is responsible for what happens to him, but at the same time he cannot be simply or wholly *blamed.* As a free human being he contributes crucially to his own downfall; but so does a mysterious and uncontrollable fate. Every tragedy depends, in some way, upon the intertwining of these two elements. But ultimately it is the non-ethical, or the beyond-ethical, which predominates: tragedy leaves us with a sense that man is *not* the master of his own destiny. It is this recognition, I think, which produces the *frisson*, the eruption of fear and pity, that is perhaps the central characteristic of tragedy. As *King Lear* (that archetypal tragedy) shows, an awakening ethical awareness can bring about an important and valuable transformation of human affairs; Lear's relationship with Cordelia towards the end of the play is moving, and seems to undo much of the discord of the first three acts. But the final truths of the play are the deaths of Cordelia and of Lear; our final response must be honesty, acceptance and awe:

> The weight of this sad time we must obey;
> Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
> The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
> Shall never see so much nor live so long.

To return briefly to sonnets 33 and 34 (if it is permissible to make a direct comparison between a great thing and things that are relatively small), it is sonnet 33 which brings us towards the world of tragedy. The sonnet itself is not tragic of course; there is a sort of cheerfulness in its conclusion. But it pictures life in such a way that we watch events which are beyond our control: the only reaction that is available to the watcher is one of acceptance. In sonnet 34, on the other

hand, the watcher is able to intervene and bring about a successful transformation; the poem is essentially untragic — it avoids tragedy, or passes beyond it. Wilson Knight has shown that in many of Shakespeare's plays there is an implicit tension between storm and music: music represents, of course, harmony, relationship, fulfilment; and storm, discord, suffering, tragedy. Music is both man's creation and something that stretches beyond man, the music of the spheres; but storm, even when it is partly a psychological phenomenon as it so clearly is in *King Lear*, lies wholly outside man's control. I think it is not unimportant that the central image of sonnets 33 and 34 is the blowing-up of stormy weather. In the first sonnet the weather predominates; we are forced to come to terms with it. In the second, the weather-image itself fades away, and the crisis that it represented — seen now as the result of sin — is dissipated by a full repentance.

I have been speaking as if all tragedies are fundamentally similar; this is of course only partly true. Each of Shakespeare's tragedies has its distinctive atmosphere, emphases, images, vocabulary. The contrast between *King Lear* and *Macbeth* on the one hand (for all their differences, these plays have certain tendencies in common) and, on the other hand, *Antony and Cleopatra*, the play that seems to have come next, is perpetually fascinating.

Elsewhere I have written:

> Whereas the tragedies of Lear and Macbeth unfold themselves against a clear framework of good and evil, the terms in which *Antony and Cleopatra* is conceived are perhaps more aesthetic than moral. Or maybe one might say that the field of morality into which the later play plunges us is in some respects more complex, mysterious, uncharted, than the worlds of *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. The earlier two plays could be said to be concerned primarily with human conduct towards other people. Antony's central problem is his own conduct towards himself: what sort of person — what sort of *man* — is he to be? In what way or ways can he fulfil himself most copiously, most finely, most valuably? While *King Lear* and *Macbeth* contain suggestions of a moral order that is cosmic, divine even, *Antony and Cleopatra* is essentially humanistic, and the grand colourful empire that surrounds the protagonists is felt to be the hunting-ground, and at the same time the product, of human energy. If *Macbeth* makes us feel how dangerous and unholy a man's submission to his ambitious yearnings may be, *Antony and Cleopatra* gives us (in very different circumstances of course)

> a sense of the value and the necessity, but also the tragedy, of an ambitiously rich self-fulfilment — a sense, indeed, of 'the holiness of the heart's affections', and perhaps also of 'the truth of imagination.'[2]

As we watch *King Lear* or *Macbeth* our standpoint is fundamentally an ethical one: that is why the victory of non-ethical forces is so overwhelming. In *Macbeth*, the victory of the non-ethical (Macbeth's ambition, his disintegration and his fall) finally almost coincides with the triumph of the ethical (the restoration of law and loyalty in Scotland); but still it is the tragic fall which is more important. Both *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, like *Othello*, bring us to what Yeats called 'tragedy wrought to its uttermost'. In *Antony and Cleopatra* something rather different happens. Shakespeare's view of the potentially tragic facts seems partly to have changed. In *Othello* and *King Lear* the weather, whether external or internal, was felt to be an enemy to human fulfilment; and the admirable feminine characters, Desdemona and Cordelia, were supremely good, reliable and pure. In *Antony and Cleopatra* the heroine is both disastrous and creative, a creature of dazzling variety and power, and her changeable moods and motives are like those of nature itself:

> We cannot call her winds and waters, sighs and tears: they are greater storms and tempests than almanacs can report. This cannot be cunning in her: if it be, she makes a shower of rain as well as Jove. (I ii)

Cleopatra in one sense helps to destroy Antony; this has happened by the middle of the play. Instead of 'tragedy wrought to its uttermost,' however, the play moves on, it seems to me, into some sort of transcendence. It is as if Shakespeare penetrates into the mystery of the weather and of the slime of the River Nile in order to see them as symbolic of certain valid human possibilities. By the end, Cleopatra's earth and water have become 'fire and air', and her natural cunning, so akin to the strangeness of Nature itself, has been seen as a path to 'grace':

> She looks like sleep
> As she would catch another Antony
> In her strong toil of grace.

Antony and Cleopatra seems to me, then, in one of its many aspects, a partial attempt by Shakespeare to move beyond the medium of tragedy — beyond the *frisson* into some sort of glory. Perhaps it would not be wholly fanciful to compare the last act of the

play to what we saw, in its miniature form, in the last lines of sonnet 33.

But in Shakespeare's imaginative evolution, in so far as we can see a coherent pattern in it, *Antony and Cleopatra* is in several respects unique. In the properly and fully post-tragic plays, the last plays, what we see on the whole is a further development from some aspects of Acts IV and V of *King Lear*. In each of these plays — but in *The Winter's Tale* particularly — a tragedy is enacted, but it is not final, and it is seen in a new perspective. The subtle relationship between ethical and non-ethical is altered. Man's stormy experience (Leontes's jealousy for example), while remaining in many respects a tragic phenomenon, is seen ultimately as something that can be atoned for — in Leontes's case, by repentance and suffering, by the goodness of the redemptive figures Hermione and Perdita, and by a change in the weather represented by the coming of spring after the harshness of winter. Even external storms — for example, the storm at the beginning of *The Tempest* — are seen as ultimately a manifestation of an *ethical* universe. The plays convey the general sense that tragedy is no longer an event to be contemplated with terror and awe and then accepted: it has become a phenomenon which an imaginative, honest and generous person can affect, dissipate, transform — although the final act of transformation lie beyond the management of the participants.

> Ah but those tears are pearl which thy love sheds,
> And they are rich, and ransom all ill deeds.

> Full fathom five thy father lies,
> Of his bones are coral made;
> Those are pearls that were his eyes;
> Nothing of him that doth fade,
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange. (*The Tempest*, I ii)

In the last plays it is the ethical world of sonnet 34, the world of repentance and reunion, that supersedes the non-ethical world of sonnet 33.

But to say this is not to say that one sonnet, one world, cancels out the other. Whatever Shakespeare himself eventually thought, we know that this is not so. The full bristling tension remains.

VI

To conclude, I shall look very briefly at sonnet 35:

> No more be griev'd at that which thou hast done:
> Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud,
> Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
> And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.
> All men make faults, and even I in this,
> Authorizing thy trespass with compare,
> Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss,
> Excusing thy sins more than their sins are;
> For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense —
> The adverse party is thy advocate —
> And 'gainst myself a lawful plea commence.
> Such civil war is in my love and hate,
> That I an accessary needs must be
> To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me.

It is a finely-wrought sonnet which provides a psychologically interesting sequel to sonnets 33 and 34. Shakespeare's sensitive feelings and self-critical, self-analytical intellect are fully displayed. Yet the sonnet is something of a disappointment. It doesn't quite *sing*. And it *moves on* from the experiences, the worlds, of the two previous sonnets without attempting to confront their implications. But then perhaps no mere sonnet could face such a task.

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NOTES

[1] Philip Martin: *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Self, Love and Art* (C.U.P. 1972). His account of the three sonnets is perceptive but brief.

[2] *Theoria*, 30, p. 19.

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DARKNESS AND 'A HEAVY GOLD GLAMOUR': LAWRENCE'S *WOMEN IN LOVE*

by ROBIN LEE

D. H. Lawrence is not a candidate for the usual close textual analysis; and he never really was, despite his 'arbitrary yoking' into the great tradition. Close attention to the tensions and pressures in his major prose is, of course, valuable. But, in the great novels, the isolation and intricate analysis of individual passages yields nothing like the pleasure — or insight — that such an approach yields in George Eliot or, even, Dickens. In *Women in Love*, at least, the smallest unit seriously offering itself for 'close analysis' is the Chapter. And within that larger-than-usual segment of text, concentration upon the words on the page demands flexibility of approach, and a previously existing conceptual framework of interpretation of the whole novel, if it is to yield any insights.

This article aims, then, to analyse one of the centrally important Chapters of *Women in Love*, placing it in a context of interpretation of the novel, but trying to concentrate upon the internal tensions of imagery and theme in the ten pages of *Coal-Dust*,[1] Chapter Nine of the novel. The analysis will focus, as the title of the article suggests, upon the tension between images of darkness and images of gold in the evocation of character and atmosphere.

Let me give first, then, a brief description of the interpretation of the whole novel to which this Chapter analysis contributes, and from which it takes its bearings. I take Lawrence's general and recurrent theme to be the discovery of the integrity in every individual, together with the forms of social life which will nourish this discovery, and promote the growth of all individuals. In *Women in Love* Lawrence's insights into these personal and social realities are concentrated and given form by his sense of modern crisis. In the conversation between Birkin and Gerald in the train (Chapter 5), Birkin sets the tone of the novel when he says: 'I feel such a despair, so hopeless, as if it were the end of the world'. Repeated references to the extremity of the situation portrayed in the novel emphasise this feeling of crisis, as do Lawrence's comments in letters written at the time. The sense of crisis results in increased emphasis upon individual authenticity, with a relation to perhaps one other person, and a decreased sense of the possibilities of social community. *The Rainbow* may end with the rhetorical assertion of

man's relation to his entire world, but *Women in Love* does not take up this idea with anything like that certainty, and indeed opens with a half-puzzled, half-defiant admission by Ursula and Gudrun that for themselves they do not see the possibility even of marriage.

The theme of individual fulfilment within a society occurs in almost all the conversations of the novel. Another conversation between Ursula and Gudrun brings it out clearly, and focusses upon the central issue of Lawrence's thought as it finds its form in this novel:

> 'But', (Ursula) added, 'I do think that one can't have anything new whilst one cares for the old — do you know what I mean? — even fighting the old is belonging to it. I know, one is tempted to stop with the world, just to fight it. But then it isn't worth it.'
>
> Gudrun considered herself.
>
> 'Yes', she said, 'In a way, one is of the world if one lives in it. But isn't it really an illusion to think you can get out of it? After all, a cottage in the Abruzzi, or wherever it may be, isn't a new world. No, the only thing to do with the world, is to see it through!
>
> Ursula looked away. She was so frightened of argument.
>
> 'But there *can* be something else, can't there?, she said. 'One can see it through in one's soul, long enough before it sees itself through in actuality. And then, when one has seen one's soul, one is something else'.
>
> '*Can* one see it through in one's soul?, asked Gudrun . . .'[2]

The two elements of the theme appear quite clearly. Society is in a state of decay and dissolution so extreme that contact with it is destroying individual authenticity. Gudrun asserts the impossibility of escaping this process, and with a kind of grim relish proposes that we can only endure it. In context, we see clearly her participation in the negative destructiveness of the society (opposed to Birkin's positive destructiveness). Ursula, under Birkin's influence, proposes the other course of action the novel explores: the paradoxical course of surviving, of indeed transcending the dissolution, by living through it *within oneself.* With this idea, we come to the core of Lawrence's religious and social perceptions. A process of dissolution, of personally initiated and consciously realised reduction, will free the individual from the negative, destructive aspects of the same process that is taking place in his society. A willed reduction of the self is the escape from will. Deliberate use of sensuality as an instrument of exploration of the self and the other is the escape from sensuality. Withdrawal into the self and into a polarity of relationship with one

other self, is the escape from a clinging, destroying society, and forms the basis of a new society. In short, the processes of decay Lawrence perceives in his society can be escaped by living them through more intensely within one's self. And from this process — some of the more rhetorical portions of the novel tell us — a new sense of individual authenticity and of man's community with his universe — a new *moral* existence — will come into being. Onto his sense of the historical decay of his culture, Lawrence grafts a myth of possible human redemption. Or, perhaps more accurately, he sees a particular phase of history as a means of conveying a utopian vision of what society might be like — not in the details of social organisation, but in the kind of vital relationships which, if they lay at the heart of that society, would generate the desired social harmony.

Frank Kermode (to whom any student of Lawrence owes an immense debt) has succinctly identified this tension:

> Ursula is repeatedly the voice of that scepticism which always, in history, attends apocalyptic prophecy. When Birkin rants about the disappearance of England, she knows it cannot 'disappear so clearly and conveniently'. It is part of the historical tension between myth and history (the long record of disappointed apocalypse) or between what Birkin thinks of as life and death.

There is a desirable analytic clarity in this statement. But in the words of the novels themselves, the tensions between myth and history, between image and reality, between life and death are almost never resolved. Nowhere is this clearer than in *Coal-Dust*, where Lawrence returns to his life-long interest in the colliery life, and makes of it a striking image of Gudrun's attraction towards and repulsion from the 'voluptuousness' of the mindless, mechanical reality of modern life.

The Chapter creates these insights by a decisive clarity of structure, combined with a strong pattern of imagery, by means of which Lawrence expresses his own ambivalence concerning the notion of a mindless physical life. Together with the African statute at Halliday's flat, the collier-life provides most of the imagery by which Lawrence explores the attractions and dangers of immersion in sexual awareness alone. We come to associate Gerald also with the kind of unawareness that results from this immersion, for the simple reason that he is the master of these men. Gudrun, too, is attracted to him by his dominance over them, and because he participates in their lives.

The pattern of the chapter makes quite clear Gerald's connection with the miners. Gudrun and Ursula first see Gerald forcing his horse to endure the noise of the train, forcing the mare's submission to the conditions of *his* life. ('. . . what use is she to me *in this country* if she shies and goes off every time an engine whistles?' he asks later.) Ursula is repelled, Gudrun fascinated. Then, in the second part of the chapter, Lawrence explores the relation between the girls and the men inhabiting 'this country', in a fine piece of realistic writing, as two road-menders talk lecherously about the sisters. Gudrun is attracted to them, and they to her. From this, the third part develops easily, as Lawrence generalises upon this particular example of mutual attraction and probes Gudrun's relationship with this world ('To Gudrun, however, it was potent and half-repulsive'). In the last few paragraphs the nature of the collier society is evoked in depth and its symbolic place in the novel suggested. Also, Lawrence brings the chapter round to its beginning, as it were, through the brief creation of Gudrun's 'boy', Palmer. Like Gerald, Palmer despises the colliers individually, but is fascinated by organising and using them as a mass:

> They were a new sort of machinery to him — but incalculable.[4]

In this way, the chapter, having opened on Gudrun's attraction to dominance, closes on the same idea, and gives a brief prefiguring of the infinitely more developed, and tragic, affair between herself and Gerald.

This is an entirely Lawrentian progression from the intensely visualized scene, or the flash of realistic dialogue, to the generalising, image-laden prose. In this case, it is Lawrence at his best. The realistic eye of the novelist controls, and gives substance to the symbolic meanings of his scene. The symbolic domination of Gerald over Gudrun is the final aim in describing Gerald dominating his mare; but that *act itself* is vividly evoked by the vision of the mare rising 'slowly, as if lifted on a wind of terror', and, later, of 'man and horse . . . bounding springily, unequally up the road.'

We need not dwell for long on the insight into Gerald created by this scene. From the start, Lawrence's strategy is to evoke the effect of the scene on Gudrun, and we see it mostly through her 'black-dilated, spellbound eyes'. In this way, what is, after all, a perfectly ordinary occurrence (and later discussed as such by Gerald and Hermione), takes on a 'glamour', a richness of significance that Lawrence makes clear both is, and is not, *in* the scene. The tension between seeing Gerald's actions as ordinary, and seeing them as symbolic, is sustained throughout, and through this tension, we are

able to translate Gerald's dominance over his horse into his dominance over Gudrun. Lawrence directs our perceptions to this end by several images of dominance that have sexual suggestions: Gerald 'sank into her (the mare) magnetically'; 'he bit himself down on the mare like a keen edge biting home'; he is 'keen as a sword pressing into her'. The blood drawn by the spurs reinforces the sexual overtones, and can be linked with the blood drawn on both Gerald and Gudrun later by the rabbit, Bismarck. It is through this later wound that the two finally recognise their attraction, pass through the social conventions which have so far kept them apart, and enter the 'unthinkable red ether of the beyond.'[5] In the earlier Chapter, though, Gudrun cannot 'know' this, and turns away from the recognition. ('The world reeled and passed into nothingness for Gudrun . . .').

Gerald is characterised by a wilful dominance, and by a 'mechanical relentlessness' in the application of will. Gudrun is deeply attracted by the 'sort of soft white magnetic domination' that she sees in him, as well, simply, by the possibilities of cruelty. In the second part of the chapter, the men are attracted to her by a similar arrogance she emits, and there is, perhaps, a faint echo of the image of the horse's blood in her 'red stockings'. However, her attraction to the mining town is rendered in such a way as to make clear its connections with her attraction to Gerald. Her first feeling is for its 'glamorous thickness of labour and maleness', which is then elaborated, in a crucial passage:

> In their voicess he could hear the voluptuous resonance of darkness, the strong, dangerous underworld, mindless, inhuman. They sounded also like strange machines, heavy, oiled. The voluptuousness was like that of machinery, cold and iron.[6]

There *is*, in the lives of the colliers, a form of unselfconsciousness, a variation of the state of selfhood Lawrence desired. But it is an unselfconsciousness resulting from a failure to face the mechanical quality, the spiritual decay of their life. It does not result from living through mechanical response to another, deeper loss of consciousness. In this way, it is a false mindlessness, and a spurious community follows from it, suggested in the quality of their talk: 'buzzing, jarring, half-secret, the endless . . . wrangling.'[7] Lawrence registers his criticism of Gudrun's attraction by seeing it as 'nostalgic' and 'glamorous'. Both terms suggest falsity of response. There is a conscious attempt to retrieve a feeling from the past that itself renders the feeling spurious. As the poem *Piano* reminds us:

> The glamour
> Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
> Down in the flood of remembrance . . .

Gudrun's nostalgia is partly for her own past life, and arises from her radical alienation from her family. But it is also a nostalgia for a state of pre-consciousness out of which she has developed. To the extent that she glimpses the attractions of this state, redemptive if it could be regained, Lawrence sympathises with her. Yet, his own ambivalent feeling towards the dark life of the miners does not prevent him carefully placing the quality of her response:

> The heavy gold glamour of the approaching sunset lay over all the colliery district, and the ugliness overlaid with beauty was like a narcotic to the senses. On the roads silted with black dust, the rich light fell more warmly, over all the amorphous squalor a kind of magic was cast, from the glowing close of the day.[8]

The two colours which Lawrence uses here are later linked to a third: the *blackness* of the coal-dust, and the *gold* of the light, are related to Gerald's *whiteness*. Gudrun has thought in the first Chapter that perhaps 'some pale gold, arctic light' surrounds herself and Gerald, singling them out in some way. The 'gold' image gives value and life to the relationship, but must be set against the coldness of 'arctic', and the 'ugliness' which the gold light overlays. The 'black' imagery is also used often by Lawrence to suggest an unknown mode of being, attractive as a further area of transcendence of the self, and yet horrifying in its possibilities of corruption and death. The African statue embodies this symbolically, and we can see what kind of connection it has with Gerald's whiteness in this extract from Birkin's speculations in 'Moony':

> . . . a tall, slim, elegant figure from West Africa, in dark wood, glossy and suave. He remembered her vividly: she was one of his soul's intimates . . . She knew what he himself did not know. She had thousands of years of purely sensual, purely unspiritual knowledge behind her . . . the relation between the senses and the outspoken mind had broken, leaving the experience all in one sort . . .[9]

The darkness of the colliery town, even the 'voluptuousness' and 'glamour', is echoed in the statute, 'dark', 'glossy', 'suave'. Both modes of existence are unacceptable, being 'all in one sort', the reduc-

tion of a multiplicity of experience to a single mode of response. In the lives of the miners, all has been reduced to mechanism, they are absorbed in the dark, mechanical life of the colliery. In Gerald, all the range of human response has been reduced to mental abstraction and cold will. Both Gerald and the colliers share the statue's reduction of experience to 'one sort'. But Gerald's reduction will eventually be seen to be of a fundamentally different kind. It is not a reduction of all responses to sensuality, but a reduction of all responses to abstraction:

> It would be done differently by the white races. The white races, having the Arctic north behind them, the vast abstraction of ice and snow, would fulfil a mystery of ice-destructive knowledge, snow-abstract annihilation.[10]

Gerald, 'calm as a ray of cold sunshine', Gudrun 'hard and cold and indifferent' begin that destructive reduction in this Chapter. The images of coal-dust, and snow work against each other at one level, but at another combine to evoke the process and the goal of reduction, and to suggest the ambivalent moral attitude that Lawrence has towards these.

What the structure and imagery of the Chapter finally suggest, then, is that we are to attribute a representative quality to the responses and aims of the individual characters. Through image and symbol Gerald is used to identify a certain movement in our civilization, and his representative stature is reinforced by his management of the collieries, and by the images of coldness and abstraction associated with him. Gudrun shows a deep fascination with this process of decay, a fascination which Lawrence himself does not entirely reject. There is an unobtrusive movement of the Chapter from a sharp perception of a scene (Gudrun sees 'the whole scene spectacularly, isolated and momentary, like a vision isolated in eternity') to a general observation of the crisis and alternatives of our time. But the implications are unavoidable, even this early in the novel.

Like many of the scenes in *Women in Love*, it appears to have a greater impact upon the reader than upon the characters. Ursula later tackles Gerald about his treatment of the mare, but the terms of the discussion do not suggest that the symbolic significance of the event has gone home to either in the way that it does to the reader. The full experience belongs only to the reader, being concentrated for him by the novelist, and connected in many ways with other events in the novel. The characters remain conscious of the experience as an experience. The reader becomes aware of its symbolic, indeed

mythic dimension (at one point Gudrun shades into Daphne),[11] and can see how the characters embody the society's slide to destruction in a way that the characters cannot see themselves.[12]

This Chapter illuminates in small, then, the major strategy of the novel as a whole. The matter, the body of the novel is concerned essentially with the evocation of mystic states within the characters, and though Lawrence's use of image and symbol, myth and archetype, carries us toward that meaning, and gives force and cogency to the historical process portrayed, he cannot finally carry us or his characters into that state. Many episodes, such as those in *Coal-Dust*, carry us to the brink of an experience that must be non-verbal, and leave us there, looking out of the novel-world into another, greater and more mysterious.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] All page references to *Women in Love* are to the Penguin edition, first published in 1960.
[2] *Women in Love*, pp. 492/3.
[3] Frank Kermode: 'Lawrence and the Apocalyptic Types', in Cox and Dyson (eds) *Word in the Desert*, London, 1968, p. 24. George Ford also points out that Lawrence was reading widely in mythology and astrology before and during the composition of the novel. See *Double Measure: a study of the novels and stories of D. H. Lawrence*, New York, 1965, pp. 185-7.
[4] *Women in Love*, p. 131.
[5] *ibid*, p. 273.
[6] *ibid*, p. 128.
[7] This is not unlike Gudrun's later conversations with Loerke, 'full of . . . double meanings, of evasions, of suggestive vagueness'. *Women in Love*, p. 150.
[8] *Women in Love*, p. 128.
[9] *ibid*, p. 285.
[10] *ibid*, p. 286.
[11] *ibid*, p. 129.
[12] Recently Terry Eagleton has taken up this theme in the analysis of the earlier novels, to which it is equally appropriate. I cannot acquiesce in his low estimate of *Women in Love*, but his analysis of this theme of 'settlement and transcendence' is most illuminating. See *Exiles and Emigres, Studies in Modern Literature*, London, 1970, pp. 191-218.

ASPECTS OF DICKENS

by C. VAN HEYNINGEN

In the eighteenth century great novels seem to have been warmly welcomed by nearly all who could read, and the vicissitudes of their protagonists followed with as personal an interest as if they had been friends in the flesh, quite as keenly as (James Thurber tells us in a 'New Yorker' essay of several years ago), the American public followed the adventures of certain television characters, sent these imaginary people gifts of flowers and boxes of candy on their fictional birthdays and wedding-days and wreaths when they were supposed to have died. The popular interest in Richardson's novels was so personal that when it became known that Mr B. was to repent of his treatment of Pamela, and marry her, the townsfolk of Slough to whom the local blacksmith was accustomed to read instalments of that book aloud, are said to have rung all the church bells in joy, and when Colley Cibber heard that Clarissa was actually to be raped, he wrote an impassioned letter to Richardson, begging him, with oaths, to spare her. Fortunately, Richardson was artist enough (he was a supreme artist, in spite of his faults) to carry his tragedy through to the very end.

Dickens could count on an almost equally responsive public in the nineteenth century, even though by that time many more novels had been written, and a great many more people could read. His novels were always gladly published and even more delightedly read. For they all had certain qualities that made (at least) passages in them unforgettable; many of his contemporaries were properly grateful for the joy of being able to look forward every so often to a brand-new instalment of one of his incomparably friendly, lively, entertaining and profound novels.

Yes, profound — most of his contemporaries preferred the less profound works such as *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Chimes*. My own sense of humour is too limited to embrace the purely comic parts of *Pickwick Papers*, but I have heard severe and discerning critics speak of them with unmistakable enjoyment, and in the debtors' prison scenes there are 'bright gleams of immortality'. We have not for at least half a century wept over Little Nell, but what depths of insight and power-volts of energy there are in the Quilp scenes and those where the Brasses and Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness strike flaming sparks out of one another. As for *Nicholas Nickleby* it is by no means the simple picaresque it seems at first, for whenever any of the Squeers family appear there is a harrowing fusion of cruelty, — coarse, devilish cruelty — and ironic

humour, which, surprisingly, manages to be nearly always more funny than bitter — sharp and piercing though the compassion is. But not quite always. The scene of Nicholas' first waking in Dotheboys Hall, as the starved and abandoned boys all round him (some of them still very young) are just beginning to wake in their cold dormitory, is as horrible and as pitiful as Belsen, and in the same way. And when we come to the later books, Dickens's tragic insight (though the sheer fecundity of his comic sense is there in plenty too) forms a strong and enduring rock-bottom to all Dickens's creation.

There is such a mine of observations to be made about Dickens's novels that, once begun, one would never be able to stop writing about them. I shall therefore confine myself to mere scraps of remarks on four aspects of his work: his handling of landscape, his attitude to and varying treatment of his women characters, his treatment of madness and states of mind cognate to it, and his handling of crowds. Also I should like to borrow from Dr Leavis his illuminating description of the greatest novels as dramatic poems.

* * * *

Let us consider first, landscape: even in that comparatively early and very loosely constructed book, *Martin Chuzzlewit* the landscape descriptions contribute their mite to the poetic whole. Most of the descriptions, like those of the drive to Salisbury, of the steamship's going off to the ends of the earth from the river wharf and other London scenes, such as the way to Todgerses, and the view from the roof-tops there, are chiefly expressions of Dickens's inexhaustible creative vitality, and his own rejoicing in life itself. But these are also often expressions of the character of Tom Pinch himself, through whose eyes they are seen. Tom Pinch, with his sunflower nature, is almost an incarnation of unselfishness, and the book being about selfishness, this indirectly emphasises its moral. By contrast, the accounts of the wood where Montague Tigg is murdered by Jonas, are quite blood-curdling, even to a generation which has grown almost inured (from a distance) to genocidal wars, and massacres on a merciless scale. The penetrating effect of Dickens's sensationalism in this book is due, I think, chiefly to his unsleeping moral sense, and, even when he is obviously building up effects, it is clear that underneath all the drama is a deep abhorrence of violent crime. This is the main difference between Dickens's kind of sensationalism and the modern kind, in which there is very little real feeling, if any.

Much more symbolic than any landscape in *Martin Chuzzlewit*,

however, is that memorable one described at the beginning of *Great Expectations*. The main theme of *Great Expectations* is often complacently asserted to be snobbery. The first landscape-description in the book strikes the keynote to the real and deeper theme (for which of us at Pip's age and in all Pip's circumstances would have behaved better than he?) — it is the differences between those who live in the comparatively safe world they take for granted, and those wild creatures beyond the pale of law and society, who move always in the shadow of the terror of death — death from starvation or death by hanging. This central theme like that of all great drama gives the whole book its unity, and the key to the poem is firmly suggested in a line or two here or there of landscape-description near the beginning: when Pip gained his 'first and most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things' he realised that he was in the churchyard, and 'that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes, and that the low leaden line beyond was the river, and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea . . .'. With what indelible vividness in every word of 'the *distant savage lair* from which the wind was rushing', we are made to feel the uncontrollable dangerous forces of nature surrounding the little bit of the world that man has tamed for the time being, by building such things on it as 'dykes and mounds and gates'. Pip so far has known little more than the physical comfort of the blacksmith's home, where Jo's strong leg and sweet and sturdy nature fend him off to some degree from his then greatest danger, Mrs Gargery's unreasonable temper.

Immediately after this description comes one as vivid of a human creature, for the moment (and always potentially) as wild, as dangerous as the wind and the sea — another force of nature bursting from its restraints and 'rushing from its distant savage lair;': 'A fearful man, all in coarse grey with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head, a man who had been soaked in water, smothered in mud and lamed by stones and cut by flints, and stung by nettles and torn by briars, who limped and shivered and glared and growled, and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.' He has already been fighting almost to the death, poor outcast, against non-human foes, but his danger comes chiefly from the guardians of us who are protected from such enemies as those natural and human ones that surround the convict. As Pip leaves the convict hugging himself in both arms to keep out the cold, 'picking his way among the nettles and brambles, he looked to my young eyes as if he were eluding the hands of the dead people stretching up cautiously out of

their graves, to get a twist on his ankle and pull him in;' and presently Pip sees him 'limping on towards the gibbet with some chains hanging from it, which had once held a pirate'. The man was limping towards the latter 'as if he were the pirate come to life, and come down and going back, to hang himself up again.'

By such powerful poetic means, Dickens in short, strong phrases shot through with pity, makes us realise the misery, desolation and constant acute danger of death in which the escaped convict lives — here — right at the beginning of the book. In a slightly later chapter and before the convict is captured, he shows us the Christmas comfort and even comparative luxury in which the Gargerys and their guests spend the day; he has already shown us, as if in passing, the touch of human kindness and delicacy that passes on both sides between the little boy and the hunted man. 'I hope you enjoy it', says the little boy when he sees how the hunted man snaps up the food like a dog. 'Thankee, my boy, I do', and out of this tiny touch of mutual kindness rises the whole story, the whole book, where the horrifying return of Magwitch, alll gratitude, coarseness and unbearable possessiveness, plays its all-important part so that by the time that we come to the tragic end, Pip and Magwitch, by dint of the germination of that minute exchange of kindness and delicacy, have civilised each other. And the other wild creatures who have lived beyond the pale are put an end to by the law, beyond the protection of which they have been compelled to live: the sun is shining through the great drops of rain on the panes of the court windows when they are all sentenced. 'Then they were all formally doomed and some of them were supported out and some of them sauntered out with a haggard look of bravery, and a few nodded to the gallery, and two or three shook hands, and others went out chewing the fragments of herbs that they had taken from the sweet herbs lying about.'

I shall give only one more example of Dickens's poetic and subtly symbolic use of background. *Bleak House* begins in and about the Court of Chancery. The passage is much too long to quote; it is all, as it were, allegorised. Every detail about the landscape — the slippery mud, the semi-darkness, the muddle, the deceptiveness caused by obscuring rain and fog, all this applies to Chancery laws, the endless confusion and misery they cause, ending often in slow death from hope deferred, in bankruptcy, suicide or madness. It is all almost patently as allegorical as the names of mad Miss Flite's caged birds, or as the wonderful story of Malbecco in *The Faerie Queene*. Almost every character in the book is a victim in some degree or other of Chancery, or else, like Mr Vholes or even Conversation Kenge, a promoter of its very gainful evil.

The theme of the book is responsibility. Nobody is exactly responsible for Chancery, it is just the law, it is 'the law's delays' that break thousands of people's fortunes, hearts and happiness; and this evil system is allowed to go on from generation to generation, often to the immense profit of the established lawyers.

The whole tragic story of Rick (who is gradually drawn into involving himself in the delusions Jarndyce and Jarndyce encourages, as if he were really drawn by the Mace of Miss Flite's penetratingly insane imagination) is like a clear illuminated window, with uncoloured glass, symbolism for the time abandoned, opening into the darkness of Chancery and showing us exactly, in full reality, step by step, how the Mace operates. The fact that Dickens makes us care very deeply about Rick, wrong as he so often is until the end, makes it all dreadfully credible.

Mr Vholes, horrible man, with his sinister black gloves picking at the unwholesome pimples on his sallow cheeks, is the chief agent of the Mace in this illuminated picture of its workings. By 'putting his shoulder to the wheel' he gradually consumes all Rick's fortune in making unnecessary expensive journeys, — never openly encouraging Rick to spend more on the case and yet representing this expenditure somehow as the only way to increase his chances of winning it. Yet Vholes, of course, is a 'responsible' man, a respectable man, acting never for his own profit but to provide (he keeps telling everybody) for his 'three unmarried daughters and an ancient father in the vale of Taunton'.

At length Rick, wasted by hope deferred, cannot even physically endure the shock of suddenly finding all his money gone in costs. With brave words on his lips, he has a haemorrhage, and dies, while the whole court dissolves into laughter because the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, after so many, many years of learned argument and counter-argument, is suddenly no more, but has vanished forever into the fog.

* * * *

There is one aspect of this great novel which many of its admirers dislike, and this brings me to my next point: *Bleak House* has a heroine by whom few, it appears, are attracted. My own view is that most people forget that Esther Summerson's faults are few and all due not so much to Dickens's conception of her as to a certain clumsiness often present in his delineation of eligible females in general. If people were simply, in reading the book, to cut out entirely a few very unreal parts of Dickens's creation of Esther, they would realise that she is one of the most delightful characters in Dickens. Esther is, in fact, the most thoroughly and unobtrusively

and attractively responsible character in the book. She is truly womanly. Consider, for example, her most amused, affectionate and most helpful treatment of the Jellyby and the Coavins children. Her tenderness to poor Guster, her friendly concern for the brickmakers' wives, and the way she wins their confidence, her tactful kindness for Prince's and Caddy's sake of the very unattractive Mr Turveydrop — all this is illustrated or proven by incident after incident. But Dickens slightly mars his character by attributing to her an often ridiculous modesty and coyness. This arises, presumably, from his period's fixed ideals of womanhood, (from which Dickens seems hardly ever able to free himself) especially of young, handsome and unmarried womanhood, ideals both artificial and undesirable. Of portraying married lower and middle class women, and especially the ways in which they control and bully their husbands by means of fainting fits, hysterics, calculated irrationality and the rest, Dickens is a past master. Nobody else 'knows their tricks and their manners' better than he, nobody more thoroughly and ruefully sees through them. But give him a heroine of the right looks, the right manners, the right class, and usually the poor fellow can't breathe a breath of life into her. An exception is Dora in *David Copperfield.* Dora is built on the Victorian ideal pattern, yet she escapes the fate of unreality that all the rest on that pattern succumb to. Somebody like Dora he must once have deeply loved, perhaps, and that deep emotion in retrospect continues to make the idea of Dora enchanting, or at least to make the glory of that very youthful love affair invest the whole story until Dora's death with a peculiar beauty. Dora is stupid, silly, childish, utterly impossible as a wife and housekeeper — but she has, poor child, a very strong and enduring and pathetic capacity for affection. One has only to compare passages from the real *David Copperfield* to see how alive she is compared with the 'improved version' of those parts which Robert Graves so curiously offered the public. What would have happened to her if she had not died? It doesn't bear thinking of, and to demand that Dickens should not have killed her would have been probably to make him write the kind of book that, at that stage, he didn't want to write.

The least real of all Dickens's heroines is Madeline Bray of *Nicholas Nickleby*, who lets herself be enslaved by her monstrously selfish father, and very nearly marries the equally monstrous Arthur Gride with his servant old Peg Sliderskew (what beautiful names!) — who are almost as much pure essences of evil as the three birds of prey in *Volpone.* But as the novels go on, the heroines become more credible until we reach *Little Dorrit*, who has spirit, intelligence, energetic endeavour, excellent sense as well as that enduring and profoundly

compassionate love for her father. One could wish that Amy had a touch of joyousness in her nature, but with all her history and in all her circumstances that would have been too much to expect. One can accept Mr Dorrit's shamefully self-deceiving conduct, because somewhere in his subconscious mind is a conscience that he cannot quite kill. He always knows and this secret knowledge tortures him, that his behaviour is not worthy of what he would like to be, because, poor fellow, he has never quite lost his painful sense of the truth about himself. His perpetual suffering on this account, his unquenchable knowledge that he is behaving badly instead of nobly never ceases to wring from us our acute compassion. And for this reason he is more to be pitied than all the hardships from which his daughter almost succeeds in protecting him. Consider, for example, the encounters with Plornish, and with Little John when he comes to Mr Dorrit in his grand hotel with gifts of cigars as of old, and is cruelly snubbed. The Plornish incident makes him miserable, but Little John's white and stricken face is in its intimate reproach to him a foretaste of Hell itself.

Nevertheless, much as we admire Amy perhaps we actually enjoy reading about her sister Fanny, with her impulsive bursts of remorse, more. There is something rightly spirited and amusing in Fanny's skirmishes with Sparkler's mother and with Mrs General, and in her sweeping and rapid victories over Society, so that one knows that she will to some extent have the strength and the wit to circumvent, if not to overcome, the fearful looming burden of boredom that she has deliberately brought upon herself by marrying Sparkler. And she will meet the challenge decently, poor girl! What a triumph, by the way, of symbolic and poetic subtlety is that whole fatal chapter in which Mr Merdle borrows the tortoise-shell-handled knife. Every word is loaded with tragic significance — it is sheer poetry, unsurpassed.

A glimpse of how entirely realistic Dickens was becoming with regard to marriage is given in *Hard Times*. Stephen Blackpool and Rachel's relationship, though presumably platonic, is an affair of this earth and the marvellously described incident of how, half-waking from uneasy sleep, Stephen sees his drink-sodden vampire wife's hand stretched out towards the laudanum bottle, and never knows, because Rachel suddenly starts up out of sleep and seizes it from her, whether or not he would have checked that hand before she could swallow the poison, and so rid his wife — and himself — forever of the curse that lay so heavily upon them both, shows how near he had moved towards the idea that an impossible marriage must be dissolved at all costs.

The best heroines of all are the two in *Our Mutual Friend*, Bella

Wilfer, whose feminine charms, though certainly very taking, as a rule, are, especially in the love scenes, a good deal too feminine for a feminine taste; and Lizzie Hexam, who to all her working class virtues of good sense, endurance, steady self-control and determined industry, adds great delicacy of mind and depth of feeling.

How deep, and how seriously thought out, how unconventional, especially for Victorian times, her love for Wrayburn is, may be judged from the dialogue with Bella in Lizzie's room near the factory where she works. They have met by chance when Bella came to attend the funeral of Betty Higden, who had been found dying on the bank of the river that drove the factory mill. The 'horribly mercenary' little beauty had struck up a friendship that respected Betty's pride with as much delicacy as Betty herself could have desired. The two young girls take to each other and cannot help mutually confiding the love of which its object in each case is unaware. Bella's path is to be smooth, we guess, but at this point it doesn't seem possible that Lizzie's ever can by. Lizzie confesses her fear that the schoolmaster will kill Wrayburn.

> 'Kill him? Is the man so jealous then?'
>
> 'Of a gentleman,' says Lizzie, 'who broke Father's death to me, and has shown an interest in me ever since.'
>
> 'Does he love you?'
>
> Lizzie shook her head.
>
> 'Does he admire you?'
>
> Lizzie ceased to shake her head . . .
>
> 'Is it through his influence that you came here?'
>
> 'Oh, no! Of all the world I wouldn't have him know I am here, or get the least clue where to find me.'
>
> 'Lizzie dear, why?' asked Bella in amazement at this burst. But then quickly reading Lizzie's face: 'No, don't say why. That was a foolish question of mine. I see. I see.'

Later, Lizzie speaks of hoping, in time, to wear out her unhappy memories of accompanying her father on his nightly expeditions on the Thames in search of drowned men whom he could rob of any valuables found in their pockets. Gaffer would argue that you can't rob a dead man, but Lizzie's horror was complex; however, she finds she can wear out those memories. Bella suggests that Lizzie might also wear out the memory of a man who is not worthy of her love for him.

'No, I don't want to wear that out,' was the flushed reply, 'Nor do I want to believe, nor do I believe that he is not worthy of it.' He had done her nothing but good since she had known him, and knowing

him had wrought a change in the very grain of her being. It was like the change in her hands which had been 'coarse and cracked and hard and brown when I rowed on the river with father, and softened and made supple by this new work as you see them now.'

This is the highest common sense, choice based on the clearest insight, and she sees that to reject it might give her a sort of happiness or peace that, she sees, would be delusive. It is a far subtler choice than most women in real life are capable of making, with an element in it of the complex kind of renunciation demanded of a Henry James heroine rather than a Victorian one. Lizzie is not in the least idealised. The virtues she has have been given her by her genes: both her father and her brother are outstandingly able, and despite feminine delicacy she has accepted Eugene Wrayburn's offer to have her and Jenny Wren taught, and has, with this help, made herself an educated woman of whom Eugene Wrayburn need never be ashamed in no matter what company. Not that she believes marriage with him will ever be possible. Little Twemlow, that perfect gentleman, in a group of vulgarians headed by Lady Tippins, discussing the marriage later when it is accomplished, puts the matter exactly. 'I am disposed to think' says Twemlow in his usual unassuming way, 'that this is a question of the feelings of a gentleman.' 'A gentleman can have no feelings who can contract such a marriage,' flushes Podsnap. 'Pardon me,' says Twemlow, rather less mildly than usual. 'I don't agree with you. If this gentleman's feelings of gratitude, of respect, of admiration and affection induced him (as I presume they did) to marry the lady' — Podsnap objects to the word 'lady', and gets a spirited reply from Twemlow. 'I should like to know,' sneers Podsnap, 'whether your noble relative would be of your opinion.' 'Mr Podsnap', retorts Twemlow, 'Pardon me, he might be or he might not be. I cannot say. But I would not allow even him to dictate to me on a point of great delicacy on which I feel very strongly.'

* * * *

Dickens, of course, knew nothing of the modern attitudes to murder. But he became more and more subtle in his analysis of the mind of a murderer — a subject in which he is deeply interested in all his novels. Even in *Oliver Twist* he is intensely interested in the mentality of Bill Sykes, who suspects his victim of treachery; and the long account of Fagan's last hours in the condemned cell is fascinating and completely convincing. There is a great deal of subtle, deep and compassionate accuracy in his analysis. In fact, nothing can surpass Dickens's extraordinary insight into the mind of a murderer; which is at its best in the account from the first moment

to the last of Bradley Headstone's intensely suffering yet wilful progress towards the vile killing of Eugene. Dickens depicts Eugene's goading of the poor schoolmaster and that wretched man's justified feelings of his own inferiority to Eugene in every way: in class, intellect, looks, manners, everything, and chiefly in Lizzie's favour; so that one is made to understand only too thoroughly how all this drove him to do a deed he dreaded, and yet how he encouraged himself to do it. And yet Dickens never allows us, even in the midst of our pity, to sympathise with Bradley or dislike Eugene. Bradley is not hanged, and the reader does not have to bear that. This understanding of murderers may have been developed in Dickens because of his frequent attendance at executions. Even an ordinarily imaginative person could not undergo such experiences without extreme and pitiful thoughts, much less a Dickens.

* * * *

Very different at first is Dickens's treatment of madness. In *Nicholas Nickleby* madness is treated as merely funny. Mrs Nickleby's neighbour, who woos her by throwing vegetables over the garden wall, doesn't speak like a madman, or like anybody any of us has ever known. From first to last he is treated simply as comic relief. About feeble-mindedness on the other hand Dickens is quite serious. Some details in his depicting this quality are unforgettably pathetic; for example, the hopeless yet longing look Smike casts at the post Squeers has brought in from town, or his dogged persistence in trying to learn by heart, with patient help from Nicholas, the half dozen words he has to utter in his part in Mr Vincent Crummles's production of *Romeo and Juliet*. But when Dickens has him fall in love with Kate we feel it is mostly mere tear-jerking.

Then there is Mrs Smallweed who has almost become a comic wooden marionette from extreme senility, automatically and endlessly reciting the words for mounting sums of money, until quenched by a cushion thrown at her with all the remnants of his malevolent energy by her charming spouse, the money-lender — who is almost as senile, and wicked as well. Treated with insight but amusement is Flora Fincham's 'Mr F's aunt'.

Probably Miss Havisham's case in *Great Expectations* lies between true madness and what a layman might call hysteria. She is apparently one of those whom life has hurt so badly that she believes, half consciously, she will find it easier and pleasanter to be mad than sane. In fact her madness is mostly sheer obstinacy. She *will* be miserable, she *will* use every possible device to keep the cruel betrayal she has suffered always in mind. She refuses every opportunity to be cheerful.

All this, I think, is fairly common. 'Oh sorrow, sweetest sorrow, of all the world I love thee best', goes the song from *Endymion*, and Miss Havisham recognises towards the end, that all the trappings of her madness, the mouldering wedding cake with its veil of spiders' webs, and crawling with vermin, the clocks stopped at the very moment of her disillusionment, the one satin shoe left where so many years ago she put it, cannot hide from her the fact that her misery is wilful and self-sustained. She had begun by trying to alleviate her sufferings by exhibiting them — but in the end she has deprived her life of all wholesome nourishment. Yet to explain her behaviour in rational terms would injure the poetic effect of the eerie apparition Dickens creates in our minds, the queerness and the horror. The only part one finds quite unacceptable is the supposed influence of Miss Havisham's teachings on Estella. We simply cannot believe that a normal healthy, handsome girl would actually condemn herself to a single life and actually marry that vicious, clumsy animal, Bentley Drummle, in order to avenge on *all* men her foster mother's not very uncommon wrongs. And it is partly because of this that Estella never becomes more than a lay figure. It is Pip's sufferings from hopeless, thwarted love and the effect of them on his character that Dickens is interested in — not Estella at all, in spite of the patched-up 'happy' ending that his friends persuaded him to write.

Miss Flite is the most genuinely mad of all Dickens's mad people, and she sits at the very centre of Bleak House, more than any other the living embodiment of the effect upon human beings of 'the law's delays'. She is *very* mad, 'drawn in by the Mace', and everything she says and does exhibits this. Her madness is made all the more interesting and relevant to the poetic unity of the drama by the fact that she remains a feeling woman whose compassionate temperament has kept instinct and intuition alive even though her mind is so much astray.

* * * *

Last, I must comment on Dickens's gift for creating crowds. Is there any other writer whatever who could have created Cook's Court, Cursiter Street in *Bleak House*, for example? Dickens' native gregariousness, with its delighted fellow-feeling for and amusement at all the little concerns of ordinary people, and their dependence on one another for entertainment: their ability to combine together into making a festival, out of every small happening in the community, of the sudden death of Mr Nemo, the spontaneous combustion of Mr Krook, and innumerable other opportunities for gossip and sensation. Dickens plays upon the many individuals whom he has brought to life for us in a sentence or two, as if they were the notes

of a piano, and makes harmonies of them in all kinds of different moods. Each is alive with character and observation, and together they make, on each occasion, a brilliant harmony. Consider, for example, Mr Guppy's dinner party. The scene is an ordinary cheap London eating-house of the class known as 'Slap-Bang', where the main characters are the three law-clerks, Mr Guppy, Mr Jobling (who has been in hiding to escape his creditors) and 'Small' or 'Chick), the youngest of the Smallweed family. Guppy is standing treat. Small, the youngest, a mere youth, who affects the wisdom of wizened age, chooses the dinner. 'They know him there, and defer to him. He has his favourite box, he bespeaks all the papers, he is down upon bald patriarchs, who keep them more than ten minutes afterwards. It is of no use trying him with anything less than a full-sized "bread", or proposing to him any point in cut, unless it is in the very best cut. In the matter of gravy he is adamant.'

'Conscious of his elfin power, and submitting to his dread experience, Mr Guppy consults him in the choice of that day's banquet; turning an appealing look towards him as the waitress repeats the catalogue of viands, and saying "What do you take, Chick?" Chick, out of the profundity of his artfulness, preferring "veal and ham and French beans — And don't you forget the stuffing, Polly", (with an unearthly cock of his venerable eye). Mr Guppy and Mr Jobling give the like order. Three pint pots of half-and-half are super-added. Quickly the waitress returns, bearing what is apparently a model of the tower of Babel, but what is really a pile of plates and flat tine dish-covers. Mr Smallweed, approving of what is set before him, conveys intelligent benignity into his ancient eye, and winks upon her. Then, amid a constant coming in, and going out, and running about, and a clatter of crockery, and a rumbling up and down of the machine which brings the nice cuts from the kitchen, and a shrill crying for more nice cuts down the speaking-pipe, and a shrill reckoning of the cost of nice cuts that have been disposed of, and a general flush and steam of hot joints, cut and uncut, and a considerably heated atmosphere in which the soiled knives and table-cloths seem to break out spontaneously into eruptions of grease and blotches of beer, the legal triumvirate appease their appetites.'

Dickens, like several of the greatest English writers, like Lawrence or Richardson, for example, has glaring faults too obvious to be mentioned. One fault perhaps should be mentioned; it is not exactly sentimentality, for there is no false feeling in it (though Dickens can be very sentimental in love scenes). It occurs when Dickens, rejoicing with all the natural excess of his ultra-generous character, at the approaches of a thoroughly 'happy ending', behaves much too ebulliently: he is then almost as troublesome as a big dog knocking

one down and licking one's face all over in the excess of his joyous welcome. One longs for a little reserve, and thinks with a tinge of unhappiness of one of Blake's *Songs of Experience:* 'I told my love, I told my love . . .'. But he has, as well, an incomparable wealth of gifts and virtues — and a depth of empathy so great that it can't be plumbed, a sea of inexhaustible creative vigour and energy. He tosses off minor creations as full of life as the major ones, in passing; there is a constant play of humour, some of it merely the expression of a sense of fun, some extremely bitter like the American part of Martin Chuzzlewit. (And yet a great part of that still seems to be true in the way that he himself specified at the time — that is, the passages reflect only the bad and not the good.) Much of it, like the Veneering dinner party is full of exquisitely pointed detail. Every Veneering dinner becomes most finely-polished satire. As in all the greatest writers, including Swift, there is at the bottom of all the variety and the gloom, a belief in human potential and a love of human achievement where it exists. The truly great are never merely negative, they love life in spite of suffering, fear and disillusionment, and they believe in it.

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