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**Variations in the nature of the perceived self in some  
twentieth century Welsh autobiographical writing in  
English.**

**Barbara W. Prys-Williams**

**A thesis submitted in candidature for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy**

**Department of English, University of Wales Swansea**

**April, 2002**

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## Abstract

Analysis is undertaken of autobiographical works by seven authors who were wholly, partly or by adoption Welsh, and on whom the experience of Welshness impinged significantly. Without neglecting literary and directly investigative elements, various psychoanalytical theories have been employed to assist the purpose of literary enquiry. Since the function of this body of theory is strictly auxiliary to the dominant aim of literary criticism, the author has felt free to employ different appropriate bodies of theory for selected writers as seemed helpful. Specifically, the writers engaged with were Rhys Davies, Margiad Evans, B.L.Coombes, Ron Berry, Gwyn Thomas, Denise Levertov and Lorna Sage. In the chapter on Davies's *Print of a Hare's Foot* and its drafts, the concept of narcissism is presented as being of great interpretative power. Evans's *The Wooden Doctor* is explored in terms of a young woman's attempt to resolve Oedipal blocks to adult development, while her *Ray of Darkness* demonstrates the erosion of meaningful selfhood after the onset of epilepsy. Coombes's seemingly naïve work about the mining experience, *These Poor Hands*, is shown to be much more knowingly crafted than has previously been realised. Berry's *History is What You Live*, at once a celebration of the now vanished Rhondda coal-mining society and a bitter polemic, is discussed in psychological terms, without ignoring its overall elegiac purpose. Thomas's widely-read *A Few Selected Exits* is shown to derive its baroque power partly from his highly disturbed process of attachment in childhood. Levertov, in some ways the most accomplished and mature of these authors, is seen to have drawn on her Welsh ancestral mythology and on understanding derived from her period of Jungian analysis in producing the autobiography, *Tesserae*. Sage's cleverly crafted, postmodernist autobiography, *Bad Blood*, can be read in terms of dysfunctional object relations.

## Declaration and Statements

### DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being submitted concurrently in candidature for any degree.

Signed .....(Candidate)

Date: 28.4.02

### STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed .....(Candidate)

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## Table of Short Titles

Reference is made in the text by the name of the author where this is unambiguous and does not impede the flow of discussion. Otherwise, short titles, in bold, are used as listed below.

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**Intlyn.** Lyn Thomas. interview, 1985.

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**Print.D2.** Rhys Davies. *Print of a Hare's Foot* draft. n. d.  
**Print.D3frag.** Rhys Davies. *Print of a Hare's Foot* draft. n. d.  
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## Acknowledgments

I have been most grateful for expert and committed help in mining particular archives. At the National Library of Wales, Dr Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan's extensive knowledge of uncatalogued material has been of notable assistance to me. She further generously provided me with prepublication sight of her biography of Margiad Evans and with many stimulating conversations about her. Elisabeth Bennett, of the South Wales Coalfield Archive at the University of Wales, Swansea, has been unstinting with her time and knowledge in matters concerning B.L. Coombes and documentation of the South Wales mining experience in the 1930s. Mike Petty, at the time publishing director of the Gollancz imprint of Orion books, put himself out considerably to retrieve for me the archive of the communications between Victor Gollancz and B.L. Coombes and allowed me to photocopy large parts of it.

I am grateful to have had the possibility of access at a distance to material in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre at the University of Texas at Austin and I am grateful to David Higham Associates for allowing me to have photocopies of John Lehmann's letters to B. L. Coombes in 1937 and to Vivian Davies for allowing me to have copies of letters from B. L. Coombes to John Lehmann between 1937-48. I am grateful to Jeffrey Robinson for allowing me to have photocopies of draft typescripts of Gwyn Thomas's *A Few Selected Exits* from the National Library of Wales.

I am most appreciative of the kindness of Professor Dai Smith, Professor Peter Stead, Malcolm Thomas and Professor Gareth Williams in sparing time to talk to me of their memories of Gwyn Thomas, largely from their schooldays at Barry County School for Boys, and to others who talked to me but have not been quoted directly.

I am indebted to Jonathan Pope (who has helped the process of psychoanalysis be a very powerful experience for me) for discussing with me my psychological hypotheses as I developed them. The responsibility for the final versions is, of course, mine.

I am grateful to Stevie Davies, who, at a late stage, very kindly read this thesis and taught me a proper regard for commas.

It was a great privilege to be in on the start of the Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales at the University of Wales, Swansea, and to be fired by the enthusiasm of Professor M. Wynn Thomas and Dr James A. Davies. I am very grateful to Professor Thomas, in supervising this thesis, for giving me my head and several good ideas, and for his scrupulous care and exactitude in scrutinising the results.

Most of all, I am indebted to my husband, Allan G. Prys-Williams, for all manner of support and encouragement, for providing and wrestling with a variety of software, for giving houseroom to the range of autobiographical personae with whom I have been preoccupied for several years and for ambling after me down some of the divergent byways into which they have led me.

**Author's note:** The Rhys Davies chapter has already been published, almost in its entirety, in *Welsh Writing in English* and in a book to celebrate Rhys Davies's centenary, *Decoding the Hare*. I have already explored some of the ideas contained in this thesis in articles, review articles and reviews on B. L. Coombes, Rhys Davies, Margiad Evans and Lorna Sage in *New Welsh Review*. Part of the chapter on Ron Berry has been given as a conference paper.

## 1. Introduction

In this study of some twentieth century Welsh autobiographical writing in English, I have chosen my subjects on the basis of my personal judgment of the intrinsic interest of their autobiographical offerings rather than from a desire to represent particular Welsh experiences. A remarkable gap needs immediate acknowledgement. One of the most fascinating autobiographies of the century, R.S.Thomas's *The Echoes Return Slow*, is excluded from consideration here as it formed the basis of my M.A. dissertation. The lives of the writers selected span the whole century: the earliest, B.L.Coombes, was born in 1893, although his autobiography, published in 1939, is not the first chronologically that I consider; the youngest, Lorna Sage, was born in 1943, her autobiography coming out in 2000, just a few months before her early death. The geographical locations which shaped my subjects are, fortuitously, mainly in the east of Wales. Life in the industrial valleys is generously represented in the work of B.L.Coombes, Ron Berry, Gwyn Thomas and Rhys Davies, the northern Border country by Lorna Sage and the southern by Margiad Evans. Something of the incomer experience is charted by B.L.Coombes and Margiad Evans and nationality as a matter of imaginative identification and family cultural shaping by the Essex born American émigré, Denise Levertov. None of my subjects was Welsh speaking, although, in many instances, at least one of their parents had been.

What constitutes autobiography is a matter still hotly debated by theorists. While I consider, for each of my subjects, at least one work that would be classed as autobiography by rigorous definitions, my choice of supporting material has been inclusive, other life-writing being represented by poetry, a novel, journals, letters, journalistic articles and, for Gwyn Thomas, one of the Welsh notables of the early days of widespread television, video recordings of television interviews and transcripts of radio interviews and panel contributions.

My main focus has been an analysis of the sense of self as enacted and discerned by my chosen writers. This has often been a problematic exercise. As Diane Bjorklund has so ably argued in her recent book *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography*, a paradigm shift in autobiographical writing got under way in the late nineteenth century when the new science of psychology radically changed beliefs about human motivation. As time passed, autobiographers began to discern,

with Freud, that “each one of us [...] is not even master in his own house” and that each “must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in his own mind” (**Interpreting** 119). For several of my authors, my analyses detect both “calculated self-portraiture” and “unintentional self-betrayal” (**Turning** 42) and sometimes an awareness in writers of unsounded depths that may resist being raised to consciousness. Gwyn Thomas expresses puzzlement at his regular repetition of self-defeating patterns of behaviour but seems to have found contemplation of trauma-laden events in his early life, the source of his neuroses, impossible to engage with. Ron Berry, with some distress, mulls over dysfunctional aspects of his personality, with an awareness of the deep shadow cast on his young life by them. He feels envy of friends who had had their psychological disturbance or neuroses diagnosed and treated, while sadly aware that that could never have been a route for him. Between draft and published work, Rhys Davies eradicates accounts of areas of behaviour over which he feels vulnerable, particularly his homosexuality (for which he implicitly offers Freudian interpretations) and his compulsive rootlessness. Both Lorna Sage and Margiad Evans, in *The Wooden Doctor*, trace early experiences of searing painfulness which cause deep insecurities in the adult sense of self. For each of these writers, I have used the tools of psychoanalysis to attempt to unlock troubled areas of the writer’s sense of identity, which, while often noted by them, has sometimes seemed inaccessible to them at the time of writing.

Psychoanalytic references have needed to be wide-ranging in this study, drawing on the attempts of many workers over the last century to shed light on the structure and dynamic of the inner world of the experiencing human being.<sup>1</sup> Freud’s initial theoretical formulations were in some cases expanded, in some cases modified by later workers. The extent to which early pioneers in the field were required to erect their theories using scientific concepts currently available in late nineteenth century Vienna and Switzerland is sometimes forgotten. It is hardly surprising that more than a century of developed insights into ethology, Darwinian evolution and cybernetics has changed the paradigms used in describing how a living and intelligent organism/system can handle information from, adapt to and internalise its experience of the world. The British “object relations” theorists from Fairbairn through Bowlby

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Schwartz’s *Cassandra’s Daughter: A History of Psychoanalysis in Europe and America* provides a comprehensive overview. In this introduction, references and footnotes will be given only where the material is not expanded on in subsequent chapters on individual authors.

and Winnicott have developed psychopathologies of the personality bound up with tensions and conflicts caused by success and failure in early human relationships rather than the tensions and conflicts arising from the instincts and their gratification posited by Freud. Bowlby's work on attachment theory, based on a thorough assimilation of ethological research, will be a major tool in my analyses of Margiad Evans, Gwyn Thomas, Ron Berry and Lorna Sage. Kohut, in an offshoot of object relations theory, finding that the pathology of narcissism resulted from a deficit of parental care, will be useful in my analysis of Rhys Davies. Melanie Klein's inspired work with very young children produced models of psychic development much earlier than the age Freud determined for the onset of Oedipal conflict: her model of the depressive position will be invaluable for an understanding of Margiad Evans. Jung's study of personality types as extended by Kathleen Briggs and Isabel Myers, particularly the extravert/introvert distinction, will be helpful in a consideration of several of my subjects.

A major concern of this study has been an attempt to investigate how it felt to inhabit the skin of each of my subjects, to try to establish for each what Gerard Manley Hopkins described as "my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the smell of walnut leaf and camphor" (qtd by Buckley in **Turning** 4). However ineffable one may feel one's unique sense of self to be, the impulse to trace the history of one's subjectivity and to capture and record its feel and nature at different life stages has been a common incentive to the writing of good literary autobiography. Margiad Evans's perspectives on self, written at several different points in her life, have been particularly moving. Her fictionalised account of the agonies of unrequited Oedipal love in adolescence and early maturity, which mirrored her actual situation at the time, gave way to the security and self acceptance of married happiness, bringing with it the rootedness which allowed her to develop the ability to be an acute observer of nature. The onset of epilepsy frighteningly altered the nature of her perceptions and undermined her sense of identity, but even in that anguish, she sought to describe her sense of self so that, through her writerly skills, doctors may well understand both the terror and radical loss of self-esteem many epileptics suffer. The "taste of self" was particularly clearly communicated by Ron Berry, the cadences of his language and his idiolect helping one feel that in an important sense the medium was the very man.

Several of my writers created telling metaphors of self. Ron Berry's sense of himself as an embodiment of pent-up aggression is wonderfully evoked in his image of "a solitary piranha amongst inedible weaver fish". Gwyn Thomas coins images of alienation, declaring, for example, that the sophisticates of *The Brains Trust* aroused in him "a strong desire to send home for my leper's bell and hood". Margiad Evans, for whom writing had been a release and a joyous fulfilment, when mentally crippled by a brain tumour, sees herself as a nightingale silenced. Rhys Davies, in an early draft, in an emphasis later deleted, identifies himself with the Wandering Jew who is accursed and doomed to wander the earth.

The sense of self as communicated reveals not only the pulse of personality but also characteristic ways of looking at things. Denise Levertov is deeply intuitive, rarely, if ever, explaining connections and leaving the reader to follow her by imaginative leaps. Margiad Evans feels the zenith of her selfhood is achieved, paradoxically, when she loses sense of self in interfusion with Nature and becomes the exactest observing, recording instrument. Ron Berry becomes aware through sense impressions which are vivid and acute. Gwyn Thomas flourishes by indirection, digression and meander, delighting in the oblique viewpoint. Lorna Sage's characteristic stance is innately analytical.

Any autobiography must represent a phenomenal exercise in selection. My study has revealed several instances of external factors dictating the shaping of a life story. Crucial moulding elements have been an editor's sense of what the market needs and wants, what will sell or what will advance a cause. Dismayingly, the contents of a book marketed as autobiography do not necessarily reflect in any exact sense what the authors felt had been central to their sense of self. Archival delving has illuminated unexpected forces in the shaping of a work. Sometimes, standpoints have been strongly suggested to particular authors. The American editor of Gwyn Thomas's autobiography insisted on the inclusion of particular areas of his public experience as a playwright and television personality: the first draft Thomas submitted had ended at the point Thomas left teaching. John Lehmann, his intended publisher, advised B.L.Coombes to leave out matters to do with his personal life: the book needed for his editorial intentions should deal starkly with the working life of a miner. Further, when Lehmann's plans for a series of working men's lives came to nothing and Coombes tried the book with Gollancz, Victor Gollancz insisted on the



excision of two chapters because of a perceived libel risk. In the published version, then, instead of a climactic chapter in which Coombes portrays himself as centrally involved in a fatal accident which, he declares, nearly cost him his own life and which resonated powerfully in him thereafter, he became merely a sympathetic auditor of another's account of such an accident, with considerable downscaling of impact on the self depicted.

Theorists from Pascal's pioneering work onwards have emphasised the importance of evaluating the life vantage point from which an autobiography is written, for it may well reveal more of the situation from which an author writes rather than genuinely uncover the past. The sense of self of the one who held the pen at the time of writing rather than the past selves ostensibly recalled is what is likely to be discernible. Gwyn Thomas's bleak encapsulation of the life view "Nothing matters: nothing changes" comes at a time when his health is breaking down and he is probably already an undiagnosed diabetic. Denise Levertov's identifying of significant moments and key experiences to do with spiritual growth came from the life position of the final decade of her life when she had wholeheartedly embraced Christian belief: an earlier autobiography would probably have highlighted different events and discerned quite other meanings.

The most impressive autobiographies have been those where their writers convince us that they have been engaged in genuine search, seeking sincerely the answer to the question "How did I become what I am?". The writing, one feels, has been as much for their own enlightenment as to entertain or instruct a reader. For at least part of her autobiographical project, Lorna Sage writes in the (undisclosed) knowledge that she is dying prematurely and engages, as she seeks to know herself, in a tracing of cause and effect which leads her back through generations. Ron Berry, too, writes with the passionate involvement of one who knows he is "going to clay", aware that he is as much an enigma to himself as to the world. Denise Levertov, also in the final years of her life, detects an early budding of tendencies which came to mature flowering in her adult self. All recreate epiphanic moments from which, they now see, the course of their lives changed. Lorna Sage re-experiences the power of the moment when, having recently given birth at the age of sixteen, she stepped over the excluding boundaries drawn by her headmistress to enter the school to attempt "A" level exams from which her entire future flowering as an academic, intellectual and

writer followed. Ron Berry, after one horrendous wartime trip in the Merchant Navy where he is exposed to every sort of depravity, never again accepts authority or subscribes to ideas of honour or patriotism. Rather more shamefacedly, Denise Levertov remembers something equally formative. On the verge of adolescence, she ruptures a friendship with a child who, she now sees, was being moulded by her mother for social conformity, signalling an unconscious awareness of her own needs for a self which was to burgeon in courageous stands against the tide, for example, over the Vietnam war. Others, while, at times, seeming to pursue a similar search to a lesser degree, emerge as unsatisfactory published autobiographers. While in the early drafts of *Print of a Hare's Foot* Rhys Davies makes some attempt to explore his past, he cannot bring himself to let his findings stand: he is careful to scatter what had been a coherent track of clues and blur the pattern before publication, signalling a deep need in himself to defend against vulnerability. Gwyn Thomas obscures much of the pain of his life through compulsive humour. He is able to note constant repetition of self defeating behaviour but cannot bring himself to record, let alone explore, the traumata of his early life which had so deep an effect on the mature man. B.L.Coombes, alone of my writers, composes the exemplary life so dear to previous generations of autobiographer. When, because of a publisher's perceived danger of a libel action, he interpolates a fictional rendering of a mine accident, his depiction of self — in incidents that never happened — is as a particularly nurturing and generous friend to a former fellow worker.

For each of my autobiographers, experiences of Wales—social, cultural, linguistic or historical— impinged significantly on the sense of self each developed. Berry and Gwyn Thomas were born at a time when aspirational families in Wales were starting to speak only English, seen as the language of advancement, to their children. Twelfth child in his family, the first six and the parents speaking Welsh from preference, Gwyn Thomas comes to experience Welsh as the language of exclusion. Fielded as a representative Welshman in many media contexts, he held views on the nature of Welshness, which had grown from complex and unrecognised conflicts in himself, and caused frequent offence. Ron Berry saw Welsh as the language of control, his parents speaking incomprehensible secrets in that language. B.L.Coombes, an incomer, revelled in the culture of his adopted country and attempted to learn the language. Rhys Davies symbolically identified his homeland

with the Welsh flannel it produced, that seemed designed to suffocate instinctual urges and, while concealing from the reader the nature of his emotional and sexual needs, saw his “cul-de-sac” valley as something to be escaped from. Lorna Sage, growing up in the small, detached part of Flintshire which ran only to villages, saw it become “more and more islanded in time” as the twentieth century advanced. Although the values of her Border area were those of the complacent yeomanry, she is enviously aware in her annual visits to her grandmother’s extended family in the Rhondda, that there are parts of Wales where her educational talents and ambitions would have been cherished.

Class positioning gave an important demarcating of identity for most of the writers considered. Lorna Sage depicts the Hanmer area of the 1940s as feudal in outlook. That her grandfather, a Church in Wales vicar, was accorded the status of a gentleman, gave her prestige; she found, on her father’s return from the war, the move to nuclear family living in a council house most painful. Rhys Davies depicts his *petit bourgeois* status as a son of a shopkeeper amongst the children of miners with considerable satisfaction and has a keen eye for class placing throughout his autobiography. Gwyn Thomas attributes his considerable unease and sense of alienation at Oxford to a sense of self inextricably linked to his working class origins. In *These Poor Hands*, B.L.Coombes shows unswerving class loyalty and anger at the inability of the owners to see their workers as anything but hands, generators of profit, valuable only as long as they have muscle power. He finds his working class identity a most significant demarcator of his perceived self.

Historical forces are shown to be factors potent in the shaping of achieved identity. Ron Berry’s adult, knee-jerk resistance to authority started in his family of origin but grew to intransigent dimensions in the wartime climate when Bevan’s wartime Essential Works Order gave officialdom the power to insist on his working in the silicosis-inducing hard heading, a virtual death sentence. His very survival beyond young manhood had depended on a sense of self which had resisted such decrees of authority. Lorna Sage, who becomes a respected academic and writer, escapes into higher education by the merest whisker. Although her own Border area was slow to respond, the start of social changes of the swinging sixties persuaded the authorities at Durham, because of her undoubted abilities, that it was worth changing “conventional college rules on [her] account” (Bad 275) and admitting a married woman for the first

time. For all her intelligence and determination, had Lorna Sage been just a few years older, she could have been trapped for life by her early pregnancy and marriage. Denise Levertov's sense of what religious conviction is comes in part from the ardent, life-long religious dedication of her mother, established in the revival which swept Wales in 1904-5. B.L.Coombes's chance to become a miner-writer came about in a historical climate that elevated the solidarity of the working man as part of the movement which sought to counter Fascism in the Thirties.

Attachment to the physical landscape of a dear part of Wales, an area perceived as native patch or landscape of the heart, is a compelling force in most of my subjects. For Margiad Evans, the Wye valley and the vista of the mountains of Wales are apprehended as the landscape of security and joy, imprinted in this way from the first year she spent there at eleven, becoming for the first time in her life the beloved favourite of someone — her aunt — at a time of family unhappiness and insecurity. The in-migrant, Coombes, mole-like spending long working hours underground, often on double shifts of sixteen hours, cherishes the delight and refreshment derived from a regular walk to a nearby waterfall, while expressing amazement that so many locals did not even know of its existence. Ron Berry wandered in memory the mountain tops that hem in the Rhondda, evoking with pure delight the memory of “wheatears [...] and two planing skylarks”. Gwyn Thomas's love of place seemed more generalised but he frequently confesses to his deep insecurity when required to travel more than a few miles away from his natal patch. Denise Levertov, child of a Welsh exile who had been orphaned young and who took an exile's route herself in emigrating to America, savoured her mother's frequent retelling of her locating myth of Wales — of places, people, symbolic scenes — evoked with such intensity that they become part of Levertov's own memory trove and heartland. For Lorna Sage, deep attachment is to a particular building, the vicarage at Hanmer, which was her earliest home and ejection from which caused her considerable anxiety and enduring sense of loss.

Several of my subjects have been unusually aware of what the particular idiosyncrasies of their bodies have contributed to their sense of self. Neumann (quoted by Eakin in *Touching* 184) has fascinatingly drawn attention to “this near effacement of bodies in autobiography as a form of cultural ‘repression’” and attributes this phenomenon throughout history to the Platonic, Christian, Cartesian

dualism between body on the one hand and spirit on the other and to the constant identification of "self" with the latter in these traditions. Many of my subjects, however, in a most illuminating way factor in what their bodies made them bear and how physical features powerfully influence the sense of who or what one is. Gwyn Thomas describes a period of intense, near-suicidal misery and draws it to a close by noting that he had been suffering from an overactive thyroid gland which then received surgical correction, with some alleviation of black moods. From B.L.Coombes we have an unusual sense of many aspects of physical identity: the night and day immutable rhythms of the human body which make night shifts so difficult, the awareness of one's skeletal and muscular make up that the contortions required in working a narrow seam bring about. From Lorna Sage we have a vividly evocative sense of how large the physical and hormonal changes of adolescence loomed in her life and how deeply they affected mood. The feeling of being trapped by the traitorous fertility of one's own body is most tellingly conveyed: one self, the physical, had imprisoned another, more important self, the aspirant intellectual, possibly denying her the chance of fulfilment through an academic life. By Margiad Evans we are drawn into a terrifying awareness of the loss of sense of self, resulting both from memory losses after epileptic fits and from the changes in the nature of her perceptions.

Finally, the success of an autobiography may depend on the resonance it achieves in the reader, how well it can help us understand possible valuable ways of living a life. Bjorklund found of her present day American subjects that "most contemporary autobiographers do not appear ready to abandon, as some post modernists would have it, the notion of a unified executive self along with its connotations of choice and moral responsibility" (*Interpreting* 165). My conclusion is similar for all my Welsh subjects, even Lorna Sage, with her postmodernist fascination with the fashionable codes of a period which, at any particular time of experiencing, can assume the authority of absolute truth. In a very rich field for potential study, those autobiographers chosen for inclusion here have inspired me through the personal meaning they have found in the self and the history that shaped it. Lorna Sage, professor of English and an Establishment figure in her world, used much of her final life energy to depict the suffering of a particular sort of growing up and to affirm the possibility of rich survival as a bright beacon for others. Particular sorts of exploited

life depicted, through the sheer abnormality and intensity of the endurance, developed ways of relating that are movingly deep. For Coombes and, particularly, Berry, the dangers of the mining experience where dependence on one's working partner has to be total, brought about levels of human trust that, at times, made particular sorts of male bonding the ultimate human experience for them. Berry, who does not set high store on socially endorsed attributes such as zeal in the work place, reliability or strict honesty over matters of property nevertheless reveals utter integrity in defending the core of what he regards as his essential self against encroachment. Denise Levertov reveals how infinitely more the human self is than its rational faculty, as she postulates a web of numinous connection, embraces destiny, celebrates "coincidence" and gives faith in the possibility of a richer future showing what human qualities may flourish in the small scale and personal. Margiad Evans uses her diminishing power, as a brain tumour tightens its grip, to arouse in the reader, particularly the intended audience of doctors, pity with and empathy for both the tormented inner world of many epileptics and for their social exclusion: The reader is left feeling that meaning and use can be wrung from any human situation.

Many of my subjects experienced a "laming of the soul" (Pascal 92) to a lesser or greater degree in early childhood. The lifelong neediness which resulted in many cases seems to have been an important impetus to life-writing in various and often highly-constructed forms. By engaging, at some cost, with their lives, many of my subjects gained insight into and, importantly, a sense of power over or control of the past. In making the results of their introspection so memorable to others, they added conviction to what they told themselves about themselves. Most interestingly, the least publicly searching autobiographers in this study, Rhys Davies and Gwyn Thomas, in their continual mesmeric fascination with their childhood environment in their fiction, reveal, perhaps more than any of my other subjects, that they simply could not leave the past alone. It may be significant that some of the most committed self-examination in the works studied here was written at the end of life. An important result of engaged confessional autobiography is its seeming tendency to lay ghosts.

## 2. Rhys Davies (1901-78).

While many of the best autobiographers succeed both in exploring their experience for their own enlightenment and in moving on from this to paint a bold and revealing self-portrait for the world's inspection, for others there may be a crucial failure of nerve in moving from private understanding to public recording. In Rhys Davies's complex personality, what seems to have been a fear of being too deeply known results in, at times, very coded autobiographical utterance, at times in outright censorship as he constructs the sort of textual self that he is prepared to allow others to see. It is perhaps of significance that he put off until old age his attempt explicitly to image himself to himself and to the world in *Print of a Hare's Foot*, subtitled "An Autobiographical Beginning", published in 1969 when he was 68. The published version of *Print of a Hare's Foot* reads as a remarkably urbane work with little sense of the interiority of Davies's experience, lacking what Frank Kermode in his own autobiography, *Not Entitled*, called the feel of "the climate of a life" (3). Fortunately, the earlier drafts of the work are available for study and these help the reader construct a much fuller picture of the man. As one notes what Davies found it necessary to delete (for reasons that do not seem to be aesthetic) and as one discovers how regularly he repositions material, so that its original, revealing emphasis is lost, one builds up a much clearer sense of the vulnerability of the man lurking behind formidable defences. This chapter will consider both the finished, public work, containing what Davies chose to make known about himself in published form, and the process of the evolution of that work. The first section will focus, in the main, on the published version of *Print of a Hare's Foot*, providing some preliminary interpretation against which the draft versions will emerge more tellingly. The second section will analyse what new information one gains about Davies's personality from the drafts. The concluding section attempts to construct a model of personality which takes into account and interprets what has been noted, in a way which, it is hoped, will increase understanding of *Print of a Hare's Foot* and, indeed, Rhys Davies's fiction.

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In *Print of a Hare's Foot*, Davies most successfully places his individual life within the nexus of the powerful historical forces which impinged upon him and his community.

He vividly traces the social history of a part of the Rhondda from pre-industrial (as seen through the eyes of Davies's hero, Dr. William Price) to post-industrial times. Ostensibly, the time span covered in detail is from the turn of the century to the middle of the Depression in the 1930s, yet, as the actual vantage point of writing is the late 1960s, the experiences of that decade would appear to contribute to the defeated mood of the final chapter of the published work. The 1960s had seen the closure of seventy-four pits in South Wales, including the Cambrian in Clydach Vale after an explosion in 1965 which had killed thirty-one miners. Thus Davies records his memories of his own mining community at a time when the focal point and *raison d'être* of his village had already ceased to be. We experience, too, through particular characters represented in detail, the human reality of the social movement in South Wales in the first forty years of this century: the Welsh-speaking maid Esther, driven by grim poverty in West Wales into service in the Rhondda; Jim Reilly, son of an Irish immigrant, adjusting with difficulty to some Welsh norms; Aldo and Vanna, part of the Italian influx which established purveyors of delectable ice-cream throughout the Valleys; Caerphilly Jones, part of the diaspora of the Thirties, escaping hunger in the valleys by taking the King's shilling in the Horseguards. Yet, for the most part, the mood is of record not of commemoration. It is not surprising to read in the final draft chapter, deleted just before publication, this comment, as Davies views the beauty of the Carmarthenshire countryside: "I thought that, after all, the hideous coal mines were merely a brief stain on the nation's long history: time's sponge would dab it off" (**Print.D5** 307). There is no sense of nostalgic regret over the passing of the mining experience.

As Davies records historical movements which shaped his community, he describes, too, how he learnt to position himself within that society. In the early chapters of *Print of a Hare's Foot*, we see Davies smugly aware of his niche above that of the ordinary working man, in the petit bourgeois position of a shopkeeper's family. Although he simulates surprise at the "dread thing in English life, class consciousness" (104) which he asserts that he discovers on moving to London, his family make the appropriate signals of their higher-than-average rank in the world through the semiotics of dress and possessions. Davies was clothed appropriately for chapel in an Eton collar — "as a member of the lower middle class I never wore the celluloid kind, which required no laundering" (17) — and sat in the socially-superior



position of his family's "rented pew" (17). Their "glossy trap", horse-drawn, made Davies's family seem "stylishly well off" (23) in relation to other valley dwellers. The employment of a maid was another social marker. Davies quickly "sensed Esther's inferior position" (47) and was full of "Little Master" arrogance. His sense of who he is is intricately enmeshed with his social position.

In *Print of a Hare's Foot*, Davies gives a lively sense of the attractions of being socially accepted, while making clear his admiration for free spirits such as William Price and D.H. Lawrence, who seemed able to dispense with social acceptability altogether. He seems particularly aware of how the granting of primacy to one's sexual needs in entering a relationship might affect one's social placing, and he explores the way different cultures and traditions come to different accommodations in this matter, in his delineations of Vanna, Esther and Madame S. Italian Vanna has a "gleam in [her] dancing eye" as she reveals her "forbidden mystery" (39) to Davies after their childhood mock marriage in the coke oven. A few months later, "she put her hair up much earlier in life than was the practice with Welsh girls" (40) and shortly after that, was whisked back to Turin to finish her growing up under the fiercer Italian sexual codes for nubile girls and the strict supervision of her grandmother. Davies clearly sees the binding force of sexual convention in limiting life possibilities here. In his portrayal of the family maid, Esther, he depicts a woman who fears where the power of her sexuality might lead her when, after an impoverished upbringing, her greatest need is for security. As a boy, Davies agrees to "a profitable chaperonage" (60) with Esther and the young miner, Gwilym, Davies sitting between them at the cinema, performing much the same function as her "carbolic soap which she believed had a safeguarding property against nasty things" (59). When another strike is threatened, she sees clearly what marriage to a miner might involve and returns to West Wales. Some four years later, she comes back to the Rhondda triumphantly on a visit, "dressily well-off" (63), married to a much older man who has provided her with "a bay windowed house" well away from "the unbridled sea" (63). The adolescent Davies retains a lively memory of the electric charge he experienced when he explored her intimate person on the one night he shared a bed with her as a child. Now she is totally hemmed in and contained. "Under a wide hat containing a sharp-eyed bird with outspread wings, she sat with an erectness conveying [...] the discipline of a lengthy corset" (63). The fixed bird with

outstretched wings surely suggests the freezing of any aspiration for a fuller emotional life. Social exigencies had stifled sexual potential. Moving into a wider world, Davies, in his portrayal of Madame S., his landlady in the South of France, shows how other, warm-blooded cultures can reconcile the needs of good sexual adjustment with the desired niche of social placing that the marriage contract can bring. Madame S. entertains a lover in the room adjacent to Davies's for exactly one hour every Friday afternoon. He is amazed and instructed by the "choral ritual" (121) of their unbridled love-making, clearly heard through the communicating door, and "the Gallic thoroughness which, like the native talent for forcing all usages out of a vegetable, extracts full value from the provisions of nature in men and women" (121). Only once does he catch sight of the lover, dressed in *bleu de travail* unmistakably denoting his peasant or working-class status. Madame S.'s husband, a clerk in a municipal office, assures her lower-middle-class status, while her lover is an outlet for her highly sensual nature. Davies is amused when, after Madame S. has done him real service, he invites her for a morning aperitif at a cafe. There was "a perceptible drawing-up of her frontage" and an "expression of deprecating rebuke" (142). Davies felt that her refusal implied that "a respectable married Frenchwoman did not sit in a public place drinking with a young man acquaintance" (142). This is a culture where public and private codes are allowably quite different. Davies captures beautifully the French bourgeois preoccupation with having everything exactly *comme il faut* in the public domain.

As Davies observes and conceptualises from a late adult perspective what sexual need and social placing have done to limit others, there is a distinct, if guarded, tracing of his own sexual development. Overtly, Davies attributes his huge sense of guilt to his chapel formation and in his adolescence he achieved relief when he "found a less guilt-ridden religious creed" and "insisted on transferring my worship from Nonconformist Welsh-speaking Gosen to the Anglican church of St. Thomas" (81). Nonconformity has not the reputation of having people live happily with their sexuality and Davies had perhaps reason to be less happy than many. David Callard reproaches him for being, on the evidence of his friend Urquhart, "100% homosexual" yet in *Print of a Hare's Foot* "writing much to hint otherwise" (Rhys 84). Certainly, he never declares his homosexuality overtly in *Print of a Hare's Foot* and, in comparison with homosexual autobiographers such as Ackerley, Gide and Genet, he

would seem most secretive. Yet what he does write of his early sexual experiences seems to show a propensity that would make homosexuality a not unlikely outcome. As we shall see later, Davies makes explicit that he found Freud's theories, as expounded in the London of the 1920s, personally very liberating. Clearly the text we are studying is the product of an elderly author writing in London in the period up to 1969, whose conceptual apparatus seems to date from the 1920s and for whom the relatively novel Freudian world view of that time had a liberating instrumentality. While the Freudian model, especially in the formulation of that period, would now, to put it mildly, be far from universally accepted, in discussing *Print of a Hare's Foot* and its drafts a largely Freudian model of homosexuality seems illuminating.<sup>2</sup>

At many points in *Print of a Hare's Foot* Davies seems to explain himself to himself — and to readers alert to this coded communication — in Freudian terms. Freud writes of his conviction that the choice of sexual orientation is made in adolescence (Freud 214). The models of heterosexual identity that Davies offers us as he moves towards adolescence often depict the female in a relationship as threatening and often emasculating. Though not the chronologically the first such episode described in the book, his first overt heterosexual experience is that with Esther, with whom he has, on his assertion, just once, to share a bed and receives an “eerie shock” as he explores her “electrically tingling bush” (47) while she is asleep. At this early stage, very much the young master, his guilt at his action — which was a sort of theft — is containable, although when Esther decides to leave the Rhondda rather than marry a miner, Davies records “Somewhere far away in me I felt an oddly welcome acceptance of her going” (62). However, years later, coruscating guilt is felt when Esther returns to visit, very much the fine lady. ““Had she *known*?”” (63) he asks himself in torment. When he returns from a short walk, Esther has left, leaving as a gift a plucked and eviscerated duck (64). Davies shapes this observation to form a climactic end to the chapter.

Davies's next heterosexual adventure is the mock marriage to Vanna in the coke oven, arranged by the manipulative Idwal, robed in his choirboy surplice. After the ceremony, Idwal retires, ostensibly to keep guard, but when Vanna whips up her skirt to reveal all, there is an almighty clatter from outside and a convincing voice declares

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2 It might be enlightening to pursue Davies's largely shrouded sexual persona from the point of view of contemporary political/social constructions, cf. Joseph Bristow, “Irresolution, Anxieties, and Contradictions” Ambivalent Trends in the Study of Masculinity’, *Journal of the Study of British Culture* 3/2 (1996): 165-180.

that he is Sergeant Richards ready to make an arrest. Heterosexual interest is again consciously linked with the idea of punishable wrongdoing. Vanna — a tease — runs away and when, soon after, she returns to Italy, Davies feels a sense of “bondage and deprivation” (40). Perhaps the most interesting and powerful indication of his sexual shaping is given in the incident of Mrs. Blow’s pear tree. Idwal involves Davies in a scrumping adventure. As Davies swings up the big pear tree, he sees “golden flasks hung plump among the arms of leaves” (42), perceiving the pears first sensually as breasts; “Then my hand closed round a cool little belly and the fleshy shape, free-of-charge for its plucking, excited me” (42). In this moment of heightened sexual awareness, Mrs. Blow appears bellowing “Thief! Police!” and so great is Davies’s terror he urinates there and then in the tree. Surely part of the excitement of a scrumping raid is the possibility of being caught. This level of terror seems indicative of a particular psychic vulnerability. He has been caught in what he would see as a lascivious act by a female authority figure.

From the examples cited, heterosexual sex is closely linked in Davies’s mind as he writes with acts of theft or trespass. An aspect of a child’s nurture that is often offered as a precipitator of the homosexual state is that, within the family situation, the mother is dominant and the father weak. The child fails to resolve the Oedipal stage as most males do, by moving on, from intense love of the mother, to fear of the castrating power of the father-as-rival, to use the Freudian model, and then to identify with the father as role model. Heterosexuality then becomes unthinkable because, at an unconscious level, it involves a kind of theft, a sort of violation of the mother. Mrs. Blow’s appearance as he is on the point of sensually capturing a “fleshy shape”, envisioned as a female body, arouses enormous guilt and fear. Inwardly, then, Davies is consolidating a view of the female as domineering, controlling and, as we shall later see, predatory, while outwardly he seems to be making a “normal” progress through adolescence, following models of a particular sort of adult identity based on externals: he takes to cigarettes and buys his own shirts. In acquiring a silver-topped malacca cane and spats, he takes on the accoutrements of a male gender role but also further develops the sense of superior social position begun in his Eton-collared childhood. An important rite of passage remains to be negotiated. His friend John, a pharmaceutical apprentice, fills him in on the cold practicalities of sex; he is much preoccupied with contraception and prophylaxis against venereal disease, but finally

wearies Davies with his “everlasting cut-and-dried lasciviousness” (90). Davies finally loses his virginity to a woman on the sand dunes at Porthcawl.

It seems to be in ignominious retreat from a sighting of this woman in Cardiff that Davies discovers in an intuitive way what his sexual orientation might be, although he does not yet have the vocabulary for it. At this point, the tale virtually becomes a conversion narrative. He has that day bought a copy of Wilde’s *Salome* with the Beardsley drawings: “Random little bombs go off inside one with secret detonations. [...] Delight restored my nerves” as he looks at “these sinuous drawings of perverse yet truthful human beings”(95).<sup>3</sup> Evidently Davies felt an imaginative awakening and a strong sense of affinity with these brilliant — yet perverse and nasty — drawings illustrating a text in which Wilde has depicted Salome using her enormous sexual power over her stepfather, Herod. Salome’s name is linked from the beginning with the idea of woman as an instrument of death. She performs the dance of the seven veils, and through her wiles, achieves the death of John the Baptist who has spurned her. On his death, she lavishes a horrifying, necrophilic love on his severed head. The drawings are overtly erotic, showing the considerable sexual power of Salome and Herodias, her mother, and through them Beardsley creates a series of images of potent women producing arousal in men — Herod, servants, slaves — without any hope of consummation. Simon Wilson draws attention to the multitude of phallic symbols expressing Herod’s fatal lust: the candelabrum with its candles, the peacock’s head, the trees (**Beard** Section 12). Davies makes his own idiosyncratic leap in interpreting the drawings: “even I could tell that its illustrator [...] made peculiar fun of [Wilde’s text]. [...] The alarming majesty of our Jehovah and other powerful biblical characters went awry and melted like wax” (95). That Herodias and Salome were contemptible figures of corruption seems to have passed him by. To the extent that Jehovah and his servants appear in the Salome story, they remain potent and not to be mocked. Because Davies seems to have been prone to experiencing women as authority figures, he delights in seeing Beardsley “sending up” the evil matriarch Herodias and her wileful daughter. When that authority crumbles, for Davies, the whole religious structure with its guilt-arousing tendencies collapses too. One can only speculate from the vigour and delight of Davies’s response to Beardsley

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<sup>3</sup> The drawings were originally commissioned for an edition of Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* (Paris and London: John Lane, 1893). It is not clear which edition Davies purchased.

that the drawings and Wilde's text reinforced a growing sense of alienation from the trap that women represented and, at the end of Part One, Davies sees traps all around him.

Art and literature had started to transform Davies's view of what sort of identity might be possible, giving a sense of emancipation at the crucial transition to manhood. Earlier, Davies had told us that *The Odyssey* had been one of the first works of literature to quicken his pulse and fire his imagination. However, it is not the nobility of Penelope, steadfast and loyal to her husband through endless trials which excites Davies, but the wiles of the enchantress Circe, who turns all Odysseus's companions to swine. Davies later refers to the one woman recorded as granting him complete sexual intimacy as "my Circe of Porthcawl" (94).

If, in leaving the Rhondda in 1920, Davies is in search of self-fulfilment, he gives no stronger sense in Part Two than he did in Part One that that fulfilment will be achieved through heterosexual love. He writes with incredulity of Franz who achieves congress with a known-by-sight journalist at the Cafe Royal in "an old-style [telephone] booth of stolid wood with two small glass panels in its door" (107) and is trapped into marriage by the woman who "ferreted his identity" (107) and unleashes "a bombardment of phone-calls and telegrams" (108) until he capitulates. Davies visits a brothel in Germany "in the spirit in which one visits a zoo" (**Rev.Print** 245-6) to inspect but not to participate. Although, on the evidence of the pubic-hair lice he mentions and "the lyrical night" (125) which produced them, Davies is evidently sexually active, he tells us nothing of the identity or sex of the partner in this presumably rather sleazy liaison. He has a wide range of homosexual acquaintances, ranging from "unknowns" like German Ernst in Nice to Norman Douglas and Hart Crane. Brenda Maddox, who interestingly observes that D.H.Lawrence's interest in Davies was possibly to do with his fascination with homosexuals, quotes Aldington and Orioli's belief that Lawrence's legendary rage stemmed from his inability to acknowledge his own bisexuality (Maddox 471): his refusal to believe that he had tuberculosis even when terminally ill shows his prodigious capacity for denial.

Although Davies at no time explicitly acknowledges his homosexuality, his developing orientation can be traced in the ways indicated and in a further humorous clue, where the reader is required to match two pieces of information rather like cards in a game of Pelmanism. Early in Part Two, Davies lauds Freud as "a newly

canonised redeemer” (101) in the London of the Twenties and he would doubtless be aware of the significance Freud imputes to particular symbolic forms. At times Davies seems to be testing the alertness and discernment of the reader. He confesses an obsessive attachment to a cash box “I used to carry about everywhere when I was much younger [...]. It went with me in the streets, to bed, and, once, to chapel”. It was “a black-and-gold tin box” with “beautifully-fitting trays”. He explains: “Early anxiety, rooted in guilt, had manifested itself in fear of loss of my beloved box” (87). Freudians would see, in this attachment to the box with its beautifully-fitting trays, a strong identification with female genitalia. That Davies is aware of what he is suggesting seems likely as, some forty pages later, he seems euphemistically to image the vagina as a money box. The child Rosamund in Nice is said to steal from tips left for lavatory attendants and concealed the coins in “that very private money box” (123). That the box Davies so treasures is a cash box provides a further, teasing conundrum. Freud argues that miserliness is a later manifestation of an anally retentive personality. Davies was known to be frugal, even parsimonious. He leaves the interpreting reader floundering between these two possibilities: which orifice is he alluding to? One feels that Davies enjoys the power of manipulating and discomfiting the reader: draft material will provide further insights.

So guarded a depiction of his sexual orientation gives interesting insight into Davies’s very private personality. He would seem to offer a further, cultural explanation for reticence. A recurrent theme in *Print of a Hare’s Foot* is how Davies’s Welsh valleys conditioning tended to stifle any strong instinctual life and how moving to a strong sense of fulfilled identity involved leaving behind the narrow, claustrophobic models on offer in his “cul de sac” valley. In the introductory chapter, we see how as a boy Davies felt “manacl[ed]”(17) in the itchy Welsh flannel shirt he was forced to wear to chapel. In a neat and (surely) exuberantly fictive balancing episode in the final chapter, an elderly collier’s wife speaks of the days when men, her husband included, “used to wear those Welsh flannel underpants with tapes to tie below the knee. [...] Striped, they were, bright stripes”(174). Flannel, for Davies, represents all that depresses the instinctual in Welsh life and from this concluding episode we surmise he is alluding to the forces he sees in Welsh life that stifle joyous sexual fulfilment. His autobiographical journey has involved a progressive moving outwards from this base.

If the content of *Print of a Hare's Foot* is guarded, coded, the polished elegance of its style seems a further controlling device, leaving minimal risk of unintended self-disclosure. Although, from time to time, we experience Davies's involuntary eruption of memory from the texture of the flannel cloth in the market, or the smell of sweet peas which invariably recall Porthcawl, there is little sense of the frustration usually attendant on attempts to recapture evanescent memory, nor discernible grappling with inadequacies and imprecisions of language to embody particular experiences, nor any hint of fear that memory may be betrayed once it is set in the immutable fixative of words. Certainly, there is little sense that *Print of a Hare's Foot* offers an unmediated access into an extra-textual world of events. Each of the sixteen chapters, most of which can be regarded as free-standing short stories, shows Davies exercising the acquired skills of a lifetime as a short story writer, imposing coherence, closure, form on the amorphousness of life as it was lived, and inevitably introducing a fictive dimension. The first part of "Spats and Malacca Cane" seems pure short story with its fully created background, extended conversations and rounded sense of character without any attempt on the author's part to say, "This is *approximately* how it might have been". The remarkable concreteness of detail of the telling and the firmness of the narrative line, as it shapes towards the closure of each chapter, gives a distinct sense that this is "life as short story".

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My study of *Print of a Hare's Foot* was almost complete, when, in a visit to the National Library of Wales, I found my perspective radically altered and my understanding deepened, when I unearthed earlier drafts of the work. There are five drafts to which I refer in what follows, all holograph in pencil: the first, loose-leaf, a fragment of 51 pages, henceforth referred to as **Print.D1frag**; the second, complete, apart from occasional missing pages, henceforth referred to as **Print.D2**; a 35 page fragment of a third draft written in the second volume of Draft 2 and henceforth referred to as **Print.D3frag** and complete fourth and fifth drafts, (apart from some missing pages) referred to henceforth as **Print.D4** and **Print.D5** respectively. Each of the three complete drafts contains a final chapter "Country" which was dropped just before publication. In the discussion which follows **Print** is used to represent the published form of the book.



Before evaluating the drafts, it seems essential to try to formulate what justifiable expectations can be brought to one's reading of autobiography, a genre which has attracted a great deal of critical interest and comment over the last thirty years. In his essay "The Autobiographical Pact", Philippe Lejeune posits a contract or pact, whether explicit or implicit, "proposed by the author to the reader, a contract which determines the mode of reading the text" (29). The author invites the reader to read with particular expectations. In the rules Elizabeth Bruss formulates in her attempt at a generic definition in *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre*, she includes :

Under existing conventions, a claim is made for the truth-value of what the autobiography reports — no matter how difficult that truth-value might be to ascertain, whether the report treats of private experiences or publicly observable occasions. [...] The autobiographer purports to believe in what he asserts. (11)

Barrett J. Mandel in his essay "Full of Life Now" arrives at a particularly helpful judgement:

An honest autobiography puts its illusion of the past forward in good faith, not suspecting that it is but one angle of perception. The good faith is the ratification that the particular creation speaks as well as could any creation for the author's present sense of where he or she has been and the meaning of it all. (66)

To what extent does Rhys Davies enter into such an autobiographical pact? The title page declares: *Print of a Hare's Foot: An Autobiographical Beginning* and delivers an account of the earlier part of the author's life. Further, the name inscribed on the title page as author is the name inscribed in the text as protagonist: included in the text is a letter from D.H.Lawrence to the narrator which begins 'Dear Rhys Davies' (*Print* 127). The dust jacket of the first edition describes the work as "informal autobiography". In the opening page, Davies describes the incidents which trigger "an unsealing of the past" and the uncovering of "buried memory". The way Davies attempts to market the work is surely an indication of how he intends it to be read. Just before publication of *Print of a Hare's Foot*, he attempted to sell the "Esther" chapter to *The Southern Review*. The response thanks him "for giving me the opportunity of reading this excerpt from your autobiography".<sup>4</sup> At no point does Davies repudiate an autobiographical pact, as Dannie Abse does in emphasising that

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<sup>4</sup> Letter written on the paper of *The Southern Review*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, dated 16.3.69 and signed by Donald E. Stanford. (In uncatalogued private papers in the Rhys Davies archive, NLW.)

*Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* is an autobiographical fiction or Maxine Hong Kingston when she includes fantasy sequences in *The Woman Warrior*.<sup>5</sup>

Although Davies's papers give evidence of his care in checking up on historical facts in his preparation of *Print of a Hare's Foot*, a study of the drafts brings the reader to the unavoidable conclusion that Davies is a very unreliable narrator in matters which concern his private experience. Any critical analysis has to be formulated on the probability, not the certainty, of where the truth might lie. It is hard to escape the conclusion that some of Davies's characters may well be fictitious. The final section of this chapter will explore in more detail the significance of the personality traits that the drafts reveal.

As one scrutinises the drafts, one becomes aware how little concern Davies had, on occasion, for matters of fact or in recording consistent emotional responses to people or situations as the text evolves. In **Print.D1frag**, both he and Idwal climb the pear tree. They are caught by the owner (at this point referred to as Mrs. Cook). Davies believes that he has been recognised and “badly wanted to water” but manages to contain himself and drops down into the garden to be told off by the irate woman who later complains to his mother. Davies states that, after this, “the unreasonably malevolent dislike of Mrs. Cook endured for long”. He records “making fun of her”, “jeering at her dropsical behind” and playing practical jokes on her (**Print.D1frag** 11). There is no mention of Mrs. Cook's death or funeral. By **Print.D2**, his initial action becomes more culpable — he urinates into the tree — and his emotional response more commendable — after the incident he now accords Mrs. Cook “an embarrassed respect” and declares “she was no longer a target for derisive humour”. He ends the **Print.D2** account of her with a description of her “moderate funeral” (21) when “night shift colliers” [i.e. those free to come without inconvenience or loss of pay] turned out to pay tribute “to the widow of a collier killed down under” (**Print.D2** 20). Davies concludes the section with some general comments about miners' funerals which can be very impressive when club guilds turn out with their banners. By **Print.D4**, Mrs. Cook's funeral itself becomes large scale, resplendent, “with a panoply of great banners” (31). In this draft, Davies asserts he feels guilt over

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5 Dannie Abse, *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* (London: Corgi Books, 1972). Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (London: Picador, 1981). Dannie Abse prefaces his *There was a Young Man from Cardiff* (London: Hutchinson, 1991) with an Author's Note in which he emphasises that this work is a companion volume to *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* and both works are to be regarded as autobiographical fiction, not autobiography.

the pear-tree theft and urination and is glad to see this impressive recognition of Mrs. Cook in a large-scale funeral (31). By **Print** (44-5), the lady in question, by now referred to as Mrs. Blow, has a grand funeral in place of her husband who, on this occasion, is recorded as having died of silicosis in a home over the mountain. Many of the funeral details were originally positioned for quite another funeral, now deleted. Davies himself is penitently centre stage as the funeral moves off: “My small presence among the pack of onlookers, most of them grown-ups, was all I could offer” (**Print** 45). Thus between **Print.D1frag** and **Print** there has been a complete turnabout on personal feeling about the owner of the pear-tree, very different versions of what happened in it, and a magnificent upscaling of a possibly imaginary funeral. /

Different outcomes in different drafts can suggest that Davies has very little interest in people and how they experience their lives. Although the feeling tone is more consistent in this case, Rhys’s good friend Jim, who is reported as having died of silicosis in his thirties in **Print.D2** (91), by **Print.D4** (105), meets his end “by a fall of roof a few years later [i.e. in his teens] and his was the second funeral I went to”. By **Print** (75), the focus is again the boy Davies, centre stage, trying to take in the news of the death of his friend and running to the funeral at the last moment. This handling of the material suggests a striking shallowness of emotional response in Davies, in view of the fact that Jim is presented as the person to whom he is closest in his growing up. It could, of course, be possible that Jim is entirely fictional but such a conclusion would have interesting implications as Jim is the character with whom Davies is described as having the closest emotional bond in **Print** and its drafts.

The lability on matters of fact is pervasive. In descriptive detail, Davies may alter a word to its opposite. In **Print.D2** (21), the cemetery at Trealaw is “crammed”, by **Print** (45) it has become “capacious”. After the escapade in the pear-tree, Davies declares, in **Print.D2** (19), that he has a fortnight’s pocket money docked. By **Print.D4** (30), he avers that no punishment was meted out. Through the drafts, one at times seems to see Davies adjusting details on the principle of what he thinks he can get the reader to believe. In **Print.D2** (8E), a dressy Gentleman Collier is described as having nineteen pairs of shoes. By **Print.D3frag** (21) this is reduced to fourteen and is further whittled down to eleven by **Print.D4** (15) where even that number is struck out and “nine” substituted. Davies can shift from a position where he can only be reporting what he has been told by a third party, to one where he personally

endorses the authenticity of a story by having himself been a witness to at least part of the proceedings. In **Print.D2** (138), Eastern European Franz and a woman journalist achieve sexual congress in the otherwise empty lounge of the 1917 club. By **Print** (107), Davies is personally vouching for the happening, as Franz is described as leaving the table where Davies is sitting to follow a journalist from a nearby table upstairs, where the act now takes place in a two-paned telephone box. Further, guilt is a persistent theme in **Print** but it may well be one that Davies has made a conscious decision to develop in a literary sense. In **Print.D2**, this sentence is interpolated: “I was not conscious of guilt for a long while, although its strong underswell lay in our religion”(8A). Yet by **Print** (17, 37), we have a very early evocation of how early and deeply his chapel experiences imbued Davies with guilt.

As one engages with **Print**, one is aware that every syllable is considered, weighed and mostly evaluated in terms of its intended effect on an exactly-positioned reader. Draft evidence reveals how Davies is entirely aware of the response he intends to elicit on occasion as he deploys particular tests for the reader. That he means us to read his escapade in the pear tree and his discomfiture in front of Mrs. Blow in Freudian terms is made absolutely clear when one discovers that Davies abandons a neutral description of the pears in **Print.D4** and inserts a deliberately eroticised evocation of breasts and “cool little bellies” in **Print.D5** (53). The episode is invention, on the factual level, as we have shown, but is, perhaps, an attempt to encode a psychic truth of how terrifying — to the point of involuntary urination — Davies found any possibility of heterosexual engagement in a world dominated by authoritarian women. Similarly, although Rosamund’s vaginal “money box” appears in **Print.D4** (171), the balancing cash box, codedly suggestive of Davies’s anality and identification with female sexual equipment, is deliberately inserted as late as **Print.D5**. (134-5). One can almost feel the presence of the ironic writer manipulating and then evaluating the reader.

It is in the area of sexuality that the drafts seem most revealing. Although Davies seems exuberantly relaxed in discussing sexuality in general terms, he lets no explicit reference to his own homosexuality into the public domain, nor anything that could be construed as such by the casual reader. In **Print.D2**, Davies describes the Gentleman Collier very early in great detail and this collier is clearly something of a homosexual role model for Davies. He is:

no longer really young but still unmarried. [...] He was alleged to possess nineteen pairs of shoes which he polished to resplendency every Sunday and treading our streets trimly in a pair of these, wore a slim-waisted mauve velvet smoking jacket, fanciful neckwear and kid gloves long after our evil winter winds became balmy with spring. (**Print.D2** 8E) [...] Whatever people said about the dressy Gentleman Collier — one of them ran “He’s got his father’s fixtures and his mother’s tastes” — he paid his bills and kept himself in clean and tidy order. (**Print.D2** 8ff)

By **Print**, he is assigned a minimal walk-on part in a scene illustrative of the sort of brawls that take place in the Davies family shop. No longer remarkable in his unmarried state, he is fully incorporated into “the tribe of unmarried young lodgers who, since Victorian days, had come seeking fortunes in the deceptive valley” (**Print** 73). Davies has removed any traces of his boyhood fascination with someone who resembled what he might have felt himself to be. Similarly, he deletes the entire episode of Count Potocki’s trial at the Old Bailey in which he describes the defendant in a sexually appreciative way: “from the public gallery, [I] admired him nonchalantly combing and arranging his resplendent hair over his slender shoulders” (**Print.D2** 186). He deletes the phrase “frustrated queer” (**Print.D2** 191) in the description of a strange, kimono-clad landlord he once had, and removes the banal explanation of how he acquired his pubic crabs (**Print.D2** 250). Further, he suppresses a sentence in a passage where he describes landladies “of an advanced degree in bitchiness, keyhole spies gifted with second sight and the eyes of cats. [...] *This is a profession lending itself to blackmail!*” [My italics]. So cautious is he to delete explicit homosexual references that he even changes expletives. He meets by chance a former lodger of his own landlady, now a prostitute, and the surprised woman greets him with “Well I’m buggered!” (**Print.D4** 225). By **Print** (116) this has become “Well, bless my tits, it’s you!”

While Davies is eager to extirpate any too obvious traces of homosexual signalling, his interest in sexual matters in a general way is allowed through to **Print**. As we have seen, he found the broad sweep of Freudian ideas, particularly on sexuality, which he experienced in the London of the 1920s, personally very liberating. He lauds Freud as “the newly canonised redeemer” of that post-war society which “coruscated with intimations of complete personal liberty” (**Print** 101). Freud’s belief in the force of the sexual drive, which he saw as the strongest human motivational force, and his analysis of the neurotic illnesses which can follow a too ferocious repression of it must have seemed to offer *carte blanche* to promiscuous sex to those early, delighted receivers of his findings. In **Print.D4** (218), a sentence

which occurs in a description of Bloomsbury in the 1920s, and which Davies deletes, reads “Another virtue was its discriminating awareness of puritanism, derived from the still-fresh breezes of psychoanalysis”. Freud’s Vienna was the very model of seeming propriety and respectability yet he found it to be seething with sexual energy beneath the surface. Suddenly Davies sees his chapel-instilled puritanism as no sort of moral or God-given absolute but merely a repressive construct set up against wholly natural sexual drives. He sees Wales as repressed as turn-of-the-century Vienna: “In Wales, sex as a subject of conversation was strictly taboo. It was a thing lying under a great weight of flannel blankets and it belonged to the deepest dark. Even among the Saturday night colliers in the pubs, it was not a popular subject for jests” (**Print.D2** 168). .

Retrospectively Davies is able to trace or construct a realistic illustration of a Freudian normative figure in a grandfather whose sexual drive appears both in public repression and impetuous action. A particular section in **Print.D2** highlights Davies’s sense of adolescent troubled sexuality within this very repressive society. He has described having his nose broken by stone-throwing boys and being gently ministered to by a young woman (who later goes mad from unrequited love) (**Print.D2** 79-80). He becomes tormented by nightmares. He experiences “a huge red wardrobe of blood-red wood” whose mirror “held evil” as a “tomb” and “woke to a sound of my own bellowing”. In a generally frail state he is sent to convalesce at his grandparents’ house at Ynysybwl. There, the “clean religious quiet” was dominated by “the portentous tick tock” of the grandfather clock (clearly seen by Davies as an objective correlative to his stern grandfather), “its rhythm at night less a threat than a solemn warning not to neglect discipline” (**Print.D2** 83). The specific area in which he saw that discipline as being required is clear as he describes the “genital pendulum and dim weights” of that clock. The mood is as near distress as we ever get from Davies, and an awareness that Freud closely identified the nose with the penis helps us interpret the wretchedness he is feeling over his nascent sexual identity as he nursed his damaged nose in this oppressive household. The passage continues:

My grandfather frightened me. I thought of him and her weighed down under their enormously heavy patchwork quilt night after night while the religious ticktocking of the clock went on and on for eternity but such a grey, deacon loving bed was beyond any crystallisation of my imagination. Yet some years after my visit when my grandmother died untimely, he would not wait the customary twelve months of decent mourning and within a few weeks anarchically married a buxom widow on the

sly/quiet.<sup>6</sup> My mother wept into a Turkish towel when news of the furtive act reached her — a full-sized weeping of all the shocked daughters in the world. (**Print.D2** 86-7)

From his late adult perspective, Davies knows that those who live by the tenets of puritanism are not exempt from the anarchic forces of their own sexuality. Here, the social control of the chapel cannot constrain the lustful urges of one of its leading deacons. In **Print.D2** the connections can be clearly traced between Davies's memory of his adolescent dismayed but growing awareness of the power of sex, his consciousness of the ferocious discipline that his grandfather exerts over his household, (to the extent, the adolescent believed, of the banishing of any carnal contact), and the universal amazement when carnality rampant is finally revealed in this pillar of the chapel. Although the relating of the actual events is carried through to **Print**, deletions ensure that these clear points are not made. What is symbolically resonant in a draft largely becomes mere plot or local colour in **Print**.

But Davies's strongest interest in Freudian theory seems to be to do with neurosis. In **Print.D5** (308) he observes "But pleasure for me was varied people, especially if they were problematical — and who isn't — or dire with failings or, best of all, ruined"; and indeed he seems to relish the collection of neurotics he depicts, using this term explicitly for several of the characters he presents. It will be remembered that Freud saw sex as an anarchic power of tremendous strength which civilization, as it evolved, attempted to keep in check by imposing repressive defences. Individuals, in trying to accept the strong, inhibitory demands of society, may reject at the conscious level desires that society considers wrong and immoral. These repressed desires still have power, however, and if frustration levels are increased, can break through and result in anti-social behaviour. Alternatively, when instinctual energy is denied outlet, a person's defence mechanisms can become more and more extreme, resulting in neurotic behaviour. The most striking example presented by Davies is Erasmus, in the final chapter of the drafts, who is rescued by his sister Rhoda after "the serious adultery" (**Print.D4** 281) of his wife and becomes a chronic, chairbound invalid,

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6 In early drafts, Davies frequently lists two or three possible words as he tentatively formulates an idea. He often records them, one above the other, without any prioritising. I have indicated this practice with / in my transcription. Where an alternative word appears in a bracket, I have transcribed the bracket.

presumably as a defence against the unbridled nature of sex.<sup>7</sup> However, from his chair he researches Welsh folk customs, including the unbelievable ‘Hir Wen Gwd’, allegedly an old Pembrokeshire custom which involved removing a corpse from its coffin just before the funeral and hauling it right to the top of its own chimney on ropes as a sort of farewell to life.<sup>8</sup> Davies seems to delight in the imaginative displacement of the phallic and ejaculatory in neurotic Erasmus. We also meet deeply neurotic Eastern European Franz who achieves sexual congress without any social preliminary with a journalist in the 1917 club lounge (**Print.D2** 139), which, in the next full draft, metamorphoses (as has already been noted) into a two-paned telephone box (**Print.D4** 155). Further, Davies sees Esther’s arms-length treatment of her devoted Rhondda boyfriend as deeply neurotic.

In fact Davies seems fascinated by what becomes of the sexual urge, if it is not allowed its proper channels. Rather more darkly, an incident which is recorded only in two drafts, (**Print.D2.13-14**, **Print.D4** 17), when read in conjunction with the story “The Public House”,<sup>9</sup> suggests that Davies suffered something remarkably like sexual abuse when a child at the hands of a local publican’s spinster sister. The story (which will be read as fiction) communicates something of the boy narrator’s scarcely formulated disquiet and troubled reaction and a sense that trust has been betrayed. In the autobiography rendition, however, this feeling tone is suppressed. “Aged eight, how was I to know that Miss J’s insult to dignity would bear decent fruit when I took up a pen to earn a living. She became a short story [...]” (**Print.D3frag** 14), he quips.

Indeed, in spite of considerable preoccupation with sex in **Print** and its drafts, the works are remarkable for the lack of feeling displayed by the main protagonist. Occasionally Davies is an appalled spectator of what feeling can do to others: for example, at a funeral seeing “a woman’s exposed face streaming with unashamed tears” (**Print.D2** 98); of Esther after she has intervened on her brother’s behalf in a

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7 Erasmus and Rhoda had an earlier incarnation in ‘Time and the Welsh mountains’, a contribution by Davies to *Countryside Character*, ed. Richard Harman (London: Blandford P., 1946) 209 - 219. In this earlier version, Erasmus is described as unmarried with no money and no mention is made of research into Hir Wen Gwd.

8 Jonathan Ceredig Davies describes this alleged tradition in his *Folklore of West and Mid-Wales* (Aberystwyth: Welsh Gazette Office, Bridge Street, 1911) 41-2. I am grateful to Emma Lyall of St. Fagan’s Museum of Welsh Life for making further searches and for indicating that this is the only sighting she has been able to trace.

9 Rhys Davies, *Collected Stories II* (Llandysul: Gomer 1996) 62-66. Hereafter CS 2 and similarly CS 1 for *Collected Stories I*.



riot: “[it] petrified, my first glimpse of a woman demolished by emotional excess” (**Print.D2** 60). He remembers that his boy self was scornful of Gwilym who allowed himself to be in thrall to their maid, Esther, and, depending on the content of a message that he, Davies, delivers the young man, “his swarthy, strong-boned face would either close into blankness or brim into a smile. My wondering contempt grew” (**Print.D2** 68). Davies’s version of events in **Print** often seems to reveal dissociation from pain. As Davies describes the undoubted torment he suffered as a boy in his itchy flannel shirt in chapel being bombarded with terrifying *hwyl*, it is in a detached, distant way which does not allow himself the reality of the pain. It is as though he is not there in the experience. “Adult saints of the past endured a comparable martyrdom” (**Print** 16), he jokes of his childhood Sunday mornings.

However, the same period is recorded in stronger language in **Print.D2** where a recurrent motif of horror of anything imprisoning is apparent. In Chapter 1, Davies traces the beginning of his whole autobiographical project to a visit to Carmarthen, where, on a visit to the market, he notes with alarm a roll of the flannel which had so tormented him as a child. He also notes in (a none too subtle symbol, immediately deleted) “a crumbling old gaol placed warningly in [Carmarthen’s] centre” (**Print.D2** 2). He goes back in memory to “the dreadful Sundays’ agonies of a manacled boy”, remembering “the robust shirt, slipped on by my mother’s capable hands”, before “something almost as ruthless (deleted) manacled followed”(5), He writes of his Eton collar as though it were a neck fetter and declares in a deleted sentence that “exposition of the Gospel required such manacled tribute”(6). He evokes the whole experience of being a child in coldly appalled language:

But there is a period of growth when man is a miserably ignorant nobody almost totally unable to free himself of ignoble/ancient fetters, when he is moribund, lost in a dread no-man’s land, incarcerated in a jail of submission to authority of which he has no rational understanding. This happens in early boyhood roughly between the ages of five and twelve [ten]. (**Print.D2** 7-8)

The horrified images of constraint are remarkably revealing, and although he later refers to the Wordsworthian “shades of the prison house” there is no sense of a time when the world was “apparelled in celestial light” for Davies. In a later passage he writes with admiration of Dr. William Price who tried to emancipate people from what Price saw as the blighting power of Welsh chapels and “the groaning sounds of guilt coming from within those shackling, imprisoning walls” (**Print.D2** 43). Finally, at the point of making life decisions about what work he shall do, Davies sees the

colliery as “a final jail” (**Print.D2** 144). Although in **Print.D2** (145) the sentence “I was my own interior master now” appears with coded emphasis, embedded in a paragraph where Davies describes his purchase and treasuring of a rhyme sheet of Blake’s poem “Never Seek to Tell thy Love”, by **Print.D4** the words are given unmistakable prominence, becoming the opening sentence of Part Two and a ringing declaration of his sense of emancipation on leaving the Rhondda. A strongly-charged recounting of an incident appearing only in **Print.D1** frag (15), where he was held down and anaesthetised on the kitchen table for an operation on his nose finds him, at times, almost inarticulate with a remembered terror that he cannot bear to formulate:

I was laid flat on the kitchen table [...]. I can still see the hovering of the mask of wadding, smell the chloroform. [...] It was the sudden assault that branded me indelibly, this proof of the illusion of freedom and the will. This death [...] this prison. I struggled against obliteration; was mercilessly held down by the legs and arms.

The idea of being tied down, having to submit to someone else’s authority, brings out the strongest language we experience in **Print** and its drafts. Many of the early references to jail and manacling disappear by **Print**.

Interestingly, too, Davies vividly communicates a sense of horror of entrapment in relationships in the way he juxtaposes two situations in **Print.D2**. He describes himself fleeing from his lady of Porthcawl who had relieved him of his virginity, seeing his “fear or self-preservation or whatever” (**Print.D2** 138) as being like that of the Eastern European refugee, already considered several times, who, having achieved sexual congress with an almost unknown woman, finds himself bombarded by her attentions until he capitulates into marriage. It is probable that Davies finds the parallel too revealing, and, by **Print.D4**, the anecdote has been shifted to Part Two, removing all the emphasis it originally delivered about his own fear of being trapped by a relationship. Further, some family ties are perceived as frighteningly constricting. When visiting Carmarthenshire relations, Davies is dismayed by Erasmus and Rhoda’s sibling relationship: “His sister’s submissive harkening to him is oppressive to me. They are imprisoned in a tight cramp of family bondage” (**Print.D4** 289). Most interestingly, in describing the excitement of the freedom of London, he writes “Homosexuality, a term I did not know until I went to London, was not a thing to be shut away [in Wormwood Scrubs — deleted]” (**Print.D4** 154). In view of Davies’s obvious horror of any sense of being imprisoned, trapped, not his own person, this gives telling insight into what active homosexuality might have felt

like for Davies during the period it was illegal. Although some of his changes will have been made for aesthetic reasons, Davies seems aware from his deletions and removal of emphases that such a dread of entrapment could be pathological and he is not prepared to allow something so revealing to stand.

As a defensive protection, Davies habitually adopts “Now you see me, now you don’t” stances. As we have already seen, there is a drive to fragment, so that the clear message of the drafts may be lost and he is not trapped by what he seems to have said. His title, *Print of a Hare’s Foot*, is something of an enigma, never properly explained in **Print** or the drafts. M. Wynn Thomas in “Never seek to Tell Thy Love” writes “Davies would have us believe that his title refers harmlessly and lightly to the young man who mounted the train at Tonypany station, already joyously savouring his escape to London. But I don’t believe him” (11). Thomas goes on to demonstrate how, in his stories, Davies uses the hare image in a personally significant way to suggest a creature “that knows its life is precarious among the colossal dangers of the open world” (11). But the reader has to accomplish an Isis-like search through the stories to work out exactly what Davies intends by the image. Closely connected with the hare trope is the way Davies uses his trunk as a sort of motif symbolic of his compulsion to pack up and move on at regular intervals. In **Print.D4** 220 he writes, “For years all my worldly possessions lay in the trunk with which I had left Wales. There was a handy firm of van owners, Carter Paterson, who removed it to any London address for a shilling or two — you left a message at the local newsagent”. By **Print**, the trunk is only mentioned as a useful storage receptacle while in London and as the means whereby he smuggles D.H. Lawrence’s poems back into Britain. Any sense of it symbolising Davies’s need to live his life on the move, his inability to root, has been deleted. Similarly, too, he dismantles what had seemed a very evocative ending to Part One, replacing it with a much weaker and less climactic **Print** version. In this (**Print.D2**) version, he sees the mysterious pedlar figure, known as the Wandering Jew, silhouetted against the darkening sky and seems to identify strongly with him:

Why didn’t the immortal glazier burdened with that heavy load on his back, take the trams which slanted the habitated winding valleys off the main mountain valley? ... In the green twilight I saw his square load outlined against the sky as he slowly disappeared/faded away over the mountain crest/brow. Away, away. I had a load on my back too and did not know clearly what lay inside it. I only knew I wanted all the pleasures the five senses can provide, especially those of the eye, and that the

nourishment around me had come to an end. My box, an oblong metal-bound receptacle of indestructible strength into which several customs officers were to poke, peer and alarm me on one particular occasion, was bought. Passive resistance to my plans of rooting there had won. (**Print.D2** 147)<sup>10</sup>

Davies's nerve seems to fail at associating himself, at this point of departure, with the Wandering Jew, a figure who is accursed and condemned to wander the world until the Second Coming. The parallel may be exact in describing how Davies feels but would not seem to accord with the self image he wishes to present. Davies associates his sense of psychological burden with the physical load the climbing figure carries; the image allows him to make explicit his awareness that life away from the valley will involve exploration of the nature of his dis-ease. However, he decides against making any such symbolic ending to his Rhondda experience, dismantles the paragraph and has the Wandering Jew appear at a much earlier point simply as a colourful character. Although traces of Davies's sense of burden carry through into Part Two in **Print**, without this passage the later references are much less explicit.

A further striking motif, fully preserved in **Print**, is the Ledger of Old Accounts in his parents' shop, a six-inch thick tome in which were recorded the debts of the miners during strike periods, a tracing that went back many years and was even preserved beyond death. Although Davies's tone is always equable as he describes her, it seems that Davies's mother was an unrelenting debt collector: "Untainted by the romantic gullibility of my father, she swooped drastically now and again" (**Print** 23). In other contexts, he twice uses the word "ruthless" of her (**Print.D3Frag.** 20 and **Print.D2** 5).

In **Print** (155) Davies shows that he himself cannot allow himself to be in anyone's debt:

I became ashamed of being poor. I would not borrow money even from my parents, and when D. H. Lawrence heard of my plight from a friend and sent a cheque for ten pounds, I stupidly refused it. Yet I did not get into debt. When the lurid red light appeared, I went nimbly to ground, saw nobody, and could spend a month equably without speaking to a soul.

Perhaps the most interesting passage in any of the drafts is one which seems powerfully to encapsulate the characteristics in Davies we have been observing in the last few pages. The episode seems to provide a paradigm for the way in which Davies

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10 Sometimes Davies's phrasing in early drafts is less than polished. Clearly "there" in the final sentence refers to the Rhondda.

configures his feelings and, as it is deeply revealing, it comes as no surprise that the passage disappears after the second draft:

Half the people remained for ever in bad debt because of the long Cambrian strike. But the father of another boy in my class [schoolfriend half deleted] cut his throat with a razor in a shed down their back garden. In aspect, they were the best turned-out family in the place and did not mix with the others: two aloof twin girls with a calm diplomatic poise and their hair put up early, their tall graceful brother with his considered air of not really being present in our noisy/scruffy class, their slender mother always taking trips to Cardiff and wearing something new — her feather boas, esp. a pink one, were especially flaunted and she wore them like an actress (people said it was her mania for costly clothes for herself and three children that brought the disaster) and the quiet father, a clerk in the colliery office who slit his throat from ear to ear in an ivy-smothered shed. I watched the meagre ‘private’ funeral passing below our upstairs window. There was no singing. A few men walked before the hearse, behind it, my fourteen year-old fellow pupil, stepping with a strange, elegant dignity, perfectly dressed. He was the man of his family now. To my astonishment and admiration, he carried a smart, rolled umbrella, planting it on the road with easy resolution. (**Print.D2** 88-9)

The passage is striking on many points. A man has responded to huge debts incurred by his dependants by killing himself in a horrific manner in an ivy-covered shed, the creeping plant symbolising the parasitic nature of human relationships, as we see from Davies’s use of it elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> As suicide was illegal at this time, the funeral was small and shamefaced. Yet what remains with Davies is not the sense of squalor and pain but the stylish way the son distances himself from it all with “his smart rolled umbrella, planting it on the road with easy resolution”. It seems to be the sort of urbane detachment Davies himself seeks to achieve in life and certainly adopts effortlessly in his stories. The horror of being trapped, manacled, imprisoned, the need to be constantly on the move to avoid dependent relationships, the awareness that being in debt is a way of being bound hand and foot in someone’s power, all coalesce into a life solution that Davies seems to see as a luminous positive: detachment. Again and again Davies describes himself as remote inside his private lighthouse. What could be more securely aloof, less subject to “parasitic” demands of relationships, and yet more able to give warning of danger?

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How we respond to a particular autobiography may depend on what we have felt about self-disclosure in other, similar works we have read, particularly those of the same period. J.R. Ackerley, literary editor of *The Listener* and a deeply respected

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. **Print.D5** 318. “Neurosis, often bestowing a compensatory physical toughness, can be the encroaching ivy that brings a tree down. Erasmus might succeed in demolishing Rhoda”.

figure in the London world of letters, published his autobiography *My Father and Myself* in 1968, and although there is congruence with Davies in age, time-scale covered, London literary milieu and promiscuous homosexuality,<sup>12</sup> the contrast with *Print of a Hare's Foot* could not be more striking. Ackerley's response to his deep-rooted sense of being an enigma to himself is to excavate as strenuously as he knows how and then to display the results frankly, feeling that in this way either he or others may achieve understanding of his complexities, and increase the general sum of knowledge of the human condition. He writes openly of his sexual relationships, revealing that the Horseguards, who were very poorly paid, were a regular source of homosexual prostitutes. Comparing his frank analysis with Davies's bland chapter on the guardsman, Caerphilly Jones, almost certainly the nearest he comes to describing a homosexual partner — when he marries, Caerphilly presents Davies with a single-bed mattress — one is very struck by the difference between Davies and Ackerley. Ackerley includes an appendix for the interest of psychologists, in particular, where he outlines two problems of intimate sexual functioning. He strives most earnestly and movingly to penetrate what is inscrutable in himself and to help the reader to do so too. In comparison, *Print of a Hare's Foot* comes across as impregably defended. However, when one compares *Print of a Hare's Foot* with the earlier drafts and notes the deletions and revisions, the omissions from the final version now reveal a much stronger sense of the pulse of personality — and, it has to be said, the areas of pathology of that personality. There are questions which surface insistently. Why did Davies have so little regard for literal truth? Why did he find it necessary to cover his tracks by fragmenting, omitting, and editing what had been clear in the drafts? Why does he need to be quite so manipulative and controlling? Why is there dissociation from feeling and such shallow depiction of feeling? (For example, what sort of person can describe himself as “going nimbly to ground, saw nobody and could spend a month equably without speaking to a soul” (**Print** 155) when he has been driven to this course through the exigencies of poverty?) Why, in his autobiography, as so often in his stories, does he turn descriptions of passion into farce as in his tale of Madame S and her *coq au vin* lover (**Print** 126) or his account of the ardent

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12 Evidence of Davies's promiscuity is documented in an interview David Callard had with Fred Urquhart where Urquhart speaks of being aware of Davies “having a number of ‘one-night stands’, almost invariably with Guardsmen”. D. A. Callard, ‘Rhys Davies (1901-1978) *British Short Fiction Writers 1945 - 1980*, ed. Dean Baldwin (Detroit: Gale Research, 1994) 68.

transvestite couple which culminates in a funeral in drag? (**Print.D4** 240). Why does he seem to relish voyeuristic imaginings as when he transfers the passionate encounter between Eastern European Franz and his known-by-sight journalist from the lounge of the 1917 club in **Print.D2** 138 to a telephone booth with two glass panes in **Print.D4** 155? Whence the horror of entrapment? Why is he so obsessed with funerals and why, as in so many of his stories, does he end his own draft autobiography with an utterly macabre tale — in this case of the Hir Wen Gwd custom where corpses are dragged up chimneys (**Print.D5** 315-18)? Why does he find it so necessary to subvert death? Why is there virtually never a charge of real feeling passing from writer to reader?

In *Print of a Hare's Foot* the author strongly suggests to the reader a particular authorial persona — an accomplished writer, a dandified Bohemian of Valleys origin and a discreet homosexual. My contention for the remainder of this chapter will be that it helps and clarifies the reading of his work to consider whether Davies was, in the technical sense of the term, a narcissist. My aim here is to illuminate the man and his work while avoiding the sort of reductiveness that implies that Davies has been completely described when particular pathological characteristics have been identified. As technical descriptions of the condition are sometimes expressed coldly and even, seemingly, judgementally, it is important to emphasise at this stage that narcissism is a very painful state often fixing the sufferer on a point between the Scylla of perceived entrapment in relationships and the Charybdis of loneliness.<sup>13</sup>

There seems to be general agreement that the state is caused by a particular traumatic event or cumulative trauma brought about by the emotional character of a parent, and causes the sufferer to turn inwards to self love at the very time he would normally be beginning to develop object relations in the world beyond himself.<sup>14</sup> Kernberg finds that:

Chronically cold parental figures, with covert but intense aggression are very frequent features of the background of these patients. A composite picture of a number of

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13 I am deeply grateful to Jonathan Pope, a psychoanalytical psychotherapist, for indicating, in response to my analysis of the draft material, that Rhys Davies showed many of the signs of narcissism in the psychoanalytical sense. Jonathan Pope's humane and knowledgeable exposition of narcissism in a personal interview has very much extended my understanding of the state and has encouraged a rounded rather than a reductionist view of Davies.

14 See Neville Symington, *Narcissism: A New Theory* (London: Karnac Books, 1993) 51-59, 73-75. Otto F. Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1975) 234.

cases [...] shows consistently a parental figure [...] who functions well on the surface in a superficially well-organized home, but with a degree of callousness, indifference and nonverbalised spiteful aggression. [We remember how Davies's "ruthless" mother "swooped drastically" on defaulters from the Ledger of Old Accounts and what an imaginative charge this carried for Davies]. Their histories reveal that each patient possessed some inherent quality which could have objectively aroused the envy or admiration of others. [...] Sometimes it was rather the cold, hostile mother's narcissistic use of the child which made him special, set him off on the road in a search for a compensatory admiration and greatness [...] For example, two patients were used by their mothers as a kind of object of art, being dressed up and exposed to public admiration in an almost grotesque way. [We remember Davies's middle class Eton collar and his Little Lord Fauntleroy suit, mentioned at the beginning of *Print* and at the beginning and end of all the complete drafts, an outfit which must have made him remarkable, even grotesque, amongst miners' children. Davies's narcissistic grandiosity shows itself clearly in his presenting himself throughout the autobiography as an only child whereas in fact he was the fifth of six. Resplendent in a middle class Eton collar, he saw himself as "seated alone in my mother's rented pew in a Congregational chapel" *Print* 17.] [...] The greatest fear of these patients is to be dependent on anyone else [...] and the development of a situation in which they do feel dependent immediately brings back the basic threatening situation of early childhood. [We note with what hostility Davies remembered the period between five and ten when "in a jail of submission to authority".] (Kernberg 234-6)

Christopher Lasch in *The Culture Of Narcissism* (37-41) summarises succinctly the characteristics of pathological narcissism from a comprehensive overview of the clinical literature. He records that sufferers lack a capacity to mourn, particularly their parents, "because of their rage against lost objects [people] (37)". Their terror of emotional dependence and what can be an exploitative approach to other people result in superficial and deeply unsatisfying relationships (40). They tend to be sexually promiscuous rather than repressed, looking for "instantaneous intimacy" and seeking "emotional titillation rather than involvement" (40). They depend on a "vicarious warmth provided by others" while fearfully avoiding dependence (33). As traumatic damage has started in the Pre-Oedipal stage of psychic development, narcissists often have a huge sense of oral deprivation which results in unsatisfied oral cravings (33,37). They have a profound sense of inner emptiness and "a boundless repressed rage" (33). They are terrified of ageing and death (38).

How good a fit does the narcissist model seem for what we can discern of Davies? This study has already drawn frequent attention to Davies's need to be totally independent, avoiding the entrapment he saw in close relationships by being constantly on the move. An inability to mourn combined with a strong sense of repressed anger would explain why he deals so sketchily with his parents in *Print of a Hare's Foot*, a chapter on his hero, Dr. William Price, taking both the chronological position and the sort of detailed coverage that would normally be given to parents in a



conventional autobiography.<sup>15</sup> An inability to mourn would also explain the exploitative literary use he made of his friend Jim's death in the draft material: without the deepening of the emotional process that grief brings, Davies would not have felt constrained from disposing of his friend in a way that made, by his lights, for the best story, spotlighting Davies himself narcissistically centre stage at that funeral. We remember that the climax of "A Human Condition" (CS2 122) involves a bereft husband, after a morning of obsessive drinking to numb his sorrow, gazing into the grave into which his wife's body has just been lowered before tumbling in on top of the coffin and in so doing parting company with his false teeth. Davies could hardly be argued to be showing much empathy with grief.

In considering whether Davies's sexual relations revealed a similar sort of shallowness, or even the outright promiscuity Lasch includes as a narcissistic characteristic, we have the evidence of David Callard that these took the form "of casual, often mercenary, contacts with Guardsmen" (British 71). While remembering we are gathering evidence for a deeper understanding of Rhys Davies, rather than for a salacious frisson, we need to consider whether "vicarious warmth provided by others" would be delivered by the sort of voyeuristic imaginings already alluded to, and more fully worked out in the such characters as Mrs. Vine in "The Chosen One" (CS2 258), as she spies on Rufus bathing naked through field glasses. "Unsatisfied oral cravings" might explain Davies's interest in a lascivious engagement with food, particularly in his predatory female characters<sup>16</sup> and the sort of oral dependence that can be assuaged by cigarettes. Davies was a lifelong smoker and died of lung cancer. "Boundless repressed rage" erupts regularly and unappeasably in his stories where the delivery of savage revenge brings climactic satisfaction for a character. Particularly significant in this regard is "The Last Struggle" (CS2 32-41), the horrific tale of a miner who was entombed and, although left for dead, fought his way out with amazing pertinacity, only to find his wife has gone on holiday with the insurance money to find herself a new man. He brutally brings her to submission through the power of his will. "The Wages of Love" (CS1 202-8) shows the merciless revenge her family is prepared to exact of Olga for being a lady of easy virtue, while all the while feathering their nests with the proceeds of her life of sin.

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15 M. Wynn Thomas, "Never seek to tell thy love," *Welsh Writing in English 4* (1998)..

16 See, particularly, 'The Trip to London' in CS 2, 46-53, and 'The Chosen One' CS 2, 271.

There is no doubt at all that Rhys Davies understood most deeply what a “profound sense of inner emptiness” felt like and I rate “Boy with a Trumpet” (CS2 93-104) in which he engages with that feeling, amongst his very best stories. It seems to me that, in the young boy protagonist, Davies paints a most compassionate picture of narcissistic pain which, as we have already suggested, derives originally from developmental failure in infancy as a result of traumatic experience. A young boy brought up in an orphanage is discharged from the army after a suicide attempt. He is unable to love and he knows his lack: “he had no instinctive love to give out in return for attempts of affection: it had never been born in him” (95). In his inner desolation “like a young hungry wolf sniffing the edge of the dark, he howled desolately inside himself” (97). He declares to a prostitute with whom he shares a house “I have no faith, no belief and I can’t accept the world — I can’t feel it” (102). He likes being with prostitutes because “their calm acceptance of the world as disintegration eased him”. In a moving interchange the prostitute observes:

‘You’re too lonely, that’s what it is’.

‘Will you let me -’

‘What? she asked, more alert. The light was finishing, her face was dim.

‘Put my mouth to your breast?’

‘No’, she said. ‘It wouldn’t be any use, anyhow’.(104)

The boy is not making sexual advances but is asking for succour of his infant needs, never properly nurtured. Turning away in despair from her refusal, he takes the narcissistic option, as did the boy narrator in “The Dark World” (CS1 253) and projects his own inner desolation on the world.

He saw himself the inhabitant of a wilderness where withered hands could lift in guidance no more. There were no more voices and all the paps of the earth were dry (104).

But perhaps the most interesting of the characteristics in relation to Davies is that narcissists are terrified at the thought of ageing and death. As a writer shapes his autobiography, imposing coherence and closure, thoughts of that final, unavoidable closure to his life story can hardly be dodged. Davies manages to side-step engaging with the process of ageing or thoughts of his own death by limiting the time span of his autobiography to the first thirty-five years of his life, although the man who held the pen was himself 68. Funerals, however, abound in *Print of a Hare’s Foot* and there are further ones in the drafts; Death, played by a knockabout comedian, is one of

the main characters in his stories. An analysis of death and funerals in the stories quickly reveals how little a real sense of the finality of death Davies allows himself. A sister sits up in her coffin and so is not dead; a body is buried with great pomp, ceremony and expense by a guilty widow and then it is discovered her real husband is alive and well; a man's drinking mates propose to carry his coffin the four uphill miles to the cemetery, but after many refreshment stops en route, arrive without it so there can be no burial; a woman's fiancé dies away from home and the coffin goes missing so that she never has a body to grieve over; a woman dies and her companion leaves her body sitting in the chair for months while claiming her pension; a man is entombed for a week but fights his way out, by which time his wife has spent the insurance money.<sup>17</sup> Again and again there is no body to bury or the wrong body. In this Houdini universe, death and grief can be thoroughly disconnected from each other. Surely, too, there is a denial of death as we see people escape that ultimate entrapment.

Psychoanalytic insights do, indeed, offer illumination on puzzling features in Davies the writer. The narcissism hypothesis, further, helps to explain another interesting idiosyncrasy observed in Davies — his ability to receive intense and erotic pleasure from what he sees. His description of his early response to ballet is particularly interesting. He describes “the barbarically primary colours” which “gave much more than visual impact; colour shot down the throat, attacked the spine, poked up an erotic tumult” (*Print* 109). He further describes ballet as “a sweet depravity of the eyes” and “a permissible cultural aphrodisiac” (*Print.D2* 157). He makes quite clear the complete primacy the sense of sight has for him when he describes his pleasure in sitting in the Cafe Royal thus:

Although I had long left corporeal adolescence, I listened less at those loquacious tables than received/ absorbed visually. I received much less through my ears (deafened) by bullying sermons (and exalted oratorios) than through my ever-famished (starved) eyes. (Voyeur?) (*Print.D2* 165)

It is worth emphasising that the bracketed “voyeur” is in Davies's very own hand. We have already noted voyeuristic imaginings and how Davies transformed an open act of sexual congress into one that could provide a voyeuristic frisson by transporting it from a lounge to a two-paned telephone box. It is possible to surmise that sight

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17 “Resurrection” CS1 166; “A Man up a Tree” CS2 219-232; “Mourning for Ianto” CS 1 218-223; “Tomorrow” CS2 146-154; “Pleasures of the Table”, CS1 277-286; “The Last Struggle” CS2 32-41.

stood in for other senses in Davies's make-up. In his analysis of narcissism, Heinz Kohut in *The Analysis of the Self* explains that a child deprived in his early physical needs, both oral and tactile, by a cold or rejecting mother can seek to compensate through the visual sense:

By looking at the mother and being looked at by her, the child attempts not only to obtain the narcissistic gratifications that are in tune with the visual sensory modality but also strives to substitute for failures that had occurred in the realm of physical (oral and tactile) contact or closeness. (Kohut 117)

Kohut describes a young man who had been grossly deprived of tactile stimulation in infancy but who had been able, "early in his life, to shift his need for tactile stimulation to the visual area. At any rate, the visual stimulation seems to have been sufficient to support the nucleus of a self which in general maintained its cohesiveness" (15). When Davies describes his eyes as "ever-famished", he seems to suggest that he recognises visual stimulus is as necessary to him as food.

That Davies's fiction writing was necessary to his general mental well-being seems probable. It seems likely that, through writing, painful but amorphous mental states could become more concrete and containable. Anyone knowing Davies's vulnerabilities would find "Fear" an outright exercise in sadomasochism: it describes a boy cowering in terror in a corridor-less train as a snake charmer soothes an angry rearing cobra (CS2 124-7). Yet one can imagine by giving diffuse, free-floating anxiety and fear concrete expression their power might diminish. In *Print of a Hare's Foot*, Davies describes an awareness that comes his way as the result of an experience of near mystical interfusion in the South of France:

My grimy load of undeserved guilt seemed to have gone from my back. Its substitute of self-expression in writing, some of it impure, might always be as weighty, but this was of my own choosing, and it was a full wineskin on my back. (124-5)

Davies seems to be recognising here a direct equation: the burden of untethered guilt has disappeared through a cathartic process of "self-expression in writing".

A study of Rhys Davies's autobiographical process has, it is hoped, illuminated how much unconscious process and personal vulnerability work upon the picture a writer paints of himself and his society. In order to study the nature of the author's perceived self it has been necessary to examine aspects of his apparent character to find out what Davies has carefully, if not always consciously, left out. (It is important to remember that the concept of repression is both central and very powerful in clinical psychology.) When large areas have been consistently omitted or excised in

the course of writing, it is possible to make reasonably confident overall judgments on probable pathology, while realising that the work discussed would be no adequate foundation for a detailed clinical analysis of the writer's full personality. Ultimately, the researcher is left with a palimpsest effect: an image of what Rhys Davies was projecting in the early drafts and a further image generated by discovering in what ways the first image had been made safe by its author. Crafted by a writer of undoubted ability, Rhys Davies's central image of a repressed Valleys culture is a striking creation but, as we have shown, it is perceived from the stance of a detached narcissist, not through truly objective eyes. Davies makes his repression pervasive and external, symbolised by the shackles of the chapel and the constraints of Welsh flannel, and experiences its shattering, in a way he cannot or will not make explicit, when he responds to the Beardsley drawings of *Salome* and the Wilde text. It is probable that these externals were in fact objective correlatives to inner states brought about by the potent combination of Davies's narcissism and, at the time of his first seeing the Beardsley drawings, his unacknowledged homosexuality. A reader working with a sympathetic model of Davies's psychology in mind is likely to find his or her reading of his autobiographical text much enhanced.

### 3. Margiad Evans (1909-58)

Margiad Evans, acclaimed novelist in the 1930s, short story writer, minute observer and recorder of the natural scene, earns inclusion in this study through her steadfast identification with the Welsh Border area and through the fascinating range and, finally, the self-giving depth of her autobiographical writing. Born Peggy Whistler of English parents in Uxbridge, she gives, in an unpublished autobiography of her childhood experiences in the Border area, "The Immortal Hospital" (1957), written in the final year of her short life, a rhapsodic sense of the powerful impact on her of that region, and of the Wye valley in particular, on her first visit at the age of nine. The work goes on to describe the subsequent joy, when she is eleven, of a further idyllic stay at the home of her beloved aunt at Benhall, near Ross-on-Wye, this time for a whole year, at a time of considerable family instability and dispersal. This period ends with the Whistler family reuniting and making their home at nearby Bridstow, Margiad Evans's home base for the next fifteen years. The surviving, unpublished journals of Margiad Evans's early adult years (1933-39) reveal an emotional life of considerable pain and difficulty: a largely tempestuous relationship with her mother; an alcoholic father; the final taming of an overpowering unrequited love for her doctor (the eponymous protagonist of her heavily autobiographical novel *The Wooden Doctor*); and subsequently, continuing calf love for another unattainable older man, her publisher, Basil Blackwell. For many years, in parallel with her longing for the love of Blackwell, she had a largely unhappy lesbian relationship with Ruth Farr. From all this, she emerged to mature adult love through marriage to Michael Williams in 1940.

Margiad Evans is a writer of particular interest to this study as author of a substantial corpus of work that falls within a broad definition of autobiography and she is a fascinating exemplar on many different counts.<sup>18</sup> Her writings from different phases of her life movingly allow the reader to trace the psychic development a female human being needs to accomplish over a life span, to achieve secure rootedness in her sexuality and in the world. The rich archival material — journals, some of which are reworked in her published *Autobiography* (1943), and letters written almost daily to

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<sup>18</sup> While this study attempts to be comprehensive in terms of the autobiographical genres undertaken by Margiad Evans with which it engages, it does not include a consideration of the journals written after 1945 nor deal, in any extended way, with Margiad Evans's letters.

her husband during his years of war service — illustrate the structuring of woman's experience on a process of dailiness, "honest records of the moment, white hot" as Bloom and Holder observe, in contrast to the canonical utterances they quote of male theorists of the genre such as Shumaker, who see "the typical autobiography as a stepping back of the painter to look at a finished canvas" (207-8). Her novel-autobiography, *The Wooden Doctor* (1933), is an interesting variant on the *bildungsroman*, in its concern to trace the struggle to come to terms with female sexuality, as we shall see. A lesser achievement in the genre of Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, it seems to be an attempt to bed down painfully significant experience. Some of her final autobiographical works reveal an attempt to dredge meaning from serious disability and finally from the process of dying, as she strives to use her writerly skills to communicate to the world, in *Ray of Darkness* (1952), and to the medical profession, in the unpublished autobiographical essay, "The Nightingale Silenced" (1954), some sense of the distress, disorientation and fear a major epileptic often endures, as well as the altered perception and erosion of meaningful selfhood the state can produce. Set against this, the unpublished "The Immortal Hospital" (1957), written in the shadow of death, is a glowing affirmation of the power of early love to shape, mould and provide consolation in the harshest circumstances, as Margiad Evans returns in memory to that year of childhood spent with her aunt Fran (Annie in real life) on the Welsh Borders. This chapter will attempt to trace and then interpret and set in a wider context mutations in the nature of the self Peggy Whistler, recreated as Margiad Evans, presented at different times and in changing circumstances.<sup>19</sup>

For reasons which will be progressively explored, Peggy Whistler, deeply unhappy in her early adult life, had a particular need to create personae with which to face the world. As her name signalled a connection with the famous artist and there had been many talented amateur artists in the family, it is not surprising that, as she moved towards adult life, she believed her particular bent to be artistic, and her first commission was as an illustrator. For her first novel, *Country Dance* (1932),

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19 Two literary biographies of Margiad Evans have been invaluable: Moira Dearnley, *Margiad Evans*, *Writers of Wales*, eds. Meic Stephens and R. Brinley Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1982) and Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, *Margiad Evans*, *Border Lines*, ed. John Powell Ward (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1998). On several occasions I have made narrative summaries of a sequence of events, current relationships and significant places to do with particular periods in Margiad Evans's life from these sources.

however, she adopts a pseudonym, Margiad Evans, which becomes in some measure a persona, although illustrations for that book are in her given name of Peggy Whistler. However, while undergoing the experiences recorded in the deeply autobiographical *The Wooden Doctor* and in the process of writing that book, she seems to have discovered, through testing her artistic capacity extensively, that her more pronounced talent lay in writing. In a section of the first draft dropped before publication, during an extended stay in Brittany to paint, she concludes that, set against the genius and total dedication of a Swedish artist who befriends her (whom she calls Monsieur Suédois) painting for her is little more than a displacement activity that keeps emotional pain at bay:

To Monsieur Suédois, painting was his all; to me, it was a fence that by its puny height hid a stormy horizon. (**Wooden.Draft** 105)

Although she chose her pseudonym, Margiad Evans, before making her firm commitment to writing over art, it seems to have been an important symbolic naming. Nevertheless, practical reasons can be advanced for her choice: such a name would have been no inconvenience for the author of her first work, *Country Dance*, a passionate tale of Border strife, and Evans had been her paternal grandmother's maiden name, while Margiad was the Caernarfonshire Welsh variant of her own name Peggy/Margaret. Yet, as the taking on of a new name can be taken to be declaration of a desired identity, we need to consider the likely degree of attachment to a specifically Welsh persona.

It would be a rash undertaking to attempt to establish incontrovertibly what lies at the basis of a creative writer's passionately declared love of place. My analysis of *The Wooden Doctor* will be highlighting the degree of misery and emotional deprivation Peggy Whistler experienced as a result of her father's alcoholism. As already indicated, at the end of her life, she recalls, in "The Immortal Hospital", that her strong identification with the Border area started at the age of nine at a time of major family upheaval, when her father had just retired early "because of ill-health perhaps not unconnected with alcohol" (Lloyd-Morgan 8). Surprisingly, as she is "the least favoured among his three girls", she is chosen as her father's companion for a visit to his sister's farm at Benhall near the River Wye. "He took me across meadows never seen before, never forgotten since, to the river brink; and there on a spot which was in future to be one of 'our' magical places, it seemed as if he stood me" (**Immortal** 16).



On the point of being drawn away from the river at the moment of departure, “in a passion of tears” she sobs ““Oh don’t, don’t take me away from this place. Oh, Dad, can’t I stay *here*?”” (**Immortal** 17). Two years later, at a time when the Whistler family has no permanent home and after Peggy has had a deeply unhappy period at boarding school, she has a year, from March, 1920, with her sister Nancy at Benhall which she experiences as blissfully happy, her sister much less so. As she describes the period in “The Immortal Hospital”, a feature of central importance in an experience that she describes with rapture is that she was deeply loved by her Aunt Fran and was her special child for the duration of the stay (**Immortal** 9). What such security represented for “the nervous creature” she remembers herself to have been, “distracted not with nightmares but with passions and distortions of passions, weary even at eleven years old with too much feeling” can only be guessed at (**Immortal** 21). At the end of that year, in 1921, the Whistler family set up home at Lavender Cottage, within walking distance of Benhall. When, after the father’s death fifteen years later, the family have to leave Lavender Cottage, Margiad Evans describes the depth of her attachment in her journal:

Leave this house and leave this place where I was born? Yes, though I’m 27 and I came when I was twelve, I was born here. [...] I ask myself by what accident I was born away from these people? What rupture with Fate made me an alien walking on these hills? (**J2** 62v)

“Alien” in one sense, indeed she was. Clare Morgan has suggestively argued in her paper “Exile and the Kingdom: Margiad Evans and the Mythic Landscape of Wales” that Margiad Evans is primarily an English Romantic writer, wedded to the idea of the sublime in Nature rather than to a particular landscape. Although Margiad Evans’s journal records again and again the intense lifting of the heart she regularly experienced on catching sight of the Welsh mountains spread out against the sky, often from the Hereford road as she returns home after an absence (for example, **J1** 56, **J2** 50v), her love of Wales would indeed, as Morgan suggests, seem to stem from an imaginative affinity and a romantic attachment to the idea of the country rather than from any extensive experience of its reality. One can imagine, however, that during her year at Benhall, the mountains of Wales became imprinted on her consciousness as part of the landscape of security and joy.

She feels herself, then, to have been a nervous and vulnerable child. The young adult who grew from these beginnings seems to have had a need to try out for herself

different ways of being, and, as we shall see, even to attempt to manipulate members of her immediate family into particular roles. As Peggy Whistler eased her way into the persona of Margiad Evans, the Brontë sisters seem to have been both early role models and writerly influences: indeed, several critics have commented on Evans's strong sense of affinity with Charlotte and Emily Brontë, writers closely identified with their Yorkshire setting.<sup>20</sup> Dearnley describes Evans as "fascinated, ultimately obsessed by Emily Brontë" and finds "the main character of [Evans's novel *Turf or Stone*] essentially Heathcliff" (18). It is possible to see how Margiad Evans's own early experience would make the creation of such a character attractive, even therapeutic. As she destroyed her early journals, it is not possible to compare the fictional account in *The Wooden Doctor* of Arabella's reactions to her father's drunken rampages with the actual adolescent experience of the author in a similar case. In the novel, she writes of the child Arabella and her sister's "terror and disgust" as they stand "shivering behind bolted doors with our hands over our ears that we might not hear him scream of the horrors that he saw" (xvi). One can imagine that the creation of Easter Probert [of *Turf or Stone*], an eroticised version of a terrifying, strong yet needy male, might in some way earth a charge of horror from childhood. There is a strong argument that Evans sought exemplars to emulate as an apprentice writer and constructed her own Heathcliff analogue because particular models already in the world matched a need in her. Lloyd-Morgan traces several further points of similarity to both Charlotte and Emily Brontë. On the level of detail, in Evans's depiction of Arabella's stay in a French school in *The Wooden Doctor* she finds an influence from Charlotte Brontë's account of Lucy Snowe's experience in *Villette*, with some additional traces of Jane Eyre's schooldays at Lowood (Lloyd-Morgan 35-6). In her journals, Evans regularly refers to her publisher Basil Blackwell as "the Professor", a term again derived from *Villette* (Lloyd-Morgan 35-36). It seems Margiad Evans long cherished the hope of writing a book about Emily Brontë (Lloyd-Morgan 117), although all that saw the light of day was a paper on "Byron and Emily Brontë" in *Life and Letters Today* in June 1948. She had several features in common with Emily Brontë as a romantic writer, with a similar consuming sense of the spirit of place and a fascination with Byronic heroes.

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<sup>20</sup> Several of the reviews of *The Wooden Doctor* and *Creed* transcribed by W.A.Thorpe, who intended to write a biography of Margiad Evans, comment on similarities (**Thorpe.rev**).

However, certainly the most intriguing tracing of Margiad Evans's preoccupation with the Brontës comes in a letter of 28.7.63 from Arthur Calder Marshall who, in 1935, had rated Margiad Evans amongst a handful of young novelists likely to produce work of permanent interest (Dearnley 26). Communicating with Thorpe, Margiad Evans's prospective biographer, about a visit he had paid to the Whistler home at Bridstow, he writes:

I was a young man of 23, emotionally very underdeveloped, intellectually very overdeveloped, with a tremendously thick veneer of sophistication covering a romantic soft centre [...]

[On visiting Bridstow] I found that I was precipitated into a drama of the Brontës. Haworth had been translated to Herefordshire. Margiad was quite certainly Emily. Sian was rather reluctantly Charlotte. She had almost no literary talent but was forced to exploit what she had. Anne was, unfortunately, not playing ball. [There is also a brother whom Calder Marshall humorously depicts as alarmed at the possibility of having to play Branwell.] The generating station of this Brontë was Peggy Whistler who for some reason could not bear to be Peggy Whistler but had to be Margiad Evans.

Please don't think that I am despising this, even though there was a strong element of play acting in it. For some reason, she had to play act—which she did not do very well. But why? [...]

She strode in [...] —and even in the stride I felt there was something not quite genuine — as if this was the way that Emily might have strode. [...]

[Sian] was sympathetic. As a person to talk to I preferred her, though Margiad was obviously the real person in that family, only frustrated in trying to manipulate everybody else into the part of her dream. (Letmarsh)

Calder Marshall's impressions, recollected thirty years later, cannot be regarded as a historical factual record but the general picture given is of a piece with other evidence we shall be examining concerning that time. Certainly, Margiad Evans encouraged her sister Nancy to adopt the name Sian Evans and to write, although her journal reveals that she suffered torments of jealousy and an enduring sense of threat that Sian would overtake her as a more successful writer (J1 16v, J1 83, J2 52). The psychological "pay off" she may have received from the notion of a "Welsh" writing family analogous to the Yorkshire Brontës may have provided some compensation for these very painful feelings. At much this time, in the first draft of *The Wooden Doctor*, in parts later excised, she twice alludes to her protagonist self as Welsh — once as a riposte to an art teacher who claimed specialness on his Cornish origin (Wooden.Draft 81) and once when in Brittany to her Swedish artist friend, again perhaps to indicate a personality more interesting and unusual than the stolid English:

'It is the first time that I have been inside an English girl's bedroom'.

'Monsieur, I beg that you will not describe me as English. I'm Welsh'.

'Tiens, what's that?'

He had never heard of Wales. (**Wooden.Draft** 101)

Thus although in rational mode in a letter to Gwyn Jones she lays claim to no more than "my drop of Welsh blood" (qtd Lloyd-Morgan 32), in full romantic spate the idea of being Welsh seemed to have appealed.

But perhaps the most striking emotional need that seems to have been answered by reinventing her family as a Welsh equivalent of the Brontës came from an area of vulnerability that critics so far seem to have ignored: family life at Haworth was rendered deeply unhappy in the final three years of Branwell's life through his alcoholism and his addiction to opium, just as Margiad Evans conveys in *The Wooden Doctor* that her father's alcoholism totally overshadowed her young life. One can imagine that there was powerful encouragement for her in the Brontë sisters transcending such adverse circumstances to forge an enduring reputation. Thus the persona Margiad Evans may have seemed to promise much.

Margiad Evans destroyed her early journals in 1934. The earliest extant journals, 1933-39, covering the period when she was aged twenty-three to thirty, reveal further "trying on" of personae, as though seeking to answer the question, "Who or what am I?" She frequently writes in French, as though aspiring to a more vibrantly artistic register, but the effect is rather spoilt even for herself when she is aware of her insecure command of grammar, particularly gender: "Mes rêves sont plus beaux que ma vie ou faut-il écrire belles?" (J1 18) [My dreams are more beautiful [beaux] than my life (or is it necessary to write the feminine form of beautiful [belles]?)] Thus perhaps it is the idea of cosmopolitan poise that matters to her in these early works, rather than the communicating of something that can be better achieved in the thought forms of another language.

It has to be said that sections of the journals seem pretentious. The epigraph of *The Wooden Doctor*, a French children's song, movingly introduces the mood of the book but, in the Blackwell edition, in Margiad Evans's rendering has two elementary mistakes: it begins "O clair de la lune" (i.e. moonlight is being apostrophised) instead of the correct "Au clair de la lune" (by the light of the moon) and there is a further mistake in a verb ending. Sometimes her reach is farther than her grasp. There is a discernible indifference to the standards of propriety of others, at times amounting to

a pleasurable flirtation with a Bohemian identity. In 1933, in the days following their notice to quit Asthall School cottage, where she and Nancy have been living for a year, she notes, “Our garden is decorated with old tin cans [...] cinders and the rainwater butt upside down on the path. We don’t care a jott,(sic) we don’t care a fig” (J1 5) . A day or two later she records: “*The Wooden Doctor* is published today. While we were sitting in the sun in our tin scattered garden eating sardines on jammy plates” (J1 5). At another time she describes herself as “an unkempt, ungroomed object” whose “nails are often dirty and always neglected, my legs are bare and my hair unglyssy” (J1 15). Once a neighbour walks in, to find “Nancy cutting off my hair in the back kitchen with the gardening scissors” (J1 42v). Another comment on her total indifference to how she presents herself to the world comes from a bleaker impulse, as it is embedded in a sequence of entries which express sharp unhappiness: “We *look* like two dusty columns, sister and I as we walk along in our dirty, ragged clothes which we are too lazy to mend and too indifferent to change” (J1 71v).

While it is beyond question that Margiad Evans was very unhappy for long periods at this time, there is undoubtedly an exhibitionist streak in what she writes. It is evident that her journal is openly left about, at least at Asthall School cottage, when she and Nancy were living together in 1933 and there is no household code of honour protecting its privacy: “Here it isn’t possible to write secrets in a book which lies open for anyone to see; like a delirious mind, the property of any overhearer” (J1 4). Sometimes pages have been torn out of her journal, presumably where she feels her comments have been excessive; sometimes she scores out in Indian ink, while leaving some key phrases which suggest that the excised portions have been about powerful negative feelings about Nancy. On one occasion there are four blacked-out pages. The effect can be histrionic. On occasion, she catches herself out in the self-indulgence and a climax of Romantically expressed anger about elements of suspected betrayal in the relationship with Ruth Farr collapses into farce:

May [...] the spiders spin in her windows, the weeds choke her flowers, the owls fly blindly by day. Python passion...Aw shit!’ (J1 59)

Such humorous self-deflation is, however, rare.

*The Wooden Doctor* could be regarded as Margiad Evans’s major, published, autobiographical act, in spite of her conventional disclaimer that “all characters in the book are purely imaginary”. Arabella Warden, the protagonist, is at the same age at

various stages of the book as Margiad Evans was in accomplishing similar stages, and shares her author's artistic and literary talents. The life of each is overshadowed by an alcoholic father and a mother with considerable musical gifts, who is only intermittently supportive. The late adolescence and early adult life of each is traumatised by agonising attacks of cystitis. Each, while living in the Welsh Border area, spends a period as a pupil teacher at a school in France. Each lives for a period with a cousin in Oxfordshire, and stays on a farm in North Wales to finish writing a first book.<sup>21</sup> Both Arabella and Margiad Evans cherish an unrequited, obsessive love for their middle-aged Irish doctor. Further, Margiad Evans entitles her 1935-9 journal *Arabella's Voice* and she is known as Arabella to her publisher, Basil Blackwell. In the first draft, she frequently forgets her assumed identity, Arabella, and has people address her as Miss Whistler and Peggy, and the Irish doctor is referred to by his real-life name of Dr. Dunlop. Inevitably, however, there is some simplifying and reshaping of her actual life circumstances. The Whistler brother is dropped entirely, and a first-draft lyrically happy account of a long stay in Brittany to paint disappears, presumably to increase the bleak tenor of the book and to enhance the profile of "Growth of the Artist as Writer". But more important than the exact degree of congruence between life happenings and relationships and the "fictional" ones is the sense the book conveys of being what Gide would call *veridique* — having the authentic feeling of truth (quoted Nalbantian 18). Early critics felt this. The *Everyman* reviewer of 25.3.33 describes *The Wooden Doctor* as "An almost terrifyingly alive piece of autobiography" and the *Morning Post* one on 24.3.33 ponders "How much of it is purely personal experience?" (Thorpe.rev). Many years later, Margiad Evans records in her journal: "Very late last night I read *The Wooden Doctor*. What pain I was in when I wrote that. It was like standing in my own grave to read it" (J2 145v). She evidently feels that she is looking back on a period of her life.

Why did Margiad Evans need to write this particular book and why did she choose the mode of fiction? As, in *The Wooden Doctor*, Margiad Evans is dealing with very recent painful events in her life and is evoking particular significant figures in an unflattering way, the marketing of the book as a novel seems to have been inevitable.

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21 I have not been able to determine whether the fictional affair with a young Englishman took place on the farm in real life but Margiad Evans's first extant journal of February 1933 mentions a young man, Edward, who is coming to stay for the night and whom she believes she may marry within a year. In the first draft of *The Wooden Doctor* the young lover on the farm is called Edward.

As Patricia Spacks in "Selves in Hiding" put it: "Autobiographies, almost by definition, make the private public" (112). The Prelude declares:

My father did more than drink occasionally; he was a habitual and incurable drunkard. No word was ever more accurately or deservedly applied; no family was ever rendered more miserable by its justice. (*Wooden* xvi)

The mother is revealed again and again as unsupportive in crucially important areas. Furthermore, the doctor for whom Margiad cherishes a long-term unrequited love would have been easily identifiable. She rather blows her cover in any case by dedicating the book to the Wooden Doctor, so described because of her perception of his impassive reaction to her declaration of love but also, perhaps, to indicate his iconic significance: the first draft had entitled the book "The Divine Image". It is possible to identify a range of conceivable motives, both conscious and unconscious, for writing in the way she did. At one time she records in her journal: "I write all this *because I want to forget it*. I always write what I want to get rid of" (J2 117). In *The Wooden Doctor*, writing of another pain, she has her young heroine declare: "I *had* suffered, I was afraid to confess even to my mother, to make it concrete. I had hidden it within my mind" (77). Her story of painful, obsessive love ends with the fifty-year-old doctor, who has gently offered Arabella, Margiad Evans's fictional self-recreation, the reply, "Autumn cannot mate with spring" (140), marrying a young woman, just as Dr Dunlop, the model for Dr Flaherty, had in the real world (220). "Making it concrete" was perhaps a means of defining and possibly mastering the pain of rejection.

Just as Virginia Woolf finally purged herself of her obsessive memories of her beloved mother who died when she was thirteen, by making her glowingly external and real in *To the Lighthouse*, so, perhaps, Margiad Evans hoped that the writing of the book would distance the events it dealt with and diminish their pain. Her journal records that she sent Dr. Dunlop proof copies of *The Wooden Doctor* and is surprised to receive no response (J1 2, 3v). It seems possible that she hoped that, by revealing to him the extent of her suffering, she would stir him to some recognition and response. The strongest motivation, however, would seem to be an attempt to come to terms with the experience and to derive comfort from fuller understanding. In "Towards a Theory of Form in Feminist Autobiography", Juhasz quotes Weintraub :

History and autobiography derive their value from rendering significant portions of the past as interpreted past; for both the incoherent realia of life have been sorted out

and those selected have been assigned their fitting place in a fuller pattern of meaning. (Juhasz 222)

Adoption of a fictional mode gives Margiad Evans particular freedom in patterning her experience poetically, symbolically. She is a strongly intuitive writer, trusting what floats up from her deepest unconscious processes. While this study will embrace, in the main, a Freudian framework of interpretation and later developments from this, in its tracing the power of the Oedipal feelings at work in Margiad Evans, one cannot determine with any certainty whether what becomes clear to the initiated reader was also transparent to the writer, as was clearly the case in Rhys Davies's use of Freudian concepts. In the light of subsequent journal entries, probably not. Yet, as one continues through the journals, tracing Margiad Evans's subsequent compulsive need of a further father-figure-as-love-object in Basil Blackwell, in a second reading of *The Wooden Doctor*, one becomes aware that the writer has perhaps known more than she can consciously access. Indeed, Roy Pascal in *Design and Truth in Autobiography* highlights the intuitive knowledge that autobiographical writing may encourage:

Autobiography provides us then with what Susanne Langer defines as the achievement of art, "the intuitive knowledge of some unique experience", which as such is representative of life altogether. [...] Muir and Spender both say it is impossible to know oneself. What they mean is that one cannot come to a scientific or "discursive" knowledge of oneself and the meaning of one's life. But their autobiographies do give a different sort of knowledge, an intuitive knowledge that is quite as true as any other sort, and as important as far as the job of living is concerned. (186)

The dedication in the novel is to the Wooden Doctor and underneath is placed an epigraph, a haunting French nursery song, "Au clair de la lune". The narrative voice implores Pierrot to open his door and give her light, because she stands in darkness with her candle burnt out. In this way, Margiad Evans places herself in a child's relationship to the doctor, expressing a deep need that only he can answer.

The Prelude sets the scene, with some elucidation of situations and events which precede the main action. The Warden family live in a private hell, isolated in their neighbourhood by the father's alcoholism. Their doctor, middle-aged and unmarried, is one of their rare visitors and is a soothing and beneficent presence. Arabella, the middle child, is apprehensively on the threshold of menarche. The Prelude opens with a placing of the three sisters. The eldest, Catherine, pubescent, is described as returning from boarding school changed:



Her short crop had been allowed to grow into soft curls on her neck and her breast was no longer flat. We asked her if she did not find this uncomfortable? She said not in the least. (ix)

We become quickly aware that Arabella, the narrator, has no opinion of her physical allure:

Our relations said Catherine was beautiful and Esther promised well in spite of her deplorable tendency to make the worst of herself but I should always be plain. (x)

The following year, Esther observes that Arabella will soon be like Catherine:

I looked down at myself angrily, noticing faint curves of flesh.

A servant had warned me that I would soon experience other changes.

[...]I was aware that I had entered into a new region where as yet [Esther] could not follow me. (xii)

Arabella, then, believes herself to be unattractive as she stands on the brink of a stage which will bring physical and emotional changes, which she only partly understands and certainly fears. The Prelude vividly encapsulates the course of the father's alcoholism and its effect on the family. Margiad Evans, later to become a most exact observer of nature in its minutest manifestations, describes how the mother's efforts to protect the children from the effects of the father's alcoholism are subverted, partly by the father's tendency to roam "and partly because our perceptions were really abnormally acute"(xvi). It is startling to consider that the highly developed powers of observation may have been fostered as a survival strategy in youth in the family of a violent alcoholic.

As we grew older, there was less violence, and by that time, very little could touch us. [...] Where we had feared and hated we now pitied and despised: our father's attitude reacted to the change. His health gave way, he became quieter in his degradation, in his ruin more complete. (xvii)

In the course of the Prelude and the first few pages of the novel proper, Arabella moves from the age of twelve to sixteen and her point of departure for the wider world. Nothing that she has seen in her own family has caused her to feel confident in her own sexuality or sanguine of the potential for fulfilment in the relationship between the sexes. In the middle of the night before Arabella is due to leave for a period as pupil teacher in France, her father returns in a particularly horrifying state of drunkenness:

Desperately, wearily, sternly, with all her heart my mother cried:

'See the horrors of a drunken man'.

I looked for all my life. (4)

The final sentence is resonantly telling. At a point of near departure from her frightening father, she allows herself to record consciously the full range of feelings he has subjected her to.

At this point, the doctor implicitly moves into position as a substitute parent:

The next day I was too ill to travel, and the doctor came. All that I craved, all the things existence had so far denied me, I found in him, and in him only. [...]

I had been in pain – it was over. I had longed for him — he was there. My bare arm lay along my side. His hand rested on it.

After he had gone, I slept till midnight when a furious gale awoke. [...] Sheltered from the frenzied uproar without, the lamp upon the table by my bed burned steadily without a flicker. (4-6)

In a functioning family, a primary parenting role is the nurture and protection of the young. In Arabella's family of origin, the father is often frightening and unpredictable and, when alarmingly drunk, reverses roles in asking for help from his children; the mother can do little to preserve a safe and loving environment. Neither is to be trusted in terms of establishing secure boundaries. In Arabella's perception, the doctor moves in as surrogate protector, in whose shelter the flame of life can burn more securely.

Arabella's time in France, her first attempt to live away from her family, is deeply unhappy. Cold, undernourished, suffering from eye-strain because of inadequate lighting, she finds that her innocent friendship with a young Englishman gravely offends the bourgeois proprieties of the head teacher who angrily writes her version of events to Arabella's mother (47). The unreliability of that parent as a confidante and protector is underlined when she accepts the Frenchwoman's account without discussion and writes bitterly to Arabella. The Warden family's inability to preserve normal limits is again revealed when the mother opens a letter intended for Arabella's sister (69). In this way, she discovers the depth of Arabella's misery. She allows Arabella to return home at Christmas but is impulsive, capricious in subsequent decisions:

My mother met me in Paris. She thought I looked well, and regretted having sent for me; before we crossed the Channel she had decided I must return. (71)

It is the doctor who realises the importance of release for Arabella, and, with wholesome gales of laughter, gives her the means of effecting it.

In Part Two, Arabella discovers her talent as an artist and through it, the perceived power of female sexuality. Interestingly, in a reaction similar to the one we have

already observed in Rhys Davies, she is “pierced by delight” and “her imagination leapt” (75) when she comes upon some of Aubrey Beardsley’s more notorious drawings. It is the sense of contained power that seems to fascinate her:

Those ordered fantasies, those formal visions, those fairy things cased in whalebone, queer figures in cold blood cast from white-hot fancy...this curbed riot, this dammed river, how it bore me away! The Elizabethan explorer who climbed a palm tree and from thence espied the Pacific Ocean was not more aghast at his discovery than I at mine.

I began to draw with Indian ink. The first drawing I made was Jezebel in a striped shawl, her breasts naked, [...] two dogs licking their chops in her shadow. (75)

Her talent recognised, she is sent to art school:

We drew skulls and vases and a girl who wore all her clothes. A nude model was unprocurable (76).

Where she has discovered in herself a yearning to explore the power of human sexuality, at one remove, through the safety of drawing, and to investigate imaginatively her sense of what the female body may be a site for, she is given what she perceives as tame objects to draw, only to develop the skill of draughtsmanship. At this point, Arabella is clearly needing to pass through a Lacanian mirror stage: to gaze at a mature female form, draw it and to own it as part of her perceived identity. She is not given the means to achieve this. Winning her parents’ approval, she completes her first artistic commission and is on the threshold of adult life and a career. She takes the canary’s cage out into the garden. “I saw the sky through the bars of his cage” (76). Later, she takes off all her clothes; “the garden was so deep in leaves”. That night she is overcome by agonising pain. The acceptance of adult status seems to produce conflict (77). In one who has perceived within the family the hell that the gaining of mature adult sexuality can unleash, this is hardly surprising. The doctor comes and diagnoses cystitis. The disease proves intractable and after many weeks she is sent to see a specialist for investigation in his nursing home. Her doctor, knowing the family lack of resources, intervenes on Arabella’s behalf and the specialist agrees to charge very little.

I leaned back against my pillow burning with thoughts of the Wooden Doctor. The idea that he was doing so much for me thrilled me with delight. What should I do without him; at any time, well or ill, what should I have done without him. (86-7)

For someone as emotionally deprived as Arabella, her illness provides a considerable pay-off, guaranteeing the continuing care and consideration of a consistent fatherly human being and justification for regression. Her first tentative and innocent

experience with someone of the opposite sex, the young Englishman in France, has ended in misunderstanding and disgrace. Beardsley has taught her something further of the power of female sexuality. On the verge of adult life, as her first commission is completed, she becomes agonisingly afflicted in an area that would make any genital engagement problematic. Given that Arabella is a fictional character, it is possible that it is no coincidence that the author here makes it impossible for her to engage in any serious sexual expression.

Returning home, Arabella again becomes ill.

I had another attack and our father had a roaring drinking bout. Esther and I could not restrain our shouts of derision. To quench the stream of abuse we pretended to have hysterics and yelled and laughed till our father sat down in his armchair. [...] He ejaculated softly:

'You little bitches, you *bloody* little bitches'.

I banged on the piano with my fists. Esther's enormous eyes were wide and black, all her features were sharpened, strained. Our mother wept. (92-3)

It is a nightmare scenario. Psychoanalysts argue that the achievement of mature adult sexuality, genital sexuality, is dependent on having first experienced powerful love for the parent or other carer of the opposite sex in early childhood at the Oedipal stage. Indeed, this intense relationship has been seen to have profound and central significance in future personality development. This love is normally safely and flirtatiously touched into life again in adolescence as, during normal development, the young person moves inexorably onwards to becoming a free-standing sexual being. The evidence of Margiad Evans's journals, as we shall see, seems to indicate that she became fixated at the Oedipal stage, needing to draw in surrogate fathers to fulfil an overwhelming emotional need, before she could move onwards. This climactic exchange with Arabella's drunken father is an important representative scene in the unfolding autobiography, making clear why Arabella is inescapably drawn into an overwhelming love for the supportive, reliable and utterly consistent doctor.

As her cystitis proves unamenable to treatment, she is sent to a hospital for longer investigation. There is no support from her family even in matters of clean nightclothes. As she observes the face of a dying woman, she becomes aware of the depth of her alienation from her own mother and that the Wooden Doctor is her only emotional support (105). As the tests are extremely painful, she becomes aware of her female body as a site of anguish. On returning home, when she has to report that

no discernible cause for her illness has been found, her mother coldly attributes her problem to nerves. Minutes later, she lavishes endearments and protests her love:

I did not believe her. Esther yawned and refilled the teapot. Our eyes met with deep understanding. (119)

Arabella comes to view herself more and more as unattractive and undesirable. In visiting a former employer she is greeted most affectionately but the small boy comments that she is “as ugly as ever” (121). She is aware that her hostess is loved and admired by two men. At last she acknowledges in her own heart that she deeply loves the doctor and, henceforth, significantly, refers to him as Papa Doctor (124). Such a naming seems to acknowledge an awareness of his unavailability to her as a sexual partner. As Margiad Evans tells the story, when Arabella first recognises her love for the doctor, she knows that he is unattainable and that one day she will change the precious existing relationship by being driven to tell him of her love.

One day I would have to tell him what could no longer be borne alone; not for consummation, not in hope; for ease in desperation. To lose my friend for a shadowy lover that could never be mine. Folly...folly. (126)

It seems plain that she is aware at some level that she has directed her passionate feelings in a safe direction. Still unconsciously at the Oedipal stage, genital consummation is not a goal. As she drifts to sleep one night after visiting the doctor, the mood of the epigraph comes upon her very powerfully:

I drowsed till I thought that once more I stood on the steps facing the closed door and ringing the bell with all my strength, cried out:

‘Let me in, Papa, this is my home’. (127)

Part Two builds to a climax as she crosses the Rubicon of declaring her love, presumably by letter. Visiting him soon after this, she is gently told: “My dear, it’s impossible; autumn cannot mate with Spring—”(140). Returning to her cousin’s house desolate, she compares her lot with her cousin:

My cousin had a beautiful face. [...] Savagely I envied her, not for what she had, but for what she might have had. To myself I cried: ‘J’ai perdu, perdu; elle aurait gagnée!’ [I have lost, lost; she would have won!] (145)

She is tormented by the fullness of the loving relationship she sees between her cousin and her husband. The depth of misery is very real, but after the passage of time, she believes that she has moved on. Later, when staying at a farm in Caernarfonshire to complete her first book, she has a love affair with a young Englishman, Oliver, and they plan to marry. Oliver declares: “I offer you tenderness and devotion. You stand

in need of both” (209). She completes her book at the farm and that very night is attacked again by cystitis but this does not darken her mood of triumphant achievement. Yet in the final page of the book, she returns home and meets the Wooden Doctor (often referred to as the Irishman) by chance in the street. The final ten lines of the book are reproduced in full:

‘Arabella, are ye back again?

‘Oh Papa – ‘ I stammered.

It looks absurd written down, the conviction that I could not marry any other man.  
Yet it came upon me very suddenly.

It only remained to tell Oliver.

\*\*\*\*\*

All this took place some time ago.

My book was published.

Oliver sends me red tulips on my birthday.

And the Irishman married a young girl a few months after my return

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And that’s the end.

The reactions to the book were largely approving. The TLS reviewer on 23.3.33 found Arabella and her author “something akin”. He concludes his comments:

Fate intervenes when happiness seems nearest and all her world falls to pieces before her consuming, hopeless love. There is no end to the story. The study of the fatal nature which can rely on nothing but its own strength should have many readers.

With the advantage of hindsight, well beyond the end of Margiad Evans’s life and taking the tenor and content of her later writing into account, it is possible to be more sanguine, to see that in *The Wooden Doctor* she is passing through a necessary developmental stage. Given the fraught nature of her early environment, Margiad Evans’s devotion to the qualities of tenderness, reliability and encouragement that she found in her Papa Doctor had to be allowed to run its course. In an excised part of the first draft, a Frenchwoman advises Arabella: “Be careful for yourself; with a nature so ardent you will suffer” (**Wooden.Draft** 118). The doctor has been the container of her intense feelings during her growing up, the means by which she could project and externalise the pain experienced within her family of origin. Yet she has understood that there has been both projection and idealising in her love of him. At the end of the first draft she ponders:

I cannot describe what he meant to me. [...] Previous misery melted under his thoughtful, penetrating gaze. With him I was a child and my youth adored him. Nevertheless he was for many years a friend of fancy rather than of fact, a fancy that circling unsteadily in its fledgling flight alighted on him from the first. (Wooden.Draft 240)

Through this image she seems to acknowledge that her neediness was so great that it was almost a matter of chance whom her love fixed upon. A “friend of fancy rather than of fact”, the recording of his importance in her fantasy life in fictional mode seems to have been particularly helpful. As Dearnley points out:

Arabella’s infatuation for the Irish doctor more than twenty years her senior was [...] based quite straightforwardly on the author’s own experience, yet her portrayal of Dr Flaherty is the weakest element in the novel. He appears in person only briefly, and although Arabella claims that he is the only person to whom he can tell the truth, that he acts as her father confessor, nowhere in the novel are these statements demonstrated as narrative. (15)

One can imagine how, both in life and in his fictional recreation, he facilitates the process of working through a necessary stage. There has been little or no possibility of the early, secure exercise of infant sexuality in an Oedipal relationship, that early training ground for adult sexual love. Alcoholism made her father unreliable, unavailable and, at times, frightening, prone to Jekyll and Hyde type transformations, and, at the end of her life, she still perceived herself as his least favoured daughter (Immortal 16). Emergent adolescent sexuality had felt powerful and dangerous. From time to time in *The Wooden Doctor* there are images of red flowers symbolising the fertility that menstruation heralds but also the woundedness it may bring in the vulnerability opened up in adult sexual relations (77, 220). It is possible to interpret the cystitis suffered by both Arabella and her creator as psychosomatic, the means whereby they earn the tender ministrations of the doctor and their protection against having to leave the Oedipal stage for a mature genital relationship.

In many respects, *The Wooden Doctor* is a study in humiliation. In the Afterword to his notable work, *Manhood*, Leiris considers whether the risks he runs as a confessional writer can be compared with those of a torero. Whereas the torero runs the risk of death, the autobiographer runs the risk of revealing his obsessions, limitations and inadequacies and of damaging his relationships, because autobiography must be committed to truth telling (Leiris 156-61). In a journal entry for 13.3.33, Margiad imagines the mockery her depiction of her relationship with Dr, Dunlop will provoke amongst her acquaintances:

Last night Percy took my proofs screaming he would bring them back this morning - of course he did not and when fancy pictures himself and Tony Alexander and their rabble crew laughing over those pages, I feel it, I feel it in my pride. Thus my long love and my Irishman. (J1 5v)

Towards the end of *The Wooden Doctor*, she anticipates just this sort of experience:

An ardent devotion offered, politely declined and handed back very little the worse for wear...judge me, a woman who will set that down against her own name, who will betray her own passion, and refrain from mocking at it hanging crucified, only because she knows many people who can spit farther and scourge more powerfully.[...]

Good person, I am writing a history of humiliation and loss. It is for me: it is mine. (Wooden 160)

The evidence points to the likelihood that Arabella contained a large measure of Margiad Evans's view of herself in 1932. That she had a poor self image is undeniable: she constantly returns to a view of herself as plain and, in her attempt to show the doctor how much he meant to her, is prepared to reveal to the world her obsession and her perceived rejection. She would seem to feel herself defined most meaningfully through her relationship with him. Mary Mason interestingly argues that the norm for the discovering of female identity is through the recognition of another consciousness:

This recognition of another consciousness [...] this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other seems [...] to enable women to write openly about themselves. (Mason 210)

At the time Dr Flaherty is Arabella's obsessively perceived Other and he seems to hold for her some part of a personality she ultimately will need to integrate for herself. He is used as an external Superego. After the mother's harsh judgment of the episode with the young Englishman in France, Arabella observes:

The Irishman [Dr Flaherty] would not have judged so harshly, nor so cruelly condemned. As all egotists, I regarded my sins through the eyes of those I loved rather than through my own, and measured my guilt through their opinion of it. Of these he came first and would think least of it. [...] Never shocked, he drew truth from me as nobody else could; to him I told my faults as studiously as I concealed them from others.

He has called himself my Father Confessor: he was more. Against vice, brutality, stupidity, evil, I weighed this one man whose puissant image was the strongest influence in my life, and he more than balanced all. (Wooden 56-7)

The fictional Dr Flaherty must rank high on any scale of hugely idealised characters in literature. When, in the real world, Dr Dunlop married, he drew a line under some aspects of his relationship with his young patient and it is evident from his widow's testimony that Margiad Evans found it very hard to accept the new situation, writing



and phoning frequently, in spite of requests that she desist (Lloyd-Morgan 37). As her relationship with Dunlop was powerfully Oedipal, it did not prove to be possible to move on from it merely through an act of will. However, while her journal from 1934 on reveals continuing intermittent thoughts of Dr Dunlop, she seems to have found it possible to transfer her intense feelings to another container, another safe, unavailable, powerful man, Basil Blackwell, her publisher. Just as Dr Dunlop becomes “Papa Doctor”, at the moment Arabella recognises her love for him, so Blackwell becomes “the Professor”. On 6<sup>th</sup> April, Margiad Evans records that Basil Blackwell has become her publisher “for good and always” (J1 7). On an unspecified date in July, she writes “I love him” (J1 9v). On August 10<sup>th</sup> he becomes “the Professor”: “I wish the Professor would write to me, I do” (J1 10v). That he, in his turn, called Margiad Evans “Arabella” suggests he probably recognised his role in her life. Further, he gave her a leather-bound book which would become her journal from 1935 onwards: his gift will hold her most intimate thoughts, be a trusted container for intensity. She entitles the book *Arabella’s Voice*. In the weeks before Godfrey Whistler’s death of liver failure, even when deeply involved in a relationship with Ruth Farr, she twice recognises the stark need she has of Basil Blackwell:

I am undergoing a blind, instinctive craving for the Professor — it’s as though he has something I must have to reach my whole self. (J2 14v)

Later:

What has made of the Professor a gate I *must* pass through? (J2 15v)

The tone is puzzled but at some level she seems to understand that she is in the grip of a strong psychic need. Blackwell does seem to act as a benign parent, giving her advice on the misery of her unhappy relationship with Ruth Farr and on one occasion offers money, without any stipulation that she must write, so that she could get away from her suffocating environment (J1 57).

If one reads in chronological sequence the first draft of *The Wooden Doctor*, the published version, the extant early diaries in sequence and the much later “The Immortal Hospital” which deals with her childhood, one cannot fail to be struck by Margiad Evans’s tendency to idealise or denigrate and how violently her feelings veer between these two poles. In *The Wooden Doctor* the father is at first feared and loathed, then pitied and despised; by the journals of 1934 onwards he is regarded more tolerantly and sympathetically and it is the mother who is viewed with rage and

disgust. In “The Immortal Hospital” Margiad Evans’s childhood relationship with her sister Sian/Nancy is rhapsodically idealised; in the journals she often cannot contain her irritation, dislike and jealousy (J1 1v, 2, 4, 82v). The swings of feeling for Ruth Farr, with whom she has a lesbian relationship over several years, regularly move from hate to passionate declaration of love: “She was a traitor in her mother’s womb and her bones grew in guile” (J1 85v) and a bold, large statement standing proud on the page: “Ruth, I love you dearly always” (J2 86).

Margiad Evans obviously finds it hard to deal with ambivalence, to hold simultaneously the possibility of love and hate for the same person. Melanie Klein teaches us that this, too, is to do with a developmental stage. Kleinians argue that at first the infant has a concept of good — the generously provided, available breast — and bad — the torturing, withholding breast, when the baby’s needs are not immediately answered. The violence of the small baby’s feelings lead to a splitting, so that the good is kept apart from the bad, lest the violently experienced bad has the power to destroy the good. An important developmental stage is reached — the depressive stage, as Klein terms it — when the child is able to realise that the good and bad attributes belong to the same person and learns to cope with ambivalence. This stage is reached when a baby receives “good enough” mothering where the mother is strong enough to bear the infant’s hostile projections and reflect back something that is perceived by the baby as loving (Cooper 48-9).<sup>22</sup>

It is all too common for someone who has been poorly nurtured to blame herself for perceived inadequacies and to idealise ineffective caregivers. The description of herself that Margiad Evans gives early in this chapter suggests that at eleven she was an insecure, nervous child. She remembers that “so dear was [my mother] to me that until I was sixteen, I could never leave her without tears” (*Immortal* 17). It is possible that she misinterprets her remembered distress: it seems more likely that she was showing signs of what John Bowlby describes as anxious attachment, which is an

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22 See also D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971). which fascinatingly describes the stage thus: “If things go well, in this gradual disillusionment process, [where the infant discovers it is not omnipotent] the stage is set for the frustrations that we gather together under the word weaning; but it should be remembered that when we talk about the phenomena (which Klein (1940) has specifically illuminated in her concept of the depressive position) that cluster round weaning we are assuming the underlying process, the process by which opportunity for illusion and gradual disillusionment is provided. If illusion-disillusionment has gone astray the infant cannot get to so normal a thing as weaning, nor to a reaction to weaning, and it is then absurd to refer to weaning at all. The mere termination of breast feeding is not a weaning” (15).

acute worry over accessibility and responsiveness of an attachment figure, developed as a result of bitter experience. Drawing on the studies of Stendler (1954), McCord and others (1962) and Seers, Maccoby and Levin (1957), Bowlby summarises predisposing characteristics for anxious attachment, of which three seem of particular relevance to Margiad Evans's childhood circumstances (**Attach2** 278-83).

A very unsettled home life with changes of caretaker and frequent shifts of residence was one factor, being constantly compared unfavourably with one's siblings another, and quarrels between parents and mutual disparagement a third (**Attach2** 279-80).

We remember that Margiad Evans's father took early retirement on grounds of ill-health not unconnected with alcohol dependence when she was nine, that she had a very unhappy period at boarding school when she was ten, and moved to Benhall for a year at eleven before settling at Lavender Cottage with her parents at twelve, to observe Godfrey Whistler's worsening alcoholism. The Prelude to *The Wooden Doctor* suggests her relations saw her as the least promising of the three sisters in terms of appearance and commented on their observation. As an adult when, with her sister Betty, she visits Aunt Nell in Uxbridge, the town where she was born, she observes Nell's love for Betty with some distress:

Aunt Nell gave Betty mustard and cress, eggs and a green pot of hyacinths. She loves her. That's plain to see. My throat feels so tight tonight. I think perhaps I shall be sick. (**J1** 34)

The mother, however, was the primary caregiver and the picture that emerges of Margiad Evans's mother from "The Immortal Hospital" does not encourage any objective view of a close and loving bond. Written when Margiad Evans knew herself to be dying, it memorialises with great gratitude the loving care and tenderness she received from Aunt Fran in her year at Benhall which, we get a strong impression, was a new experience for her. "Once more I seem to feel Aunt Fran bending towards me with such a look, that had she not died of pneumonia soon after my marriage some of life's suffering had been softened towards me or even spared" (**Immortal** 45). Margiad's parents mocked Aunt Fran's taste in clothes for children. Margiad Evans comments:

It may have been in bad taste but it was in good love. [...] For the affection that went into the selection was what the child Margiad instinctively liked, and *not* the clothes themselves. (**Immortal** 48)

Margiad's mother visited when they had been with Aunt Fran almost a year:

Sian seemed hardly to notice her [...] but to me she might have brought what is now called 'an emotional conflict' if it had not been that my peace was too deep and my surroundings too happy. It received her powerful intellectual character and absorbed it entire. (*Immortal* 49)

When, at the end of a year, the younger sisters returned to their parents at Lavender Cottage:

the scrapping of those brilliant clothes in a bonfire of rather unkind laughter caused me pain. When they threw away certain things they were almost throwing me away. A *me* they could not recapture for myself: a peace like a summer's day, so long, so long, long ago: an innocence, reliance and quietness never to be regained in subsequent days. (*Immortal* 48-9)

These descriptions of a powerful and ungentle character unaware of, or perhaps even uncaring of, what is deeply important to her child are consistent with the view given of Arabella's mother in *The Wooden Doctor*. The bitter quarrels between Margiad Evans and her mother in adult life recorded in the journals perhaps had their seeds in this childhood. In any event, the family of an alcoholic is often under severe pressure, and bringing up four children in such circumstances on little money must have been a daunting task. That an inability to deal with ambivalence, a need to see people as black or white, to idealise or denigrate, was a consequence of Margiad Evans's nurture as an infant seems likely.

For the most part, the earliest extant journals from 1933–1939 make distressing reading. There is a horrifying sense of the hell that family life can become when lack of means requires incompatible people to live together. "This *is* an unhappy home", Margiad writes of the Whistler household in July 1933 (J1 10). Margiad Evans, while yearning for the Professor, becomes deeply enmeshed in a relationship with Ruth Farr from April 1934. While acknowledging her craving for the professor, she continues:

I cling to Ruth when she comes and tell her all. I want to be faithful to her always, to give her all that a man would have of his wife. She understands, my darling, my beloved. We shall not part until one is beyond darkness.

What has made of the Professor a gate which I *must* pass through? (J2 15v)

It is hard to avoid surmising that the extreme despondency she expresses again and again has much to do with guilt at yearning for one human being, while deeply involved with another, with whom she discusses her feelings for the first. The sexual relationship with Ruth provokes great hostility from Mrs Whistler, who introduced Ruth to the household in the first place. There are appalling rows, about this and other matters, and on several occasions Mrs Whistler abandons the family for several weeks, to the seeming relief of Margiad, Nancy and their father. There is not enough

information for an outsider to make any sound evaluation of what was going on. Margiad Evans displays dramatic mood swings between love and hate for Ruth and has clearly discussed something of her misery with Blackwell, who seems to counsel disengagement (J1 57, 57v May 1935). At times, as in June, 1935, she sees Ruth as predatory:

I was a fine plump silver salmon flicking my tail and swimming in the green river when an otter hunted me and took a cruel bite out of my back. (J1 60v)

The darkness, suffering, pessimism and the sterility of relationships in her novel, *Creed* (1936), give a fair indication of her state of mind in this period. One's visceral reaction in reading through these journals is that, whatever the writer's protestations, Ruth Farr made Margiad Evans very unhappy. On one occasion she writes:

It came down on me the other morning like a mallet as my head lay beside Ruth's in bed: 'Why do I lie here? It's no pleasure to me'. (J2 51v)

A not untypical mood is expressed:

What am I pouring out here but self, self, rotten self feeding on self, burying self, throwing self up and eating self again. The days crawl on me like snails. What is there to live for but more misery and further sleep? [...] I never go out. I never work. I am ugly, dirty, now indifferent, now frenzied. My eyes pick out all that is horrible, sad, feverishly disordered. (J2 43)

She sees the need for the journal as a means of capturing, and to some degree, pinioning, otherwise free-floating despair:

I must keep up this book or the last vague control will be gone. [...] But approaching this book and writing in it is like dressing a wound or a repulsive sore, such a sore as I pictured last night in my side, a gray hole creeping with maggots which bit and bit at the edges. Surely it's better to write *that* than carry it in my mind. (J1 72v)

The therapeutic function of writing, in providing a hope of integrating her sense of self and in perhaps promoting healing, is explored in a loose leaf insert in her handwriting in the journal:

#### Nothing to Write About

Once she was free. In this state she went about in a continual dream neither noticing how people looked nor listening to what they said. Then she took up writing. She put her head in a yoke which became heavier and heavier, chafed her more and more, gave her no peace. She wrote more and more. Her very diary became a jealous obligation. And still her habitual cry was 'There's nothing to write about'. She was tied to a revolving wheel, dizzy and longing for rest yet still more deeply craving 'something to write about' which she hoped, when finished, would bring her healing. (J1 38)

Yet, from this declaration, she wrote resentfully, compulsively. She certainly wrote in the hope of penetrating the puzzle of herself:

It's hopeless, impossible to come to grips with myself — like trying to cast up accounts that will never meet. I can't get at myself, and *nobody* can get at me. (J1 56)

In January, 1939 she acknowledges the cathartic effect of writing in her journal:

Why don't I write more? For the relief now is like weeping to an aching heart. (J2 148v)

Felicity A. Nussbaum in "Towards Conceptualising Diary", writing of the genre in general terms, has most elegantly encapsulated a sense of what seems to be happening in these particular journals:

The diary signifies a consciousness that requires psychic privacy in a particular way. [...] It is a private and personal revelation that cannot be spoken to anyone except the self. It is a confession to the self with only the self as auditor and without the public authority; but on the other hand, it becomes necessary at the point when the subject begins to believe that it cannot be intelligible to itself without written articulation and representation. It is a way to expose the subject's hidden discourse, perhaps in the hope of 'knowing' the self when the subject is still the sole censor and critic of his or her own discourse. (135)

Margiad Evans's journals in the period 1934-8 seem to reveal a driving need to externalise particular moods. She takes the risk of putting into the world in written form articulations that only she was legitimised to read of some of her most tormented and least socially acceptable feelings, thereby achieving temporarily some relief from their pressure. The journals seem largely to change in content from about January, 1939. They become less a receptacle for pent-up feelings and more a means of recording something otherwise evanescent, of interpreting, of celebrating. The times she was living through made the need to record fleeting happiness urgent. At the end of August 1939 she writes:

War, war. Huge noises like eras moving into place, like aeons breaking. Mist and aeroplanes and the last days. (J2 124)

She dedicates the "Journals at Dawn" section of *Autobiography* (1943), in part a reworking or an edited version of her journal during the war years, to a pilot killed in action in 1941, because he used to enjoy reading the nature notes that largely constituted her journal at that time. Although it is a psychological truism that in times of external threat, depressive states can improve dramatically, this would seem to provide only a small part of the explanation of the change in her journals. A more

profound metamorphosis came about from experiencing the certainty that she was loved.

Spacks writes in her analysis of autobiographies of particular women born in the nineteenth century:

Happiness, as these women implicitly or explicitly evoke it, derives from relationship, a point of view often considered particularly 'feminine'. (122)

Happiness in a relationship at last seemed to release Margiad Evans into a mode of being that she considered her true self. In October, 1940, at the age of thirty-one, she married Michael Williams, who was many years *younger* than she was. In writing to him in January 1943, she expresses her awareness of what that marriage has meant to her: "Oh my dear dear young man, what a restoration our marriage has been to me" (qtd by Lloyd-Morgan 86). Describing her joy after a day spent together after much separation, she sees new meaning in the natural scene:

Now I'm nearing the end of the book [her leather bound journal given by Blackwell] I shall never write about [...] sitting in the barn window with one leg suspended over weeds, my hand in Mike's, the field before us and the breeze bending the nettles as it steered round the angle of the wall. All that's finished — the light like thistle-down on the hay wagon, the silken blonde sun, [...] it has so *deep* a meaning, deeper than all my selves, vaster than the night sky. *I am not what I was*. There's all my knowledge in that line. (J2 115)

Interestingly, in view of her enduring conviction of Aunt Fran's love of her, supported by the quality of particular loving looks, she wants to capture Michael Williams on canvas when each is on that thread of each other's loving attention:

A week ago I received the letter saying 'You have all my love — all that it is possible to give'. [...] To paint him *while* he loves me, that's what I would like — to snare the likeness of the beloved glance within the reciprocal eye and translate it by the hand that lay in his. (J2 131v).

In wartime, as their time together was often snatched days, the importance of retaining sharply defined memories of a particular experience was high and her journal helped to achieve this:

With M. over the hills and down among the cracks — out of the sunlight into the shade of the multiple woods.

When I came back my hands smelled of the fire we had lit. I simply couldn't read and blur the remembrance with print. (J3 n. pag.)

She ponders on the symbiotic nature of mature, married love and the pain separation causes even for someone such as herself who revels in solitude:

10<sup>th</sup> Jan

It's one of those nights when Mike's gone back to London. I've always written about the joyful solitude. But sometimes, just after he's left the cottage, I go back to the room *seeing* him pull on his overcoat then sometimes my humanness comes over me with pang after pang. Nothing – no distance or tragic calamity could add one jot to the loneliness of that moment, that first hour. It's utter; it makes me want to creep into sleep and lose my being. I feel sure it's like death and that it's one of the things I shall remember when I'm dying. But why is it so dreadful just the moment after he's gone? I thought about it this evening sitting on the humpty before the fire he lit this morning. [...] And it struck me that it's because there's nothing in my memory between me and his actual close physical presence. 'The vitals' seem tangled around us both. And as I picture him to myself, going further and further away, they are torn just at the most sensitive spot. (J4 n. pag.)

We remember her inability, rooted in childhood experiences of being the victim of arbitrary alternation between affection and censure, to believe in a secure, dependable relationship, one in which absence is simply a hiatus in continuing presence. Without any doubt the recovery of her childhood deep attunedness to Nature — originally in itself possibly a sort of emotional displacement — comes about in part through the merging of personality in love with someone who shared her love of Nature. Pondering on her need for solitude, she muses: "Life to me is solitude" (Au 72) and evokes a wild scene which for her epitomises solitude. Then she continues:

[The scene] fitted M. who in some strange way resembles solitude. I could imagine *him* there beside me, silent, his keen eye ranging the skyline [...] he is part of myself – all I know is that at some moments — as in that last stroll about the farm — we are blended in our surroundings, more than brother or sister, nearer than lovers, deeper and more unconscious than our separate selves. (Au 73)

She becomes aware that in her response to Nature she is "reliving the first perception of my life, how I am interwoven with my childhood" (Au 80) and it is again the memories of the blissful year with Aunt Fran that she recalls, as she evokes the close relationship with her sister Sian/Nancy that grew during that year as, around Benhall, they ranged the fields, each of which had a particular name. Dwelling on a particular favoured spot in the present, she continues:

This is where I wished to be when I thought of Sian: this, when we were children would have been one of our dear significant spots. [...] Sian do you remember — how dearly do you remember? — the Mountain, Meredyth's field, Katy's meadow, the Bank, the Gap? You are the rhyme to the word that can't be found. (Au 105)

It seems inescapable that it was in times of deep emotional security that Margiad Evans became rooted enough to have the potential to be a visionary observer of Nature.



The background to the early years of the relationship and marriage between Margiad Evans and Michael Williams needs to be established in broad outline. From 1936-9 Margiad, Nancy and Helen, Basil Blackwell's daughter, had run a guest house, Springherne, near Ross-on Wye. Margiad Evans had met Michael Williams at Springherne by 1938. The lease expired at much the time war broke out. For the next year, Margiad Evans took a range of unskilled, low-paid jobs, in the early months at a considerable distance from home. When away, her journal was written in the knowledge that Michael Williams would be reading it on her return. It now becomes a vehicle for communicating with her beloved Other. The entries become shaped, often humorous, evocative, more explanatory, with vivid vignettes of, for example, the two old ladies she worked for in Dorset. She describes an amazing sunrise while she was making morning tea:

I stood adoring, the kettle in my hand...not a doubt of it, as a servant I have my drawbacks (J2 116v).

From about January 1939, there is a great increase in the frequency and amount of natural description. At this period, Mrs Whistler was living in Ross and her house was the nearest thing to a base her daughter had. When staying with her mother, she and Michael Williams were able to have long walks in the countryside around Ross, and these and other such times played an important part in their deepening relationship. In a recognisably autobiographical short story, "The Ruin" which Margiad Evans wrote in 1946, she describes the difficult period of readjustment of a young couple who have been separated for several years by the husband's war service. Out together, they revel in the profusion of primroses, the trout in the sparkling streams. The woman inwardly rejoices:

'Together again, together again. [...] Their worlds had fused. [...]

'Of us two', she meditated, 'it's he who has the strongest power to interpret. Though as *I'm* the writer, no-one knows it except myself. Oh, my imagination needs him dreadfully'. (Old 136-7)

She writes something similar in *Autobiography*:

I often feel when M— suddenly speaks like that that he thinks from inside Nature, that he has some thought with it flowing with it. To go with him into the fields is to see further than my own sight, and to understand without effort, from within [...] He has thoughts, simple, in no way elaborate or strange, which he can make me see, as I see the birds and the cloud and the moonlight. (Au 92)

Indubitably, Margiad Evans's perception of the natural world was extended and deepened by this relationship.

They married in October 1940 and for the next seven years Margiad Evans lived in a small cottage at Llangarron, near Ross, three miles from the Welsh Border, where some of her best writing was completed. When Michael Williams was called up in July 1942, he was at first based in Britain and short trips home were possible. However, from the time he was posted and was on board ships in the Mediterranean, and for the rest of the war, Margiad Evans was alone for long periods. While Michael Williams was abroad, she wrote letters to him almost daily, hundreds of which survive, and these, in many respects, took the place of her detailed journals.

Secure in being loved, Margiad Evans lived in circumstances that were at last conducive to her coming into the safe haven of a mature, authentic identity. At the beginning of *Autobiography* she rejoices in solitude:

Oh the happiness of being alone — it's like having only one door to yourself and that bolted and firm walls round. (1)

The personality is intact, protected, at peace. A journal entry in February 1943 has her showing most unusual tenderness and acceptance of herself:

One night in February

I am an introvert. Not a physical one, but an introvert for all that. Tonight I am so happy. I want nothing but myself. I close my book *Darkness and Dawn* and sigh looking at the lamp which is smoking and has a blackened chimney. Dear Arabella. Dear, dear self. The nurturing in my being, the star shine and wood burning, they are all in harmony with myself. (J4 n. pag.)

Much stress in the years before her marriage was caused by her inability to have the defended space so essential to one of an introvert orientation. A frequent refrain of her 1933 journal while living with Nancy at Asthall School cottage was "I wish sometimes quite passionately that I lived alone" (J1 4).<sup>23</sup> On 13<sup>th</sup> October 1942, Margiad Evans considers her essential needs:

Only two things are acknowledged as necessities by myself to myself – tobacco and the craving to communicate what I see – to write to myself. For whatever I am writing to it is really always to myself, as when one utters truth it is never abroad but inwardly one's words are turned. (J4 n. pag.)

She writes for her own pleasure and clarification and judges by her own, independent standards, not those of the world, very introvert characteristics.

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23 Jung's definition of introvert was expanded by Katharine C. Briggs who finds a key characteristic of introverts to be that their minds are inwardly directed. They need to defend themselves as far as possible against external claims and conditions in favour of the inner life. Introverts are more at home in the world of ideas than of people or things and in fact their real world is the inner world of ideas and understanding. (Isabel Briggs Myers and Peter B. Myers *Gifts Differing* [Palo Alto, California: Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., 1993] ) 56

Over periods in the War years, Margiad Evans's disposable income was miniscule as she tried to eke out a weekly income of 28/6d, as we see from her listed expenses in a journal entry in 1942 (J4 n.pag.). Yet her way of life, which involved hard physical labour during the day, left her at least the solitude for imaginative activity. She ruefully considers her impracticality, a consequence of her imaginative reverie:

'And the moral of that?' I asked myself at the end of a long, long silence when I found I had forgotten to do anything and everything was empty, burnt out and run down. Don't talk to me of morals. To draw a moral is to draw a bolt. One entertains one's imagination (or someone else's), makes a pretence of being friendly and then suddenly bangs the door in its affronted face. (Au 3-4)

Juhasz, in attempting to define a theory of form for feminist autobiography, insists on recognising the importance in certain women's autobiography of imaginative activity:

Women [...] live traditionally [...] an inner life of the imagination that has special significance for them due to the outright conflict between societal possibility and imaginative possibility. (237)

Contemplative time is essential. Both Margiad Evans and Michael Williams deplore "the habit of bustling":

In nature there's no unsatisfiable craving to match civilization's horrible predatory attitude towards 'the next job'. It cannot be a virtue to make incessant industry the rhythm and thought of existence. (Au 36)

In *Autobiography* (93), Margiad Evans discloses how much she has always been nourished by her senses in such contemplation:

There was no empty time, no era when my senses did not fly to me with wonders. Like children, like five familiars, they brought creation home to me.

Yet in *Ray of Darkness* (76) she reveals that such nurturing is not a matter of having acute senses — she is short-sighted and heavy smoking has destroyed the acuteness of taste and smell — but one of attention.

Margiad Evans's autobiographical writings of the war period are structured on the principle of dailiness. Her journal entries and letters to her husband would be written at night after hard work, often in the fields beet-hoeing or apple and pear picking, moments of imaginative space wrenched from an often exhausting routine. She bothers to reply to Derek Savage who, in *The Withered Branch*, interprets the seven year silence between *Creed* and *Autobiography* as evidence of her deterioration as a writer, to point out how hard the daily round can be for those forced to do low-paid jobs and how little leisure was available for completing imaginative projects (Lloyd-Morgan 81). (*Autobiography* was offered to Blackwell as it was proving impossible

to complete “The Widower’s Tale”, for which he had paid an advance [Lloyd-Morgan 81]). She indicates that:

The joys of *Autobiography* were snatched moments from the type of life lived by any poor woman without help. If you notice, you will see many of the things witnessed in it were seen while fetching water, mending a sheet or a shirt etc. (qtd by Lloyd-Morgan 82)

Intriguingly, during the period of the nature writing, she became aware of the sense of self as a burden she would wish to relinquish. Her greatest happiness comes with awareness of loss of individuality:

Such a lovely unconscious day. I never once remembered that there was such a person as myself and that I was there chopping and sawing logs and gathering faggots. [...] The only assertion of existence was blood warmth. (Au 3)

Further:

I don’t wrap myself in solitude, I go naked in it. I discard my particularity, I discard myself. (Au 103)

She makes movingly apparent that through her relationship with nature in the day’s tasks and chores, she manages to divest herself of emotional pain:

Often and often walking up and down between the coppice and the stile, by looking into the wide field I have cleared my soul of pain. (Au 151)

Derek Savage caustically questions the value of Nature writing of the sort exemplified in *Autobiography*:

If the essential meaning and value of life is to be found in the immediate communion with the natural universe, why reproduce one’s observations, sensations, impressions in the abstract mental medium of language? (Savage 126)

Margiad Evans’s implicit answer would seem to be that her firmest sense of identity is as a writer committed to recording, interpreting and establishing the meaning of what she experiences:

July 11th

Had a mood come over me when I felt that somewhere I must write down what my book [journal] is. Who will ever take it up and understand what it is they have. If truth is anything, it’s that it is a profound theme — the relationship of the soul with the earth. I believe all souls have this in them so it is for people I write who hardly ever write of them. (J4 n.pag.)

She is revealing the intense joy to be had in process of attention and the delight in noting the significance of a myriad details. In virtually any page of *Autobiography*, the reader is being taught how to observe, the meaning of what she sees and what lies beyond it: “As I sit here by the wall I find the continuity, the connection between all things” (Au 92). The ultimate aim of the rapt observation is interfusion.

The intense desire to be united with Nature grows in me with the impossibility of achieving it. Or comprehending the longing. Rarely for a moment it happens: but constantly and every day I want it without ceasing. (Au 139)

The goal of this particular self is the mystic's absorption into the infinite.

Margiad Evans had a one-sided relationship with two idealised and powerful men which remained constant over long periods. The level of idealization of the Wooden Doctor made the relationship in reality intensely unsatisfying, given that idealization is a defensive formation against aggressive feelings, in this case for her parents. Her way of relating to these distant, unavailable men was through splitting off her good self and projecting it, leaving for herself a morass of despairing feelings. Maturing beyond the need of an Oedipal relationship, she establishes a happy marriage relationship with someone not at all in the category of father, who shares her delight in nature. At last, in nature, she has a link with something greater than herself that can truly sustain her and be a container for her intense feelings. However, tragically, after the onset of epilepsy, when medication destroyed her ability to relate to Nature in the same way, it becomes evident that she has understood the projective mechanism at work in that relationship, too:

And because Nature and weather and landscape had failed, I knew everything had, for people like myself cannot live long sanely without that powering from one kind of being into another. No, not love, sexual or maternal, replaces it. That my projection of conscious life into plants, animals, trees, the land, even, in all its contours, was *scientifically* illogical I knew, but it made no difference to my not being able to exist without it. (Nightingale 40)

Indeed, the onset of epilepsy transformed the way Margiad Evans understood and constructed the world and her place in it. The TLS reviewer of *Ray of Darkness* (5.12.52) compares the upheaval in her scheme of things with what Darwin experienced off the coast of Chile, when he witnessed an earthquake, after which the earth never again seemed to him a secure place. Both Robert Murphy in *The Body Silent* and Oliver Sacks in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* provide useful conceptualising of the way the advent of serious disability undermines and alters the existing sense of self. Robert Murphy, a professor of anthropology, was found, in middle life, to have a spinal tumour which gradually rendered him quadraplegic. Using anthropological perspectives and partly through observing himself, partly through undertaking research projects, he looked at what happens to an individual's status in society and to his or her perception of self when afflicted by serious

disability. Oliver Sacks, with a different focus, shows the tremendous struggle people with neurological disorders put up, to preserve identity in adverse circumstances.

Margiad Evans explores with particular intensity her perception of how epilepsy changed her life in two works: *Ray of Darkness* (1952) and the unpublished “The Nightingale Silenced” (1954). She undertook *Ray of Darkness* from “a passionate yearning as one retreats further and further from their understanding, to be understood by ordinary and well people” (Ray 9), particularly where family and friends do not allow her to mention her fits in letters or in conversation. She sees the urge as possibly curative, turned to “as a dog eats grass” (Ray 10). After the attacks worsened, she wrote “The Nightingale Silenced” which she saw as an appendix to *Ray of Darkness* but written this time for medical professionals to increase their understanding of the epileptic state and as a sort of affirmation “because there remains something obstinate, instinctive [...] which wants to speak, to testify, to reason, to raise up myself and others like me” (Nightingale 2).

The shaping of *Ray of Darkness* into three parts is significant. In Part 1 Margiad Evans outlines, with hindsight, all the premonitory symptoms of emerging epilepsy, and explores the difficulties of ever knowing, from within one’s own subjectivity, what is normal. Although she has been aware since childhood of brief states of unconsciousness superimposed on consciousness, the “petit mal” experience, she had assumed everyone experienced them. In Part 2, “The Other Side of the Wave”, during an evening of tranquil domestic activity, she moves irrevocably across a great divide: in undergoing her first fit, she becomes an epileptic and her status in the world and her perception of herself is changed for ever. She describes herself returning to consciousness on the floor near an unguarded fire and becoming aware of an inexplicable passage of time. She knows that she is ill and must go to bed, but cannot visualize where bed is: every bedroom she had regularly slept in except her current one is visualised in turn. Next came the puzzling question – *who was I?* Her mind, like an engine “misfiring and unsteered”, will not even release her usual sense of self. At last:

it came on me stunningly, terrifyingly, that my clothes were wet. My urine had escaped me then. Horrifyingly, in one moment, I realised the incredible, impossible and ghastly truth – I had neither fainted nor been asleep: I had had an epileptic fit. (Ray 81)

She reaches a true conclusion quickly but it takes a month for her to see a specialist and to be finally confirmed in that status. After this, a further awareness intervenes: from her extreme lassitude she realises that she must either be very ill or, amazingly, at the age of 42, be pregnant for the first time. Because of the risk of inherited epilepsy, the possibility is raised of aborting this precious foetus. When two doctors disagree, she returns to the consultant who first diagnosed epilepsy, who reprieves the child. In a climactic chapter ending she brings these life-changing events to some sort of closure:

Before my inward eye, this man seemed to spread the authoritative, the peacock wings of an archangel. The child was to live. It was to be true. It was mine and I was to keep it. As he told me I wasn't suffering from the hereditary type of epilepsy, two tears rose to my eyes and slowly spilled. (Ray 129)

The third part describes the different, less frequent and more frightening nature of the fits under medication. She struggles obsessively to attribute personal meaning to the onset of epilepsy, refusing the doctor's ready-made explanation.

Using Murphy's analytic approach, it seems productive to set Margiad Evans's feelings about and observations of her changed state in the wider framework of how society and the individual within society are seen to cope with disability. Murphy shows how a formal occasion, which conferred on him a particular academic honour, served as a rite of passage for him. As a high-ranking academic he makes the transition from one social identity to another, as he re-emerges in his world as a paraplegic, in a wheelchair (65). Margiad Evans attempts to negotiate a similar passage. From the moment, an hour after her first fit, that she becomes aware that her lapse of unconsciousness has involved incontinence, she "knows" that she has had an epileptic fit, "an inner certainty to which it was necessary to confess once a day" (Ray 86). Her letters to her extended family "grow angrier and angrier" (Ray 99), as her blood relations resist very energetically any such diagnosis:

One cannot blame this attitude. It is natural that one's blood relations should not welcome a disease such as epilepsy into their circle. They are bound to protest against the idea of it. (Ray 98)

She is left in a liminal state because of their non acceptance, although she has a vivid sense of the category to which she properly belongs. She had regularly visited an epileptic colony near her sister's home "and saw the poor children and the sad, bitter battered faces of the older inhabitants and the 'different' ones of the younger" (Ray

37) and believes that she “should have been all the time” one of them. She confers a near-priestly function on the consultant who confirms that she has epilepsy:

And I walked out of the Institute as a person harbouring epilepsy, it was true, but free of false hopes and quite clearly defined as myself by another’s firmness, directness, courage and knowledge. (Ray 106)

She reifies her disease: she is an epileptic not a human being who sometimes has fits.

Quoting Ernest Goffman, Murphy describes his own radical loss of self-esteem, his sense of “stigma” and “spoiled identity” once disabled (77). He knows that the aura of contamination can become attached to other members of the family too. This seems to have been Margiad Evans’s experience. Calder Marshall, who corresponded with Margiad Evans at the time of publication of *Ray of Darkness*, feels, “it was clear that Margiad had fallen out with all her family as a result of that brave book” (Letmarsh 28.7.63). Presumably members of the family disliked the prominence given to a stigmatising disease and feared contamination themselves. Writing in this case of TB and cancer, Susan Sontag avers:

Any disease that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally, contagious [...]. Contact with someone afflicted with a disease regarded as a mysterious malevolency inevitably feels like a trespass; worse, like the violation of a taboo. (Sontag 10)

Murphy further refers to Gliedman and Ross’s view that the disabled person becomes “the Other — a living symbol of failure, frailty and emasculation; a counterpoint to normality, a figure whose very humanity is questionable”(100). Indeed Margiad Evans finds it hard to maintain a positive frame of mind when:

attacked by the world in its ignorance and hatred of the sick. ‘If you can’t be well, get out of my sight’ is the natural if unexpressed reaction of the healthy to the unhealthy. (Ray 107)

She feels particular horror at the sudden onset of fits and the loss of control:

of falling down and rolling about like an animal. It is horribly repugnant. Even more horrifying was the idea of coming round alone and finding the stamp of your animalism all around you with no-one to welcome you to yourself again. (Ray 99)

Murphy is very daunted by the effect of his illness on his status as a member of society “for it visited upon [him] a disease of social relations” (3). Margiad Evans too is aware of a shift in her social acceptability. She describes having a fit while in hospital soon after the birth of her child, and desperately needing reassurance and explanation, because of the utter confusion caused by the blanks in her memory:



I made the other women call the nurse, I made her ring up my husband. 'Poor man' I heard her say, and when she returned it was not unkindly but in rather a satisfied manner she told me she had not been able to get through to him. (Ray 153)

Through the eyes of others, Margiad Evans perceives herself as a burden, an encumbrance. Murphy further shows how lack of autonomy and unreciprocated dependence on others brings debasement of status (155). Indeed, in "The Nightingale Silenced", Margiad Evans expresses her sense of humiliation at not being able to create a restful home for her husband:

This shame helped to make me bad-tempered but it seemed I could not confess how dependent I felt without a total breakdown. (Nightingale 31)

Because she might be a danger to herself or her baby during a fit or in the state of confusion which followed, she could not be left alone. In the moment of truth when she first determines she has had an epileptic fit, her first horrified thought is: "A fit, to a healthy woman, on whose ability to live alone so much depended!" (Ray 81). One feels that, in writing 'The Nightingale Silenced', in particular, she is attempting to move from dependence to reciprocity: to offer the world insights that will be of benefit to a category of people, epileptics, but also to human understanding in general.

Through observation of his own functioning and through research interviews Murphy is aware that a far-reaching effect of serious disability is the acquisition of a new, total and undesirable identity, which he likens to:

a curious kind of 'invasion of the body snatchers' in which the alien intruder and old occupant co-exist in mutual hostility in the same body. (92)

As Margiad Evans's disability and its medication affect mental functioning directly, her experience is somewhat different but related. While she is undergoing a major fit: "in the violent attacks one feels as though the body has been entered by a terrific alien power" (Ray 154). In times when the epilepsy is quiescent:

the drugs I have to take to prevent the discharges of the epilepsy make me apathetic, have faded, dulled and dimmed the powers of the imagination and concentration. Restless but helpless, no action seems worth taking. (Nightingale 189)

The intense, vibrant delight in Nature is gone: she has even lost the freedom to be alone in Nature and the projective powers which enabled interfusion have dulled. Indeed the nightingale is silenced.

While Murphy uses his professional training as an anthropologist to evaluate the subjectivity and the status of the disabled from his own situation as a quadriplegic, neurologist Oliver Sacks's consuming interest in *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a*

*Hat* is how the neurological disorders affect the sense of self and what compensatory efforts particular selves make to retain their sense of identity. He declares at the outset that:

Neurology's favourite word is 'deficit', denoting an impairment or incapacity of neurological function. [...] But it must be said from the outset that a disease is never mere loss or excess – that there is always a reaction on the part of the affected organism or individual, to restore, replace, to compensate for and preserve its identity, however strange the means may be. (1)

He uses a statement by Ivy McKenzie as epigraph to the whole work:

The physician is concerned (unlike the naturalist)...with a single organism, the human subject, striving to preserve its identity in adverse circumstances.

Although Margiad Evans sadly declares: "It must be far easier, I think, to be born an epileptic than to become one — to have to accustom yourself to losing yourself" (Ray 36), she, too, strives to preserve a recognisable core of self. The terrifying aspects of epilepsy, as she first experienced it, was to do with suddenness of onset, the loss of control it produced and the amnesia and disorientation that followed in its wake. Each of the first four well-spread fits had a different "homely and comfortable remembrance" (Ray 169), such as a jug or spoon, associated with it, "embedded in [its] horror".

As long as I had these images, and the attacks remained far enough apart for forgetfulness *and* memory to combine, each retained a kind of separate personality. (169)

It is easy to see how these images helped Margiad Evans come to some sort of uneasy accommodation with her condition, by offering her a semblance of control over her situation by giving her the power to register each fit separately in memory, although this ability was later lost. Another means of maintaining a cohesive identity against the worst the disease could do to fragment it was through writing. It seems probable that writing *Ray of Darkness* one year after the onset of epilepsy was symbolically important. The work encapsulated and preserved the nature of that momentous experience, some of it transcribed from journals. A very frightening aspect of her fits when under medication was that consciousness was prolonged into the fit and she regularly had the sensation of seeming to disintegrate into two or more entities. As her view of self was centrally as an author, a communicator, fashioning a book from the actual experiences which caused fragmentation was to fashion a new mosaic of self from those fragments.

Erosion of memory was perhaps the most undermining aspect of Margiad Evans's illness. One of Sacks's most interesting case histories in *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* is of Jimmie, who has lost the greater part of his memory and, with that, his past, his moorings in time. Sacks prefaces the chapter with an epigraph from Bunuel's *Memoirs*:

You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realise that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all...Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing. (Sacks 22)

For Margiad Evans, the loss of a sense of continuity of identity was one of the consequences of the memory losses caused by the epilepsy. Particularly unsettling was her inability to remember events and circumstances surrounding her fits, such as walking to a neighbour's house to seek help. Sometimes the only sure evidence that she had had a fit was the blanks in her memory. On occasion, during a minor attack, she was left without any understanding of the significance of objects. Once, when offered pills by a nurse, she did not know what to do with them. She "found such vacancy horrifying" (Nightingale 24). She can believe herself to be surfacing from sleep in circumstances of total normalcy, her head beside her husband's on the pillow, only to be told she has just had another fit. Of this experience she affirms:

Ever since I have been incredulous of all things firm and material. The light has held patches of invisible blackness. Time has become as rotten as worm-eaten wood, the earth under me is full of trapdoors and the sense of being, which is life and all that surrounds and creates it, a thing taken and given irresponsibly and without warning as children snatch at a toy. Sight, hearing, touch, consciousness, torn from one like a nest from a bird. (Ray 122)

The inability to recall actions that had certainly been performed, because they have been attested to by others, caused a pervasive insecurity which could, at times, cause mental agony. One evening when her husband was out:

Suddenly there was present in me the ghastly thought that, outside my consciousness, I had been active again, that I had mounted the stairs, gone into my baby's nursery and killed her. (Ray 182)

If you cannot remember what you do, what may you not do unawares?

Clearly, deficits of memory could be a source of anguish. By a particularly cruel quirk of fate, recall could also become a bitter torment. The medication which reduced the actual number of fits prolonged consciousness into an attack, regularly inflicting upon her a sense of horror she would never forget:

Lest neurologists imagine they can cure [...] let them absorb this one point: *that you cannot cure memory*. And that no person whose mind is imprinted with such memories is ever wholly healthy again. (Nightingale 75)

Memory, then, would seem to be the most essential attribute of a firm sense of identity: its impairment can undermine a sense of symbolic coherence in a very distressing way. Explaining this, Margiad Evans describes how:

In certain moods it seems I slip in and out of [Time's] meshes as a sardine through a herring net. Having once discovered periods of *action* which I could not remember, the trust which normal people rest in their own continuity has left me. (Ray 182).

In the cataclysmic upheaval in her universe, she has lost a sense of the flow of time.

The diminishment of her capacities brought with it a shift in how she constructed her world. In "The Nightingale Silenced" she writes: "It is a commonplace to say that the world is not a real place but real only as the brain is capable of conceiving it" (16). Possibly as a consequence of all the changes and limitations imposed on her life, Margiad Evans seemed to have insuperable problems in accepting her epilepsy as a fortuitous or random disaster: she seems driven to construct a more meaningful universe. Her consultant has indicated his belief that her fits have been caused by a slight scarring of the brain tissue, probably the result of a childhood fall from a horse. In effect, in her final years, an exploratory operation reveals that a brain tumour has been the cause of the whole problem. Yet Margiad Evans is driven to make her own sense of the disease that afflicts her. She questions whether in epilepsy she finds some fulfilment that her believing nature has longed for and lacked. The inordinate weeping, seeming to indicate profound grief, on returning to consciousness after a fit, to her suggests the leaving of a state of mystical union. "Can epilepsy be a physical, unconscious awareness of a spiritual lack?" (Ray 180). A further explanation which attracts her powerfully, partly because of the sensation of fragmentation before a fit, is that the attacks are a result of too weak a loyalty to her Muse in the preoccupation of her daily round of household duties:

It was that I really contained two or more entities and one was my neglected Genie or Muse now turning on me as Apollo turned his rage upon his seer Cassandra. For I knew that I had betrayed my ideas for everyday life. (Ray 173)

If the attacks are indeed a consequence of something fortuitous, there is no hope of having any control over them. If, however they are a result of some failing in her, she may, unconsciously, believe that there is a possibility of achieving remission or control through effort. She returns again and again to her possible culpability.

Murphy offers a convincing rationale for the sort of hypothesis-building Margiad Evans undertakes:

There is, then, a need for order in all humans that impels us to search for systemic coherence in both nature and society and, when we can find none, to invent it. [...] It is an empirical fact that the mind seeks to impose systems of some kind of order upon all it surveys. It is a property of all peoples and all cultures. [...] I would suggest [...] that it derives secondarily from our deepest biological urge, the instinct for self-preservation. We look for order because it makes predictability possible and we seek predictability to avoid danger in an essentially perilous world. Our fondest illusion is that we can reduce risk by making the unanticipated predictable, and by exerting human control over the contingencies of life. (29)

Margiad Evans entitles the section of *Ray of Darkness* exploring the first onset of major epilepsy “The Other Side of the Wave”, recognising that that experience takes her into a totally new personal and social situation. Initially, one of the most distressing aspects for the reader of *Ray of Darkness* and “The Nightingale Silenced” is the insight one gains into the loss of self-esteem the disease has inflicted on the writer. Her writing would seem to be an important attempt to improve her self-concept as a result of a need “to testify [...]to raise up myself and others like me” (**Nightingale 2**). From her acquaintance with the epileptic colony near her sister’s home, she had the clearest sense of the perceived Otherness of those with that condition. A medical reviewer of *Ray of Darkness* comments: “Her recognition that the world, since she developed fits, has become afraid of her is painful reading”(Rev.med).<sup>24</sup> She writes *Ray of Darkness* from her own need to communicate, being allowed little or no cathartic relief of discussing her illness with family or friends. By “The Nightingale Silenced” however, she is consciously writing for doctors:

for if more patients had attempted it we should not now be puzzled [over] what solitary madness killed the mind of the great Swift, a being marvellously equipped to describe; [...] would relieve John Clare of the pain of genius while leaving him its joy. (**Nightingale 6-7**)

She believes there is a need of such a work, for she knows of no modern account of epilepsy apart from what Dostoyevsky diffused throughout his works and, as Sacks quotes Dostoyevsky’s delighted assurance: “You all, healthy people, can’t imagine the happiness which we epileptics feel during the second before a fit” (137), it is

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<sup>24</sup> This is taken from a review of *Ray of Darkness* in a medical journal. Its exact provenance is unknown, the review having been torn from the journal. It can be found, with other reviews, amongst Margiad Evans Papers 940 at the National Library of Wales.

evident that his testimony cannot speak for one like Margiad Evans for whom “within each seizure is embedded an embryonic second of such terror that body and mind recoil from any association with it” (Ray 14). As her fits worsen, a new anguish intervenes. “The actual visual appearance [of a thing] was unchanged but the visual value was altered” (Nightingale 19). A cherry tree in bloom can look the same but feel terrifyingly different and within her home: “a terror amounting to panic seemed to emanate from every piece of furniture, every book” (Nightingale 26-7), although the physical form of objects remains unchanged. Through her own distress, Margiad Evans has learnt intense compassion for others in her state. The “pains and pangs [of epilepsy] are very dreadful, I now know. So dreadful that the mark of them on another face makes me weep” (Nightingale 5-6). Her very laudable aim in “The Nightingale Silenced” is to have clinicians appreciate the nature of the torment afflicted people may undergo in “the universe of human suffering” that is epilepsy (Rev.med).

Idris Parry in “Margiad Evans and Tendencies in European Literature” shows admiration for both her courage and her writerly skill. He feels *Ray of Darkness* is a disturbing, moving book which more than delivers on Kafka’s stipulation: “A book must be an axe for the frozen sea in us” (225). As Margiad Evans struggles to communicate the often tormented nature of her subjectivity in her two works on epilepsy, she succeeds again and again in transmitting and transmuting the pain of it, so that it stands as a type for all suffering of a similar kind.

#### 4. B. L. Coombes (1893-1974) and Ron Berry (1920-97)

In evaluating characteristic strands of perceived identity amongst those who have been moulded by the Welsh experience, it is particularly interesting to consider the shaping of awareness of self brought about in those for whom the industrial, particularly the coal-mining, experience was important. Two autobiographers forged by their experience underground, B.L.Coombes and Ron Berry, have left accounts which span most of the mining experience of this century. Coombes's declared intention of raising consciousness over the human cost of coal was more than realised: *These Poor Hands* (1939) sold nearly 50,000 copies in the first six months; and was a Left Book Club Choice, providing, potentially, a focus of discussion for its 1,200 study groups. In the view of editor John Lehmann,

[Coombes]'s writing about the lives of miners may have had much to do with the great stirring of national consciousness which eventually made nationalisation of the mines a priority no party could withstand. (**Whispering** 261)

While his astuteness at finding a note that resonated to the historic time in which he lived means he has left an enduring contribution to social history, Coombes's stature as an autobiographer is less assured. Ron Berry's *History is What You Live* (1998) was published posthumously and its worth has yet to be substantially established. Between them, these accounts cover a time from the boom period of the coalfield, through the industrial turbulence of the 20s and depression of the 30s down to the rapid decline and near-complete demise of the industry in the later part of the century, all these events having far-reaching consequences in individual autobiographers' perception of themselves and their world. But though they have the experience of industrial living in common, Coombes and Berry have starkly contrasting personalities. One reviewer complains of Bert Coombes that "he preserves throughout thirty years [of his account in *These Poor Hands*] the neutrality and impersonality of a new acquaintance" (**Glyn**), whereas Ron Berry is at pains to delineate the ferociously individual nature of his being, in all its quirky idiosyncrasy from the first page.

For an analysis of the sense of self of Coombes, this chapter will explore, most importantly, *These Poor Hands*. It will, also, however, draw on his unpublished later autobiography, "Home on the Hill", his contribution to the Liberal Party pamphlet "The Life We Want", some of his regular weekly columns for the *Neath Guardian*

and his voluminous correspondence, in the main to illuminate particular aspects of Coombes's major autobiography.<sup>25</sup> A study of the autobiographical personae of B.L.Coombes suggests a complex and, possibly, troubled psyche at work behind the many masks. It is striking that the persona that Coombes presented in *These Poor Hands* has had a vibrant life of its own. A study of that persona is a useful starting point to this study, both because this is the received version that has entered Welsh social history and because, in the earliest stages of researching Coombes, this was the persona that I unwarily accepted as the man himself. The following section is a record of my initial — and as it now seems to me, innocent — appraisal of Coombes as autobiographer.

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In the opening of *These Poor Hands*, “Coombes”<sup>26</sup> presents himself as an impoverished farm lad. The first chapter is masterly in the way it evokes the misery and chill deprivation of the life of the rural proletariat huddling in damp clothes near a fire of damp logs, as “the winter wind rushed across the Herefordshire fields where the swedes rotted in heaps” (7), because transporting them to market was not cost effective. The feudal structure of rural life kept each in his preordained niche, with the gentleman farmer exerting great power through the tied cottage system, “where he could, and often did, make [workers] homeless and wageless for the least opposition to his wishes” (13) and with the squire, at the apex of the pyramid, for whom the very church bells only “pealed in earnest” (13) when his carriage and pair was seen to round the turn. Coombes paints a bleak picture of unremitting toil for small return for those who did not own land. From this disheartening environment, he describes his fascination with the warm glow in the night sky, identified for him as the Bessemer works at Dowlais, which comes to represent for him the fairer prospect of industrial labour. There was hope, too, for a more egalitarian society:

“Ain’t got to call no manner of man sir up there” (10).

In Chapter 1, the rural introduction to the industrial allegro, Coombes grooms us into a way of perceiving and identifying that is strongly class based. On his arrival at Treaclewyd, “Coombes”, presented as a total newcomer to the industrial scene, is

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25 Although Coombes created different autobiographical personae and revealed further aspects of self in other works, for reasons of length, this study's chief focus will be *These Poor Hands*.

26 This (intermittent) use of quotation marks will be explained later in this chapter.



struck by the warmth: he notes the bright dazzle of brass work in the homes and “a fire that filled the grate as high as was safe and its white heat showed in the reflection of the fender” (20). The reader is most skilfully drawn into an awareness of what made a move to the new way of life attractive to an enterprising young man from a dank rural heartland.

First and foremost, “Coombes” perceives himself as a worker. His metonymic title comes loaded with the intertextual resonance of Dickens’s *Hard Times*, where the lives of the exploited industrial “hands” of Coketown are depicted in their drudgery and misery. Picking up on the title, an Australian reviewer comments on the miners’ toil for “the enrichment of absent capitalists - just a unit of labour, a ‘hand’ to the controller of his industry - and his life” (**Common**). Coombes documents exhaustively the callous indifference of profit-bent owners to all matters of human justice for their hands, and how men at all levels of management must collude in profit-for-owners as the only good. For this reason, he perceives an unbridgeable gap between workers and management. He is sickened by management’s habitual behaviour after strikes:

It seems to me to be a most unfair thing to penalise the men’s officials after a strike. They only carry out the mandate of the men they represent(187). [...] [After a strike the manager] would not allow the chairman or the check weigher to come on the colliery property(189). [...] [This] was the fourth check weigher — elected to see that the men get fair play in coal-weighing — I have known whom the colliery companies have dismissed (189).

He outlines dispassionately all the ways he has seen workers cheated or done down by officials. He describes how he and a companion in the naiveté and energy of youth are deceived into co-operating by breaking all production records when a normally intractable seam becomes, briefly, easy to work.

We realised, when it was too late that we had been the cause of the rate being fixed so low that the men were always afterwards driven like slaves in an attempt to force them to earn as near their [minimum] money as possible. (86)

When officials came to measure work done, on which payment would depend,

their intention was [...] to badger the workman in every way, to talk about his interests, to frighten or fluster him — anything to make him forget some item in the measuring. After they had once passed it would be very difficult to get paid for it. (49)

If the miner took the company to court to insist on payment of the minimum wage, retribution would often come by the contaminating of his truck with stones or slag, for which he could be sacked (50). When a worker as a committee representative

complained to an official about ambulance arrangements and the neglected state of airways, he was framed by a letter to Whitehall, which everyone knew to be forged, and dismissed (219-20). Miners were regularly made to work whole shifts of overtime and were not paid for their work (126). There seemed to be good evidence that the owners were in league with the Labour Exchange, the provider of dole, to ensure that workers were made to toil at levels below the dole entitlement (215). When mine accidents occurred that could have been attributed to official laxity, the evidence was often tampered with, to imply either negligence on the part of those killed or generous provision of items, such as pit props, the lack of which had actually caused the accident (27, 253). Miners were daily required to take inordinate risks through inadequate provision of those same pit props, and made to take heavy electric cables into gassy or very wet situations where explosions or electrocution might result (111-17). The financial value of an animal could merit more care for it than for a man: a pit pony was worth £40, whereas bachelor Jack, mainstay of his family's finances in fact, only merited funeral expenses when he was killed (60-1). The catalogue of callous indifference on the part of officials builds to a moving climax in the penultimate chapter of *These Poor Hands* when we hear Billy tell "Coombes" of Hutch's death. We have grown to know Billy and Hutch as endearing individuals in the course of the book. "Coombes" affirms:

I had the affection for Billy that every workman feels for a mate who has shared years at a dangerous job with him. (246)

Billy describes how he and Hutch, as repairers in a new job up north, are forced by a fireman to work, very soon after a rock fall, when another collapse was threatening and the fireman refused to allow them to shore up the roof, before starting the work of clearing. Hutch is killed (248-51). "Coombes's" telling engages fully with Billy's pain and the grief he feels for the bereft family, with whom he and his family had lived very closely in shared accommodation. We understand and feel Billy's powerlessness: had he told of the fireman's negligence at the inquest, Hutch's family would have been denied compensation (254-5). The chapter ends with Billy asking "Coombes" to speak for him at his colliery, so that he may have the hope of returning to familiar faces. "Coombes" agrees.

'I knew you would when I came', he answered, and I was grateful for this tribute from my old mate. (257)

Through such “feeling” means does “Coombes” present how deeply his sense of self is enmeshed in his role of working man, engaged in important, dangerous and productive work with others, whom he has learnt to trust and love and on whom his life has often depended. His class identification — a feeling rather than a doctrinaire one — is constructed as a fundamental part of how he sees himself.

Certainly, some of his sense of class solidarity and an unpolitical sense of class enmity came from Coombes’s growing awareness of what the accident rate was underground, once he had trained as an ambulanceman and was regularly called away from his mining work to treat injured people. In his later years as a miner, safety measures were increasingly ignored, as management desperately pushed the workers in the search for speed and higher productivity, as Welsh coal lost its traditional markets. Coombes becomes one of the early “machine men”, a job he hated, in charge of an enormously powerful cutting machine, and was obliged to work a double shift to the point of utter exhaustion and falling asleep at his dangerous post (108-25). Although mechanical cutting eased the physical labour of mining, it very much increased the dangers, as the high noise level made it impossible to hear the early-warning creaking and shifting that often preceded a roof collapse, and dust levels were much higher, raising the risk of what came to be known as pneumoconiosis. The cable often leaked electricity. The syllabus notes for the Left Book Club study groups discussing *These Poor Hands* point out that the accident rate from explosion per thousand face workers in France was only a third of what it was in Britain, because the French hardly ever used electricity underground (**Scrap**).

“Coombes” affirms in a variety of ways his warm commitment to comradeship as an abiding human blessing. He observes with approval from the first day in Treaclewyd that: “There was none of the ‘keep away from this place, I pay rent for it’ about these people, as is the case in the English farming areas” (22). He is moved by the generous-spirited way those who had been able to save, through having several wage-earners in the family, would visit during a strike and :

after they had gone money would be found in places where only they could have placed it. When we sent it after them, they would deny all knowledge of it. It would be used to help in cases where the need was urgent. (79)

“Coombes” observes the painful progress around the pub of the silicotic ex-miner Dai, near death trying to make some money for his family through selling raffle tickets for his gramophone: he notes that “the three who are miners buy without any

hesitation [...] you will never see a miner refuse help to another who is sick or injured, for it may be his own turn next" (238). When Billy, a fellow machine cutter, is persuaded to return to work before the strike is ended, "Coombes" compassionately observes that Billy, who has six children, "was living in an isolated cottage on the mountainside [...]. [He] did not have the support of other men living near, as we did" (185). He is appalled by the Labour Exchange's attempt to get men to seek work at a distance from their community. This meant they were forced to:

Go away from the people he knew and counted as friends, who would smoke their pipe of tobacco with him as they talked of the better times they had enjoyed together. Go to some strange area where he would feel himself a stranger and an interloper. [...] Go to be a stranger in the house, in the work and in the street. (150)

He indicates that the Coombes family have made it a rule "that if we have anything in our house, no beggar shall ask for food in vain" (223). On one occasion he discloses that he was part of a group travelling to work on a charabanc; on a particular morning they go and wake up a late-sleeping boy. During that shift the same boy is sent by his slipshod butty to borrow "Coombes's" hatchet. "The boy asked so nicely I could not refuse him," he declares. Ten minutes later the boy is killed by a roof fall. "Coombes" observes "I have always been glad I loaned him my hatchet, or I would have felt that I withheld the thing that might have saved his life" (168). He identifies habitually with his fellow workers. Coombes walked the four miles to the colliery he was working at a particular time, on Friday, pay-day, exulting in "the grand day" and feeling "the wonder of such a day right in my bones", yet aware that "underneath that mountain that is over to my right more than a thousand of my mates are shut away from the sight of this day" (228-9).

After the abnormal, subterranean, dangerous life Coombes led so much of the time, he describes the need of normal, human, intimate life asserting itself particularly strongly. The delight Coombes expresses in the nesting process, when he and his wife finally achieved two ten-square-foot rooms of their own, is touching, given the manifold disadvantages of that home. Just after the war, "we had a wonderful stroke of luck — so unexpected that we could scarcely believe it to be anything but a dream: we got a house to ourselves" (130). The house flooded regularly; coal deliveries had to be carried through the prized front room; they had rampant beetle infestation, and the tiny house was next door to a noisy public house. At last, however, they had achieved privacy, something Coombes sees as a deep human need frequently not met

in the circumstances of a miner's life, and "could talk without being overheard. [...] We counted it as almost a palace, and, besides, there was a small garden" (131). Coombes values this seemingly normal satisfaction highly, being aware that "people there were prepared to go to any extreme in bribing or paying extra rent to get a house that became vacant" (130). He writes tenderly of the birth of his son, "thinking how small and helpless he looked" (171), and of his first tentative steps walking and exploring the natural world. Through the life of this average miner so often trapped into working sixteen hours a day underground, some glimmers of the deep human satisfaction and nurturing Coombes gained from his family life shines through.

Several of the autobiographers considered in this thesis have demarcated their sense of self in relation to larger movements and traditions: Gwyn Thomas takes a socialist perspective to Oxford; Lorna Sage muses on the impact of the Beat generation of her youth; Denise Levertov mulls over the broad sweep of the two different religious traditions of her parents. In Coombes, broader movements only appear in the orientation assumed in his normative reader on this occasion. Thus he has no interest in labouring theoretical concepts — that miners are representative members of the proletariat, for example — although he will discuss the class betrayal involved in a miner becoming a manager. He is enough of a thirties socialist realist to seem to have no interest in the inwardness of religious experience, seeing religion essentially in terms of the power it gives to the dominant class: in his case, firemen and managers who are also deacons and lay preachers. The realities of the struggle in the wider world — the Spanish Civil War, the movement towards the Second World War or (for his later, wartime, books) the complexities of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and its shattering collapse — do not seem to be part of his life view. Interestingly for someone who has been able to construct his adolescence in the way he did in *These Poor Hands*, he seems very taken with Borrow's Romantic constructing and idealising of a coherent and inspirational Welsh historical and literary tradition (144).

Miner Coombes may be, crawling through darkness and filth for much of his working life, but he believes he has the capacity to respond to beauty equal to any man's. He is intensely responsive to beauty in Nature: "the dew of morning sparkl[ing] from a thousand leaves" (38) after his first night shift. An eighty-foot waterfall "not a mile from the drab village yet unknown to most natives", seemed "a wide veil of water, the spray from which kissed the primrose roots amongst the rocky sides to a new life and

beauty" (55). A miner incarcerated in darkness for much of his life reveals poignantly how moved he is by visual beauty.

From Coombes we gain a sense of many aspects of physical identity. From him, we come to understand something of the hardwired, compelling night and day rhythms of the human body which are impossible to deny:

I had thought night and day were alike underground but it was not so. It is always dark, but Nature cannot be deceived and when the time is night man craves for sleep. When the morning comes to the outside world, he revives again, as I did. (37)

Further, the body never adapts entirely to sleeping by day:

Jack [declared] there was little hope that I would ever sleep properly by day. He was quite right, and even today I notice that the beginning of each night shift shows the men weary and disheartened by the lack of proper rest and that all are hoping that the week-end will come soon so they can have a real night's sleep. (41)

A particular awareness of one's physical make up comes with the unusual contortions and exertions a miner's work may require:

I soon found that a different kind of strength was needed than the one I had developed. My legs became cramped, my arms ached and the back of my hands had the skin rubbed off by pressing my knees against them to force the shovel under the coal. (35)

Coombes, in his early forties when writing *These Poor Hands*, is sensitive to the distressing awareness in older miners that their strength is ebbing and their whole sense of human value is linked to their muscle power.

Then, again, when we start to think, it must surely be realised that every passing week makes one older. [...] I watch how the few men who are old come to work; how weary they look, how their faces seem almost as grey as their hair; how desperate they are that the officials shall not think they are slower at the work than the younger men. (222)

In this harsh world, human usefulness depends on physical fitness.

There is no place in our industry for the ill or the injured, no matter how that incapacity may be caused. A working man is only of any value as long as he can do a hard day's work. (222)

In *These Poor Hands*, Coombes's sense of self is largely defined by the nature of his work: his sense of being an exploited unit of labour creating profit for the owners and suffering danger and indignity in that cause and his experience of the overpowering reality of comradeship as a great good in that life.

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The foregoing material has been incorporated, almost verbatim, from my original response to *These Poor Hands*, as an indication of the reading that this apparently naïve text would offer a reader who considers only the published work. I have, however, interpolated such phrases as “he presents himself” and have frequently inserted quotation marks around the author’s name where, I am now aware, he appears in his own text in a carefully constructed persona. Of all the subjects considered in this study, Coombes has been the most striking in terms of the awareness the researcher comes to of the calculated nature of an autobiographer’s self-portraiture. The considerable amount of time spent on him has been fully rewarded by insight into the importance of particular scholarly qualities: a peculiar sort of tenacity and the importance of holding initial conclusions lightly. The research involved in the study of Coombes has opened up quite unexpected new vistas as unforeseen caches of information have released their secrets. The conclusions of my first draft (1998), reached from a consideration of the published version only of *These Poor Hands*, are very different from those reached in this fourth and final effort. A major reassessment (late 1998) became necessary after a scrutiny of the B.L.Coombes archive with its hoard of fragmentary early drafts and discarded chapters of *These Poor Hands*, the typescript of “Home on the Hill” and letters pasted into a scrap book. Next, a folder containing some fifty letters was made available to me in April, 1999 through the good offices of the then publishing director of Gollancz, who made Herculean efforts to retrieve their Coombes file from a warehouse in Poole, where the entire Gollancz archive had languished, inaccessible since the Orion takeover.<sup>27</sup> The findings from this were so intriguing that I was driven to a lengthy attempt to verify a particular incident in the public record and local newspapers, taking in on the way many examples of Coombes’s regular column in the *Neath Guardian*. Next, the Lehmann archive became of consuming interest and, in stages, letters which had been exchanged between John Lehmann and B.L.Coombes (now at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre at the University of Texas at Austin) provided key pieces of the jigsaw by 2001. It has been interesting to note, for example, how *These Poor Hands*, as it evolves through drafts to publication, constructs a persona increasingly

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27 The entire Gollancz archive is now (2002) incorporated into the Littlehampton Book Services Archive at Littlehampton, Sussex.

“on message” for the norms of socialist realism.<sup>28</sup> As we shall see, individual idiosyncrasies disappear, partly under editorial direction, as this exemplary worker is constructed. However, quite apart from editorial strictures, Coombes seems to enjoy nothing better than reinventing himself. At several different points in his writing life, as we shall see, Coombes shows an ability, chameleon-like, to change colour according to the circumstances and purposes of an autobiographical assignment, often in a way that will present him to his intended audience in the most sympathetic light.

There is little objective evidence in the public domain about Coombes’s early life, beyond stark information of the sort found on a birth certificate: a handicap, given the psychoanalytical thrust of this study. Many indications from his adult behaviour and writings suggest that his childhood experiences would have richly repaid scrutiny. An archaeological dig has to create hypotheses from fragments. In a salutary learning experience, I have become aware that, on several occasions, the meaning I had attributed to particular observed changes in the autobiography has modified, often as I have had new evidence of Coombes being an unreliable narrator of the events and circumstances of his own life. This habitual remodelling of persona is, perhaps, most strikingly illustratable in Coombes’s contribution to “The Life We Want” (**Liberal**), a Liberal Party pamphlet published in 1944, when the war was clearly moving into its final stages and there was an awareness that a General Election was already five years overdue. Lord Meston wrote the first part of the pamphlet, giving a theoretical exposition of what he saw as a desirable restructuring of society after the war, for the benefit of the working man. Coombes follows on, writing for the most part appropriately, even, at times, movingly, of the harsh experiences of a working man’s life, showing a shrewd awareness of how to interpret working-class experience sympathetically for the middle class elements in his readership.

For the illustrative material from his own life, we have, for the most part, to take what he says at face value because there is no possibility of verification. However, what he tells us of his origins and early life until he leaves for the mines can be compared with independent records or what he has written of that period in other times and different circumstances (which I offer in brackets in what follows). Disparities are very

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28 A more extended account of the evolution of *These Poor Hands* is contained in Barbara Prys-Williams, "A Difficult Man, your Coombes'," *New Welsh Review* 49 Summer 2000. This article was written before my discovery of the John Lehmann archive at the University of Texas. I have subsequently somewhat modified my views on the nature and extent of Lehmann’s influence



striking. In this pamphlet, he presents himself as having been born on a farm in Herefordshire 45 years before and of growing up on the land. [Barbara Nield's article in *The Dictionary of Labour Biography* records that Coombes, the son of a grocer, was actually born in Wolverhampton in 1893 and was therefore 51 in 1944.] He implies he has at least one sibling. [In "Home on the Hill" he indicates that he was a lonely only child (279).] He describes his sense of growing "bitterness", "confused frustration and helplessness" (14), as he takes in, in his childhood and youth as son of a tenant farmer the utter impossibility of making one's way through life on the land. [In old age, he writes in the *Neath Guardian* of childhood years spent in the industrial context of Treharris where his father and uncles were miners, and of moving as late as the age of fourteen with his parents to take up tenancy of a farm in Herefordshire, where he spent only "a few years" on the land (**Golden**).] He describes the hardships that "drove" him from the countryside (15). [In "Home on the Hill" he presents himself from ages 16-17 in a comfortable job as groom to a doctor, whence he leaves for the mines in search of excitement and danger (27-43).] The very epitome of an enterprising young man, he indicates that he cycles the whole eighty miles from the country to the mining valleys (15). [In *These Poor Hands* and "Home on the Hill" he presents himself as travelling by train, and in the former work, is accompanied by a tin trunk (18).] In all this, it may well be that Coombes saw his brief to offer harsh relevant experience from both a rural and industrial working-class life, to illustrate Lord Meston's argument. This is, after all, a pamphlet issued by a political party. However, "The Life We Want" indubitably reveals that Coombes was prepared to go to considerable lengths to adapt his actual life-story, to suit the single clear message he is trying to put across in autobiographical mode. Some of these shifts will be dealt with in a more extended way later in an analysis that will inevitably lead to some repetition as particular sources are explored in more detail.

Catching Coombes in the act of shape shifting is an intriguing experience. A more detailed account of how his personal myth seems to metamorphose in particular circumstances is revealing. Coombes seems regularly to have presented himself as someone who grew up on the land, as in "The Life We Want" and in *These Poor Hands*. Further, he seems to have talked in this way to people he knew. In an unpublished brief memoir of him, G.B.Evans described his long acquaintance with him, started when his wife was the village newsagent:

But only one customer took the 'Writer', B.L.Coombes, and that, I suppose singled him out for me. Then having got to know him, I found out that he had had the same beginnings as my father. Born on farms in adjoining counties, they had started their working lives as servant boys. They understood what it meant to be hired out for six pounds for six months, at the hiring fair. There were shared values. (Bert)

Yet, at a time of deep personal significance to him, Coombes tells quite a different story. In the autumn of 1963, Coombes celebrated three important events: his Golden Wedding, twenty-five years as columnist for the *Neath Guardian* and being presented by the South Wales Miners' Federation with a miniature miner's lamp "for outstanding contributions to working class literature"(Golden). In his *Neath Guardian* column of 11.10.63, he declares of the recognition by the miners: "The ceremony moved me greatly and I am not easily made emotional" (Golden). Filled, at this point in his seventy-first year, with a sense of deep identification with his past mining life, he writes of the centrality of that experience for him from childhood onwards and, comparatively speaking, the marginal nature of his youthful experience on the land. He describes his fascination, at ten years old, with the neighbourhood pit at Treharris where his father and uncles had been miners. He writes vividly, too, of the long midwinter journey, when he was fourteen, across country to Herefordshire where his parents were about to become tenant farmers. He adds: "I have never regretted those few years in the country [...]". In the absence of reliable documentary evidence, it seems impossible to separate with any certainty the factual truth of Coombes's life from his myth-making. However, since, elsewhere, as we shall see, he describes a year as groom to a doctor from age not-quite-sixteen to seventeen, his growing-up on the land may well have been limited to two years in mid adolescence.

In "Home on the Hill", written in the late 1950s, his early life is portrayed very differently from his account in *These Poor Hands*.<sup>29</sup> It is startling, remembering the immensely evocative opening of that book, where "Coombes" describes his initiation at the age of eighteen to the mining environment, to discover that the industrial scene

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29 A recent anthology of Coombes's unpublished work, B. Jones and Chris Williams, eds., *With Dust Still in his Throat: A B.L.Coombes Anthology* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), has made sections of "Home on the Hill" conveniently available. My references, for completeness, are from the typescript in the archive. A further work, B. Jones and Chris Williams, *B.L.Coombes, Writers of Wales*, eds. Meic Stephens and R.Brinley Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), a critical biography, appears to have been written with an eye firmly on the public persona of Coombes as the "voice of the miner" and has relied, at times, on Coombes's own autobiographical writing as a source of biographical fact. My reservations about the latter aspect of the work have been explored in a review article, Barbara Prys-Williams, "A miner 'on message'," *New Welsh Review* 48 Spring 2000.

had, in fact, been familiar to him from childhood, for he had lived in a mining village, Treharris, before returning with his parents to Herefordshire:

I knew the smell and sound of mining as a boy. [...] [I] had sat up in bed many nights to watch the glowworm-like crowding of tiny lights near the pit top as the men waited to go down. Somewhere in me was the longing to go back amongst those dangers. (7)

Now he evokes nostalgically and glowingly the remembered *pleasures* of farming in Herefordshire, a county he describes as “rich warm land and a stolid way of life” where he experienced “good food and sweet air” and, in spite of his recorded need to escape from the bleakness of rural life depicted in *These Poor Hands*, he is unequivocal that he had “liked the work and the life” (23) when he went to work at the castle, which had about 600 acres of ploughland. When, after the success of *These Poor Hands*, he is able to rent his own smallholding, he compares the stony, poor land in South Wales very unfavourably with the rich pleasures of Herefordshire.

Often I longed again for the chance to follow two or three big horses across a Herefordshire field with the chains jangling and the plough scraping as it peeled off another slice of clover sward or stubble so that I could pause as we turned on the headland and noted that another brown ridge, level and true, had been created. Or I could admire the cricket field perfection of a prepared area for swedes and know I had taken my full share in that preparing. (225)

This is a dramatic reversal of attitude. Indeed, on rereading the opening of *These Poor Hands*, one would be tempted to attribute motives of political expediency to its author: he invents an “on-message” youth of hard rural struggle, (conveniently omitting the *petit bourgeois* origins as son of a grocer in Wolverhampton). More charitably, we might posit the possibility that Coombes, having been asked to write of the life of an average miner (an assertion we shall be considering later), makes the opening chapter paradigmatic of habitual worker movement: the rural poor did flood into the industrial valleys in great numbers and there had been periods in recent history when the earnings of a miner had been many times that of an agricultural worker. What he describes had been a typical progress for an “average” miner even if not true for his own individual life. Yet he regularly refers to *These Poor Hands* as his “autobiography”, as we shall see, and seems to have continued to proclaim the lie of rural origins for most of his life.

However, the most striking revelation *Home on the Hill* offers of Coombes as unreliable narrator is that, for the year before his departure for the South Wales coalfield, he had been employed as a groom by a local doctor, becoming “almost a

gentleman” in his regular uniform of bowler hat, kid gloves and totally waterproof mackintosh (23). The reasons he advances for moving on from that role were that this way of life was making him “slack” bodied and he wanted “to shape the world up a bit”, to go in search of excitement and danger (42). No longer writing for a politicised readership, and composing in the very year, 1959, *Cider with Rosie* was to win success in harking back with nostalgia to semi-feudal times in a rural area, Coombes, too, responds to the climate of the times. According to this later version, his ending up as a miner had little to do with the magic, warmth and allure of the Bessemer works against the night sky. Here, in what feels like a pleasing rhetorical flourish, he presents himself as having had several possible options that he plotted on slips of paper, which he placed in his bowler hat, a bravura farewell to the “almost a gentleman” life, before drawing one out at random, which sealed his fate in the direction of mining and the Vale of Neath (43).

It seems probable that the untidy, flatter version of Coombes’s life story, which includes inconvenient assimilation into a bourgeois life style, records more exactly his life events and that the symbolically resonant opening of *These Poor Hands*, which tells of an oppressed agricultural worker moving in hope to what turn out to be the dangers and difficulties of the coalfield, was a crafting undertaken to appeal to the politically committed outlets that were Coombes’s only likely avenue to prominence as a writer. What is truly striking is the sure way Coombes seems to pick up the spirit of the age. Although he needed some further specification from Lehmann before he achieved a fully “spot on” proletarian identity, in his first importuning letter to Gollancz he makes clear that he is aware of the particular parameters writing for the Left Book Club might require:

I appeal to you to give me — one of the earliest to join the Left Book Club — the chance to let the world know what is hidden in the mines [...] Your help may result in the L.B.C. producing one of the proletarian writers the working class needs so badly, but I am aware that a book written on the lines the Club wants would be alarming to the ordinary publisher so that I would be writing for one chance of a market — and only one. (Lettcoom.goll 18.2.37)

From the start of the *These Poor Hands* enterprise, he is clear that writing will involve a particular sort of register. The high degree of working class identification that we have seen in my earlier analysis can be attributed, in part, to a shrewd response to discerned market forces. He later shows that he has no compunction over assuming a role, particularly if that role places him centre stage. In letters to John Lehmann at the

end of 1940 and early in 1941, he describes being photographed as an “out of work” miner and mentions writing an article in support of the pictures:

Get “Picture Post” for the New Year issue. Have an article there and also a series of pictures of myself as an unemployed miner – true at that [deleted] this time.[...] Took several inside pictures of our little home and son Peter. Also some of the area and I was in most. Don’t think I’m always so shabby – it was necessary to be so. Over a million weekly circulation with that paper so it should be a real boost. (Lettcoom.lehm 22.12.40)

In a further letter of 9.1.41 he regards himself as a symbol of his class, and is thoroughly unperturbed to declare that he personally is in no difficulty: “Of course you will realise that the lack of mining work did not worry me unduly”: his colliery habitually worked “slack” time.

It seems important to display one final, major area in which Coombes’s misleading of his public is clearly detectable, as evidence of his particular cast of mind, before we turn at last to the editorial shaping *These Poor Hands* received. An unreliable narrator of matters that concerned his own personal history, he had a strong tendency to idealise, particularly his own talent as a writer. An important aspect of the persona he constructs is of a writer who gets things right fast through his own native wit. In fact, he was someone who constantly sought advice and acted on it. Twenty years after he wrote *These Poor Hands*, he gave an account of its creation and editorial reception in the script “I Stayed a Miner”, which he wrote for a BBC Features (nowadays documentary) programme broadcast for the first time on 11 10.57. It is an astonishing misrepresentation both of the ease of the process of writing the book and of its unconditional delighted acceptance, for which archives give quite different contemporary evidence, as we shall see:

I decided to try a full-length book. Shutting myself in the unheated bedroom and losing a lot of sleep, I typed eighty thousand words about the things I had seen and felt in my life. I did not revise one word, nor did anyone see it except myself until it arrived at the offices of one of the largest publishers in London.

A month went by then one morning I came from work and there was a pile of letters waiting for me. [There is a letter accepting *These Poor Hands*.]

Mary [his wife] reads “Shall be honoured to publish ‘These Poor Hands’ on the terms enclosed. In addition, our selection committee feels that the quality of this book is so unusual that it must be made the monthly Choice of our Book Club. We feel that it should stir the conscience of the public more than any book published for years”.

The reality of the evolution and passage to publication of *These Poor Hands* is very different from this description. A scrutiny of the Gollancz file reveals that it was more than two years from Coombes first making contact with Gollancz with the idea

of a book, in February 1937, to its publication in June 1939, with substantial redrafting being undertaken at the behest of John Lehmann, who had first hoped to publish the work. After the manuscript had moved on to the publishing firm of Gollancz, further rewriting of two chapters proved necessary. Before publication, there was much chivvying by Coombes and heated confrontation, in one letter, over his perception of Gollancz's delay in publication (**Lettcoom.goll** 10 .7. 38). His false claim that not one word needed changing is repeated in a celebratory article by Cliff John in the *Neath Guardian* on 27.9.63 on the occasion of Coombes's Golden Wedding which seems to have been based on an extensive interview with Coombes and his wife:

His "These Poor Hands" was undoubtedly a masterpiece. Published by Victor Gollancz, it made a Left Book Club choice — but not one single word in the book was altered or deleted. Such was his ability to write the publishers couldn't find a thing wrong with it.

However, Gollancz did indeed finally pay tribute to the qualities of the book. Coombes needed to be seen as a particularly gifted writer soaring effortlessly to the heights with his star quality book. The revealed truth of his writerly character, as the archives disclose it, is of quite different striking traits: first of all, the obdurate determination to become a writer and then the most extraordinary tenacity through endless setbacks. Indubitably, the self Coombes perceived at a very deep level was every bit as much writer as miner.

As an autobiography is always a construct, shaped for particular effects, tracking the factors at work in that shaping can be of crucial importance in understanding the final work. The perceived self at the heart of *These Poor Hands* is an artefact shaped by powerful forces. We have already examined some features which were useful adjuncts to Coombes's great desire to be a successfully published writer: his need to present himself in the most acceptable light; his ability to bend his life story to suit the needs of the moment. That texts are written in *circumstances* for *purposes* needs to be borne in mind for all the writers considered in this study, but most pressingly for Coombes. His chance to become an admired and influential writer grew centrally out of the events of the troubled nineteen thirties. Proletarian literature had an important exemplary and inspirational function in the publishing climate of the times in which the editor-publisher, John Lehmann, and the autocratic left-wing publisher, Victor

Gollancz, had enormous influence. Writing in 1955 in his autobiography *The Whispering Gallery*, Lehmann observes:

It may be difficult for anyone who was too young to experience the stresses of the generation that came to manhood just at the time when the Depression of the thirties spread over the world to understand how urgent our need was amongst us to break out of what we felt to be an artistic impasse, a suffocating air, and in some way in all we wrote and did help to voice the anguish of a world caught in the cogs of a pitiless economic machine, a world that demanded a drastic remedy for mass unemployment and a virile attempt to halt the forces that were making for war. (331-2)

Lehmann, to some degree, and Gollancz far more single-mindedly right up to the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939, saw an alignment with the Communist aspirations of the Soviet Union as the way forward in the fight against the certain evils of fascism. In a letter to Glyn Jones in 1939, B. L. Coombes explains that he wrote *These Poor Hands* at the invitation of John Lehmann, who had suggested he write a story of the life of an average miner, as he wanted to start a series on the lives of the workers (Letcoom.jon).

At this point a brief consideration of John Lehmann's likely publishing intentions seems relevant. He was a thoroughgoing European who lived in Vienna for long periods between 1932-8. In *The Whispering Gallery* Lehmann describes paying a long visit to Christopher Isherwood in Berlin in 1933 at the time of the elections that swept Hitler to power (209-11). From that time, he had an appalled sense of the grip that Hitler had on people's imagination and, at one remove, got to know of the immediate aftermath of Hitler's victory in the persecution of Isherwood's Communist friends. From Vienna he became intimately aware of the Fascist movements afoot in Europe and realised that time was running out before a new World War (231-2). In starting up *New Writing* — which gave Coombes his first chances of publication with his story "The Flame" — he was attempting to bring together writers from many countries who held the same views on Fascism and war: a reviewer commented that the unifying element in the writings was "the conception of an effective brotherhood born between victims of oppression" (*Whispering* 238). Encouraged by the success of *New Writing*, Lehmann had high hopes that, when his periodical moved to Lawrence and Wishart, the official publishers of Communist literature, the new sponsors would publish a *New Writing* library of novels, autobiography and books of poems by authors he had come across in his exploration for the magazine (309). This was the situation in 1937, when the drafts of *These Poor Hands* were written. A

further contextual point that needs to be borne in mind is that in 1936-7 there was an exhilarating feeling abroad of new empowerment of workers, due to what was happening in parts of Europe, where there was a powerful groundswell in response to the despotic Fascist menace. In France, the Popular Front coalition of left and centre parties united in opposition to Fascism had swept to power in May 1936, bringing about working class euphoria which resulted in immediate strikes, involving two million people, in an attempt to win particular reforms from employers stunned by the election results.<sup>30</sup> In Spain, the sense of dedication and courage shown by workers in defending gains brought about by a Popular Front government created a sense of the infinite possibilities of the ordinary working man. *These Poor Hands* seems to have been written and redrafted within the broad scope of the aspirations of the time, seeming to promote a particular view of the working man.

The fascinating history of the evolution of *These Poor Hands* through two different editorial processes requires too much detail to be explored thoroughly here, although some indication of what the tracks reveal is essential.<sup>31</sup> Most interesting for the evolution of Coombes's autobiography is the letter of 26.7.37, in which Lehmann comments on the draft of *These Poor Hands* he has just read. In line with the aims for *New Writing* and its related publications already posited, he encourages inclusion of further tales of unemployment struggles and dramatic events of mining life. He suggests dropping themes that are peripheral to this, such as Coombes's experiences as a writer and musician and recommends that Coombes should not "bother much about family life".<sup>32</sup> Lehmann's purposes clearly require a stark sense of the travail of the working man. He offered Coombes undoubtedly sound advice, giving him hints on how to improve the forward narrative thrust of the book and encouraging him to conceptualise more so that each chapter had a unity. He had found Chapter 12 in **These.D1** "rather too irrelevant" and wrote in his idiosyncratic writing on the draft

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30 An interesting summary account of this period is contained in Maurice Larkin, *France since the Popular Front: Government and People 1936-86* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

31 The B.L.Coombes archive in the South Wales Coalfield archive of the University of Wales, Swansea holds fragments of what seem to be two drafting processes of *These Poor Hands*. Portions of an early draft — Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 12— will henceforth be referred to as **These.D1**. The second draft, henceforth referred to as **These.D2**, which is complete to Chapter 6, resembles the published work very closely in that part. **These.D2** also includes versions of a Chapter 14 and 15 which have been entirely dropped by the published work.

32 Initially, copies of Lehmann's letters to Coombes in 1937 about *These Poor Hands* were requested from The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre. Subsequently, all the letters on file, 1936-48, from Coombes to Lehmann were received.



itself: "This chapter too discursive—misses the chance of describing 1926" (**These.D1** 229). Lehmann thus gives Coombes a sense of what will be of interest to his target readership, about which Coombes has, at times, had poor judgement. The heroic struggle of 1926, that year of long miners' strike, is, in Coombes's draft, overlaid with banal tales which reveal cynicism and a rather crass sense of humour, as he tells stories, for example, of how a doctor, barber and others make a fool of the local landlord (**These.D1** 233) and of how the village consumption of whiskey goes down by six bottles a week when the same doctor leaves (**These.D1** 235). He is much more scathing about people in this early draft, suggesting, for example, that another doctor did the hardest work of his life when he carried his four treasured violins from the station (**These.D1** 236). The disappearance in the published version of the anecdotes irrelevant to the main theme shows Coombes's improving conceptual grasp of what is needed and a tauter sense of narrative pace. The ambient tone develops a more consistent seriousness. Sometimes, too, the "feeling" tone changes completely. Coombes's reasons for marrying become more high minded and loving. In the early draft, he had laboured some leaden anecdotes about how hopelessly he and his friend housekeep in their bachelor days, eating some very bitter sardines and making themselves ill on substandard tinned salmon (**These.D1** 60). By the published version, there is no sense that a strong reason for marrying was in order to improve his creature comforts: in fact, he explicitly declares that his bachelor lodgings "were excellent" (**These** 61).

Throughout the fragmentary **These.D1** retained in the B.L.Coombes archive, there are marginalia and underlinings, some identifiable as by Lehmann, some probably by Coombes following the principles Lehmann has enunciated, most of which result in changes in the published work. Coombes had considerable ability and quickly picked up a more nuanced sense of the agenda of the publishers he was working for. When considered cumulatively, the changes between **These.D1** and the published work, many involving the dropping of anecdotes that clutter the narrative thrust, amount to a slightly altered presentation of Coombes as "worker hero". The narrative persona has mutated in a somewhat idealised direction. The miners, too, become conceptualised into something a little more admirable, as tales of their hard swearing and cruelty to pit ponies are reduced both in length and strength. John Lehmann's hope that his new publisher, Lawrence and Wishart, would bring out a library of longer works by



selected writers from his *New Writing* collapsed at much the time Coombes wrote to tell him that a revised version of *These Poor Hands* was almost ready. As a result, Coombes submitted the manuscript to Gollancz, a publisher he had had his eye on for some time, as he had been one of the earliest members of that publisher's Left Book Club and an avid reader of its publications. Coombes's first contact with Gollancz, as we have seen, had been in February 1937, when he had attempted to interest him in a work on his mining experience. To his long-winded overture to the firm, he received a brief reply indicating that the firm of Gollancz never commissioned such works but that his chance of success would be greatest if he offered an autobiography or some similarly factual approach (Lettgoll coom 14.2.37). Lehmann had seemingly made a more encouraging response (his letter appears to be missing from the file although Coombes's reply to it [Lettcoom.lehm 17.3.37] is there). Because Lehmann had already published Coombes's story, "The Flame", Coombes committed himself to Lehmann and Lehmann's new publisher, Lawrence and Wishart, who brought out official Communist literature. Now, however, as a result of the Lawrence and Wishart imbroglio, Coombes returned to Gollancz with considerable alacrity. Because of Gollancz's large circulation and because of the recognition Coombes would be afforded by his workmates who avidly read Left Book Club publications, Coombes declared that Gollancz would always have been the preferred publisher had there not been the question of loyalty to Lehmann (Lettcoom.goll 18.10.37). Over the twenty month period to the publication of *These Poor Hands* as a Left Book Club Choice (with the immediate sale of 50,000 copies, as members were committed to taking the Book Club Choice of the month), Coombes kept up a regular flow of letters, some five that could be regarded as chivvying, showing considerable persistence and tenacity, and on one occasion, anger and downright rudeness (10.7.38). The persona of the letters is much less gentle than that of *These Poor Hands*. The publishing director of Gollancz, Mike Petty, observed, in 1999, after reading through the file: "Speaking as a publisher myself, I'd have found him a difficult man, your Coombes".

This study engages with several problematic areas in its attempt to delineate the sense of perceived self we get from Coombes's autobiographical writing: the Gollancz connection produces a final, fascinating external pressure on the self we are finally allowed to perceive in the published *These Poor Hands*, Coombes's major

“autobiography”. In a letter to Glyn Jones in 1939, which formed part of my earliest investigation of ancillary material, Coombes had written of *These Poor Hands*:

By the way, I had to alter the ending of the book as it was rather too drastic a criticism of the conditions and the last two chapters were written in great haste.  
(Letcoom.jon)

After considerable exposure to Coombes, I now find his comment to Glyn Jones unsurprising; back in 1998, with three archives yet to be discovered, I was progressing only slowly to an awareness of his talent for misdirection. Initially, too swayed by his assertion that exception had been taken to the “rather too drastic a criticism of the conditions”, I had concluded that the two discarded chapters, preserved in the B.L. Coombes archive, had been abandoned for political reasons. The chapters describe the death in a roof fall of Coombes’s friend, Griff, as the result of the bullying, negligence and callous indifference to risk for the workers of a colliery official, the fireman, and the inquest which is a consequence of that accident, where a jury of miners feel compelled to return a verdict of “accidental death”, so that the widow will receive compensation. I had surmised that either Lehmann or, more probably, the doctrinaire party liner Gollancz, whose record for tampering with texts in a “good” cause has been memorably described by his biographer (Edwards 245-6), had wished to suppress this depiction of miners powerlessly conniving at an unjust legal process, which went against their best interests.

The Gollancz archive disclosed much more practical reasons: a long-running theme in the sequence of letters is Gollancz’s fear of a libel action from a colliery official, the fireman, who is depicted very unflatteringly in these two powerfully written chapters. When Lehmann had read the draft of Coombes’s autobiography (**These.D1**)<sup>33</sup>, he had been particularly impressed by the last part of the unfinished work, chapters 14 and 15 in **These.D2**, and made clear his preparedness to publish a version of it in *New Writing* (**Lettlehm.coom**12.12.37). It was these very chapters that now provoked considerable concern in Victor Gollancz. When the problem of libel risk seemed insoluble, Gollancz suggested a particular strategy which would involve minimal rewriting (**Lettgoll.coom** 20.2.39). With real professionalism, Coombes insisted on

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33 The version Lehmann read is no longer part of the fragmentary draft in the B.L.Coombes archive. Coombes was an energetic recycler of unused sides of paper, particularly during the shortages of wartime.

starting afresh (**Lettcoom.goll** 20.2.39)<sup>34</sup> and delivered the two new chapters within a month even while working full-time at the colliery.<sup>35</sup> He deftly transposed the mine accident from South Wales to a colliery up North, where he had two characters he had presented earlier, Hutch and Billy Ward, Coombes's fellow workers on machine-cutting, move away in search of work. Billy returned to report, in a conversation which Coombes handled in a skilful and feeling way, the horror of the accident in which Hutch had been killed outright in a roof fall (**These** 245-57). One wonders whether, in Hutch's necessary demise, Coombes had killed off a character from the real world, for Hutch had been fully presented in earlier chapters, or whether Hutch, and possibly other characters, were fictional creations.

It is interesting to note that, in my first analysis in 1998, when I had consulted the published text only, I had found particularly moving what I now discover to have been fictional embellishments — or even *volte face* — to avoid risk of a libel action. I discovered that in the early draft (**These.D1** 243) Coombes had felt “very bitter” about the behaviour of blackleg Bill Yardley and, after the warning of a libel risk from Gollancz's solicitor about his presentation of him, refers scathingly to Bill Yardley's total disappearance some years before in a midnight flit with his wife and “gang of children”, to escape many debts (**Lettcoom.goll** 7.4.38). By the published work, the character is transformed into Billy Ward:

Some weeks before the end of the stoppage I heard that Billy Ward had gone back to work. He was living in an isolated cottage on the mountainside, and the under-manager had been there persuading Billy that if he did not start he would have no chance of work when the stoppage was over. Billy did not have the support of other men living near, as we did. (**These** 185)

The change has moved the incident closer to the normative types of socialist realism. The blackleg has become the redeemable worker, his aberrant behaviour explained by his physical isolation from worker support and solidarity. Coombes seems rapidly to have developed an ear for this sort of register — unsurprising, perhaps, in one as dedicated to reading Left Book Club publications as the letters to Gollancz reveal. When, in the fictional analogue to the roof fall episode, Billy Ward returns to south Wales after the death of Hutch, Coombes writes of him with tenderness: “I had the affection for Billy that every workman feels for a mate who had shared years at a

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34 Either Gollancz in his letter dated 20.2.39 or Coombes in his response also dated 20.2.39 must have made a mistake over the date

35 Gollancz had read the revised chapters by 15.3.39

dangerous job with him” (These 246). In loyalty to and friendship for his “old mate”, he agrees to put himself out to try to help Billy get a job locally. The emotional lability shown in reaction to this character is disconcerting, even distasteful. A range of strategies were open to Coombes. Being true to his own gut reactions to people and events does not seem to have had any importance. And Coombes emerges as the loving, supportive co-worker of a man he actively disliked, in an episode that is pure fiction. This surely should give us pause over the numerous occasions Coombes represented himself as loyal, supportive, warm-hearted and generous.

One consequence, then, of fear of major libel risk over the depiction of the fireman is that two chapters are dropped and fictional reconstructions of a similar accident at a distance are substituted. Coombes knew that he already had in Lehmann a buyer for the discarded chapters. Within a matter of months of the publication of *These Poor Hands* by Gollancz in June, 1939, the two excised chapters appeared, somewhat reshaped (the protagonist slightly fictionalised in being presented as a bachelor and with the inquest omitted but with eight pages more or less verbatim transpositions from the “autobiography”), as the short story “Twenty Tons of Coal” in the “Workers All” section of the Christmas issue of Lehmann’s *New Writing*.<sup>36</sup> Posterity has tended to value “Twenty Tons of Coal” as Coombes’s most successful short story: he himself believed it “to be one of the best pieces of writing I have ever done” (Lettcoom.lehm 7.6.39).

In the long build up to the decision to drop the two dangerous chapters, Coombes, when a solicitor had started asking questions, wrote thus:

This is a true instance and the fireman is still alive. His name is Hopkins and I have called him Godfrey. [...] As only three of us were concerned in this affair and one is dead, there are only two of us left to give our version and apart from the altered name, the event is true in detail. The name of the deceased is also altered and it took place over four miles away from where I live [...] about five years ago. (Lettcoom.goll 14.3.38)

In a letter to Lehmann, of 7.6.39, his story is rather different: “It is more or less a true happening—and does happen in the mines frequently”.

In the period between my exploring the Gollancz archive and discovering the Lehmann one in Texas, and in view of Coombes’s firm assurance to Gollancz that the

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36 Currently available in B. L. Coombes, “Twenty Tons of Coal,” *The Penguin Book of Welsh Short Stories*, ed. Alun Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976). The near verbatim transposition from *These Poor Hands* are pp175-83 of this publication.

incident was true even in detail, I decided to try to find an account of the accident in the local press or Mine Inspectors' Reports in an attempt to calibrate the autobiographical status of the book: was this climax of the first version of *These Poor Hands* the true story of a shocking experience which had deeply touched Coombes's life or possibly a conflation of many he had been involved with as an ambulance man or had heard about? Coombes emphasises that, at this point, he has described an actual accident which happened some four miles away from where he now lives (at that point, Rheola Lodge, Resolven), about five years before (he is writing in March 1938), and that the fireman involved was called Hopkins. Coombes presented himself as being a witness at the inquest. The report for HM Inspectors of Mines for 1933 for the Swansea Division (**Mines**), the western area of the coalfield which stretched well into Carmarthenshire, reveals that 31 men were killed by fall of roof and side in 1933 and that such accidents accounted for 47.7% of reportable underground accidents in that area in that year — a tragically common accident then. In an attempt to find a close match for the accident Coombes described, I scrutinised microfilm of the *Neath Guardian* for a two-year period from April 1932-March 1934, searching for such accidents in the Vale of Neath and its environs, and cross checking with the South Wales *Evening Post* and *The Aberdare Leader*, where appropriate for fuller accounts of the accident, inquest and funerals.

I was looking for an account that presented a good fit on several points to establish whether Coombes's account was indeed closely based on life. The colliery needed to have been reasonably near Resolven. An essential part of the story as Coombes tells it is that his friend Griff (a fictional name) is killed beside him as they work together clearing a roof fall on the night shift, which Coombes regularly worked as a repairer. Griff is dead by the time his badly-crushed body is brought out. Coombes vividly describes bearing the body home through the dark. The dead man is older than Coombes (who was 40 in 1933) and had five children. An important part of the narrative of the inquest was the stress Coombes underwent from the obligation he felt as witness to win maximum compensation for Griff's many dependents. At the inquest, in that the jury consisted of men whose livelihood depended on the colliery where the accident happened, so that an accidental death verdict can be guaranteed, for a very good "fit", the inquest should be at a "company" village rather than Neath or Swansea.

I looked only at accidents resulting from fall of roof. I found no accident that provided at all a close match. Two reports indicated, for example, that the deceased had been working with his son. In several instances, the man killed was young, either single or childless or having only one child. Sometimes the victim was fatally injured, dying later in hospital. Only rarely were these victims working the night shift. In no inquest accounts, although firemen were sometimes mentioned by name, did I find one called Hopkins or any mention of Coombes as witness. In a letter to Lehmann dated 4.9.40, Coombes indicates that he is working at the Empire Colliery, Glynneath and this seems to have been his long-term place of employment. I could find no appropriate accident for that colliery in this period. Coombes further described Griff being buried in a country churchyard some twenty miles from the Vale of Neath.

It would be unwise to imply that this is conclusive evidence: no local newspaper can be relied upon to be a comprehensive journal of record and no scrutineer is infallible. Nevertheless, the result of this extensive trawl has been to reinforce my feeling that the accident as related was a conflation of many Coombes had known as a worker and an ambulanceman rather than representing one episode. In *These Poor Hands*, Coombes allowed himself one detailed and highly emotive account of a fatal mine accident. The original two final chapters of *These Poor Hands* contained a high number of elements of a horrifying generic accident which would shock and move his readers. There was brutal bullying by a mine official (with threat of sacking) to make men work in dangerous conditions, with Griff's need to comply being all the stronger because of his many dependents. There was the vivid imaginative impact of someone being killed within inches of where Coombes was working; the trauma of observing the mutilated body; the pathos of carrying the body home through the dark and having to observe the distress of Griff's dependents. After this, there was the stress of having to testify at an inquest, without being able to do what would have been in a miner's best interest — to proclaim the dangerous conditions they had been forced to work under — because this would have involved loss of insurance money for Griff's dependants.

Whether, possibly well outside the date mentioned to Gollancz, there was an Ur-incident, a roof fall in which Coombes was closely involved, which gave such accidents a long-term resonance for him, or whether he was writing from a general

appalled awareness of the risk of such accidents in his place of work, he returns again and again to write of this with a powerful emotional charge. When I discovered the existence of Lehmann archives, I saw that Lehmann (**Lettlehm.com** 26.7.37) warned Coombes of libel risks and the need to substitute for real names and places. It is possible that Coombes applied further disguise to the shape of the incident and the characteristics of the main protagonists, although he gives firm assurance to the contrary to Gollancz (**Lettcoom.goll** 14.3.38). Certainly, at other times, as we shall see, Coombes declares of that same accident that two men were killed. Even taking that into account, I was unable to find a near match.

It should by now be clear that, at many points, *These Poor Hands* is not a documentary work. It gives the feel of the mining experience without being an accurate reflection of Coombes's individual life. By the time he had revised his early draft in 1937, he had a clear idea what the market wanted and would take. It would be a "make or break" experience for him as a writer, and his importuning letter to Gollancz of 18.2.37 reveals the depth of his desire for recognition in this area. Further, through publishing stories, he had already found writing could produce an acceptable extra income and could lift him and his family from an insecure hand-to-mouth existence.<sup>37</sup> As with most people, motivation in writing was a complex interweaving of many factors: a desire to have the world understand the hardship and danger of a miner's life was certainly included. Indubitably, he wanted to write a book that would sell. When his manuscript moved to Gollancz, the possibility of his work becoming a Left Book Club choice with guaranteed sales of near 50,000 was a heady proposition. From Coombes's declaration (**These** 231), a miner's weekly wage in 1938 was £2.35 in present-day notation: from the Gollancz accounts he made £639.12.9d in royalties in the first six months of sale. He would have needed to be a saint not to care deeply about the financial implications of success and Coombes was not one. Indeed, in one of his letters urging rapid publication he declares: "Frankly, I need the money" (**Lettcoom.goll** 27.11.38). The book as delivered to Gollancz was as "on message" as he could make it.

Coombes's declared motivation was a desire to proclaim to the world the hardships and dangers of a miner's life, which had its source, he sometimes wrote, in that same

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<sup>37</sup> In a letter (15.7.38), Coombes informs Gollancz that he had made £25 from his writing the year before.



roof fall accident: this was perhaps the personal myth he lived by, the way he saw himself. In "Home on the Hill" (56) he explains that he had been the only witness to an accident which, on this occasion, he describes as having killed two of his mates, and had to appear at the inquest: "Inside me somewhere was the determination that I must do something to let the world know about our way of life", which had resulted in his first efforts at writing. He observes that a further prompting had been a desire to redress a balance:

No one class of people have been so misreported and slandered as the mining community. The strangeness of their work may have something to do with this but the big weakness is the poverty of the propaganda put out by the miners' union. All through the years they do not seem to have the least idea of how to explain their industry and its special difficulties. (**Home** 42)

*These Poor Hands* was written in an unheated bedroom on a £2 "junk" typewriter often at the end of an exhausting period of manual labour, next door to a pub where a brass band practised regularly. Part of Coombes's initial impulse, one has no reason to doubt, was powerful feeling. It is clear from his preservation of letters from the great and good in his scrap book, and from his obvious pleasure in meeting or being visited by notable figures of the time, that he enjoyed, after the event, the prominence and success that *These Poor Hands* brought him.<sup>38</sup> A desire to maintain that status and esteem was some part of the impetus for his subsequent sustained efforts. Yet the nature, strength and duration of the obsessive drive that kept him writing seems to go far beyond these impulses. In one of his assertively prodding letters (28.1.39) to Gollancz over delayed publication of *These Poor Hands*, he indicates that Gollancz has had the manuscript for over a year and he feels that he could have had a second or third book out by now. He proposes sending a second autobiography, should publication be further postponed. That same autobiography is rejected by Gollancz in 1940, as Coombes records in a letter to Lehmann of 5.11.40, and between the years 1940-5 it forms a constant theme in Coombes's letters to Lehmann as he submits it to him, accepts criticism, rewrites, revises and tries again, hoping against hope that Lehmann will bring the book out.<sup>39</sup> Other, more documentary, books focussed on the

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38 Coombes's scrapbook, containing numerous reviews of *These Poor Hands* and appreciative letters from many prominent people is preserved in the B.L.Coombes Archive at University of Wales Swansea.

39 Between 25.1.41 and 22.4.45 he mentions this second autobiography and the work he had been doing on it eight times. He confusingly entitles this work "The Singing Sycamore", the very title that he had given to an earlier unpublished novel. .

mining experience appear with other publishers during this time.<sup>40</sup> There seemed to have been a deep personal drive in Coombes that goes beyond any explanation offered here: it is a matter of some regret that no more is known of his early life.

Coombes was, *par excellence*, a vivid story teller and, as a miner, a representative of a rich oral tradition. He had a considerable talent for verisimilitude, for taking the reader into the mining environment and recreating it in a way that made it live. He had a capacity to produce in the reader a keen response to his vivid representation of the experiences of miners and, especially, to the hazards of the coal-mining industry. But it would be unwise to confuse verisimilitude with autobiographical veracity. We have already explored, in the consideration of Rhys Davies, the idea of an implicit autobiographical pact made between writer and reader, which conditions the reader's approach to and expectations of a text of autobiography. "Under existing convention, a claim is made for the truth value of what the autobiographer reports. [...] The autobiographer purports to believe in what he asserts" (Bruss 11). Coombes referred to his "autobiography" in writing to both Lehmann and Gollancz: interestingly, there is just one occasion when he indicates that *These Poor Hands* is an "autobiographical novel".<sup>41</sup> The subtitle of *These Poor Hands* is *The Autobiography of a Miner working in South Wales*. From evidence in areas where it has been possible to check and where large disparities have been found, one can hypothesise that Coombes regularly improved on life, in his attempt to write a dramatic and readable work that would sell, but also to deliver a persuasive work in the style of the Left Book Club. There was undoubtedly a bias towards selecting events and characteristics that show the miner in the best light. Although an early conversation that Coombes has with his friend Jack's landlord shows the latter is obsessively interested in boxing (26), and he later mentions a manager who is fascinated in a similar way (155), there is no developed account of this collier passion. As we shall see, Berry, by contrast, delights in revealing the typical pugnacity of the miner, the sheer naked aggression which he undoubtedly shares and which can well up and be channelled into fights with or without gloves. It is probable that Coombes's sense of an audience that would certainly include the *bien pensant* middle classes would deter him from highlighting

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40 B. L. Coombes, *These Clouded Hills* (London and New York: Cobbett Publishing Company, 1944). and B. L. Coombes, *Miner's Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1945).

41 He refers to his "autobiography" in letters to Gollancz of 18.10.37, 27.10.37, 23.1.38, and in a letter to Lehmann of 18.4.37. He refers to *These Poor Hands* as an "autobiographical novel" in a letter to Lehmann of 12.6.37, well before the fictional reworking of the "libel risk" chapters.

anything that would encourage the middle classes to perceive the miner as Other. Undoubtedly, too, he is at pains to emphasise inter class struggle throughout the work.

Coombes remains something of an enigma, displaying the most labile sense of self of any of the autobiographers studied here. The regularity of the adjustment of his life story has been disconcerting: he seems to have had a perhaps compulsive need to reinvent himself. My earliest archival experience of Coombes had included his scrapbook, containing many letters he had pasted in, including two from Victor Gollancz dated 10.3.38 and 20.2.39. In comparing these with the copies of the same letters from the Gollancz archive, I was astonished to discover that in the scrapbook, contentious material, sometimes to do with the libel risk, had been snipped out, leaving an impression of a serene relationship, warmed by Victor Gollancz's considerable positive regard. A letter from Lehmann dated 7.7.39 had been similarly snipped. Overall, the evidence seems to suggest that a grooming of persona was habitual in Coombes. In the early draft of *These Poor Hands*, Coombes's persona showed several less endearing characteristics — elements of cynicism and a rather crass and, at times, unkind sense of humour, for example — but by the published version, the main impression of the personality is of someone warm-hearted, long-suffering and unassertive. To experience, then, the aggressive, self-promoting and self-interested side of his character in letters to Gollancz has been fascinating. The idea of Coombes as a naïve proletarian eye witness has sometimes seemed to suit people's preconceptions. The archival material has provided hard evidence of the inventiveness and, indeed, the literary ability Coombes has brought to the many constructed versions of his life story.

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To move from Coombes to Berry is to invite energetic comparison. They are yoked together here because each was deeply influenced by the Welsh mining experience, but one would be hard put to it to find two autobiographers more different in intention, in temperament and in narrative style. Coombes's ostensible motivation seems to have been to act as the mediator and explicator to the world at large of the often maligned and misunderstood miner. He sees himself as a representative miner. In contrast, Berry's primary urge as autobiographer has been first to explore and to try to understand his perplexing self, and then to act as elegist for a vanished people and way of life. The energy sparks out from the page, sometimes threatening short circuit,

communicating distress, puzzlement, some ferociously partisan judgements and much celebration. Rarely has there been an autobiographer more deeply fascinated by the difference in human beings or more prone to tease out the nature of his own identity through evaluation and implicit measuring against others. *History is What You Live* demands considerable effort from the reader: it is an uneven work which is sometimes disappointing, often exhilarating and, ultimately, moving.

*History is What You Live* was published the year after Berry's death. Probably, from various datings in the text (most usefully and explicitly on p.97), the writing and redrafting was spread over nearly a decade, the final one of his life, and the same decade that saw the virtual demise of the coal industry in South Wales. This historical background contributes vitally to Berry's implicitly explored and hard-won values system. "Everything passes", Berry seems to be saying, "but let's celebrate what we have known". The ground themes stated, modulated, recapitulated and built to a climax in the final pages are evanescence and loss. Conceptually, the landscape of rather more than a square mile around the village of Blaenycwm in the Rhondda, particularly its mountains, is the organising framework of the book. Berry's exact and vividly visual memory imbues that landscape with often poignant meaning: one feels his urgency to record what only he in his uniqueness can know, before the recalling, perceiving and connecting mind and feeling response that is Ron Berry is snuffed out. There is, too, a fervid eagerness and a baffled need to record, as tellingly as he knows how, what it feels like to be him. Olney posits, in his fascinating *Metaphors of Self*, that in the autobiographical process:

One cannot hope [...] to capture with a straight-on look, or expect to transmit directly to another one's own sense of the self; at most one may be able to discover a similitude, a metaphor for the feeling of selfhood. (*Metaphors* 266-7)

Berry's metaphors of self are often telling, sometimes revealing a sense of spiritual and emotional hunger amounting to starvation. There is a feeling that, whatever he knows himself to be — cranky, wilful, obdurate — it is because, with his genetic endowment, in his particular historic time and environment, he can be no other, if he is to assuage his voracious longing for genuine experience that may, in the end, feed him.

Berry wants us to understand and almost become part of the process of change and loss that he mourns. We accompany him to different spots in and around Blaenycwm and its surrounding mountains at different times in his growing up and adult life. We

feel something of the inevitability of change, as he describes the petrified mussels dating, he declares, from 250,000,000 B.C., which were found on the slag heap of Tŷ Draw colliery, now a grassed over part of Graig y Ddelw (30). Berry is as entirely a creature of his habitat as the kestrels he delighted in on Cefn Nant y Gwair. He interprets that habitat in an imaginative and loving way, so that we can see its value through his eyes. We come to understand the richness (and the violence) of the mining culture. As Berry lists the range of skills painstakingly imparted to children, the sense of the diversity of talents in the community is conveyed as well as the affectionate involvement the transmission of know-how represents: “Learning takes time and time again” (46).

We experience the feelings and memories called forth in Berry by so much that is, at first sight, mundane in his environment and feel that he possesses the landscape through those memories. Follow any linear course and it will yield significance. There is the tunnel where Grandmother Berry’s first husband was killed; the cutting beyond where violets and early catkins could be found; the spot where the best willow twigs, for making whistles, grew; the hollow oak where early sexual adventures are remembered; the railway footbridge from which gentle and generous Percy Prior, one of Berry’s early mining “butties”, committed suicide when suffering from 100% dust (40-1). Time and again Berry wanders in memory the mountain tops that hem in the Blaenycwm — Graig y Ddelw, Mynydd Tŷ Isaf, Cefn Nant y Gwair and Pen Pych — musing on their different delights. He considers the swimming ponds of yore, although ripe sources of infection, the epitome of communal joy: “The blessing of sharing amongst one’s own, which exile magnifies and death disintegrates” (53). He trains us to see the meaning of different landmarks: what seems mountain is often grassed-over slag heap, “herring-boned with huge drainage ditches since Aberfan’s tragedy shook the bowels of absent experts” (30). He evokes the delight he felt as a boy on Pen Pych: “Wheatear territory this, since time stood still” where one might also see “planing skylarks” and “mock-crippled pipets flopping between tussocks” (31). He mourns that his grandchildren will never experience these joys because of the environmental vandalism of the Forestry Commission, which has planted dark sitkas along all the tops — ousting such enduring life as “hardwoods older than Cardiff city [...]whinberry ledges, ivied buttresses (29). [...] The leavings of

prehistory sacrificed to Mammon masked as a quango” (31). His habitat is altered beyond recognition.

He recreates the feel of Blaenycwm when the Rhondda was a single-industry, thriving valley, commemorating all that he knew of the suffering and endurance of the small but typical cross section of the mining fraternity he worked with at the Graig level. As a secular requiem, he intones the names of many of the dead friends who worked with him there, and the nature of their dying: rheumatic fever, dust, accident, TB (41-3). He muses at what he learnt of the variousness of human nature as the junior in the close butty relationship: Sid, a stingy payer, who “had the one-way mind of a ratting terrier and the twpness” (55); “the most insular year of my life” with open-handed Percy Prior “whose entire self was given to coal. Foolishness everything else [...]. What I learned from him was *doing*” (62-3); sociable Jimmy Shanklin, fun to be with yet whose careless shoring caused Berry’s first accident (56-7); on machine cutting with club footed Eddie Jones Cochyn, with whom he came “near to feeling inseparable from mining for the rest of my bread-winning days. [...] Native born slot fit. [...] *Humanitas Jerboa*” (67-70). The macho code of the Rhondda inflicted extra hardships: “For two years I carried a burning sore on the small of my back. Healing scabs were knocked off. [...] Boys were not allowed to kneel in the Five Deep. Kneeling signified moral weakness” (55). He communicates vividly a sense of typical, every day dangers: their headlong dash when the subterranean lake comes flooding into Five Deep, “and the black lake filled the district, dozen of stalls [...] supply roads, airways, water rising steadily up the Five Deep, drowning the toil of half a century” (65-6). By 1990, the whole colliery is gone: “And now, since then, time has obliterated Graig level, the arched stonework blown in, the whole mountain’s flank thick with conifers [...]” (66). Indeed by the time the autobiography is completed, “King Coal is dead, sole reason for both Rhonddas, leaving twin valleys of commuters (20% unemployment of course)” (30). The Methodist chapel has become a bus garage (30).

Berry weaves in regular elegiac refrains: “All gone now though, gone, Treorchy, Trealaw and chapel cemeteries’ sempiternal harvest” (34); and, even there, winds and weather remove the names from the gravestones, as they have effaced all record of Grandfather Noah’s last resting place (37).

As Berry worries away at and interprets what he is and why he is it, the reader becomes quickly aware of his certainty that one of his key endowments is the acute recording of sense impressions, particularly visual ones. By the end of *History is What You Live* one has a sense of a memory bank overflowing with intense recall, a human personality unusually endowed in recording, being nurtured by, and finding meaning in, what he sees. As Berry is poignantly aware, with Philip Larkin, of “The sure extinction that we travel to”, his recording on paper of sights, in particular, but, too, sense impressions in general, that have touched and changed him, many now passed away from the face of the earth, is his own personal stay against evanescence. He writes vividly of his earliest awareness of himself as a bundle of sensations:

Smells, tastes, sounds, sights, sensations crowding my infant ganglia, confirming oneself as singular. A soul bud. Chopped mint, drops of blood, sand on the flagstone floor, the pure tugging of candle flame, bladders of air behind gulps of stingy-nettle pop, soapsuds burning eyes. (14)

There is a sense of recall of a time when the external world itself seemed a secure and tender nurturing place reflecting a promise of sure sustenance:

Loving-kindness shone from externals, from buttercup chains, Selsig minnows and loaches, jack-frosted windowpanes, woollen vests, hawthorn berries, paper and pencil, Lucky Bag magnets, March frog ponds, Mari Lwyd nights, New Year’s Eve, cuckoo calling on the hillside, sweet cocoa, snowfalls, rainbows, tinned pineapple, our mongrel bitch howling, singing while George played his 12/11 Melodeon. (16)

In brief quotation, it would be difficult to communicate his sense of what a fascinating and secure place the world felt as his intensely curious eyes drank in the different joys of the wider world on his annual holiday in his grandmother’s cottage by Ynystawe Lock, “harmless Amazon of childhood” (19). Sight — and to a lesser extent, all the senses — imbue the autobiographer Berry with a sense of continuing wonder at the potential glory of the world. A poignant tracing in *History is What You Live* is that, while the receptivity remains, a sense of having a secure place in that world vanishes for ever and vanishes early.

The fact of the aggression and dis-ease which he finds so basic a part of himself is something frequently recorded in *History is What You Live* and we will return to a consideration of possible causes of these manifestations. Certain it is that the deepest security Berry reveals in his adult life is in his male bonding. His macho Rhondda background gave very particular models of male identity that are likely to have been innately congenial to him. We have already explored the range of “butty” relationships Berry experienced before he was twenty, a very formative period in

anyone's life, and the culminating one with Eddie Jones Cochyn which was a close and trusting one. He recalls in impressive and minutely discerning detail all that he remembers of the individuating elements of a wide range of early peers, almost all male, and, in many cases, what later flowered and what withered in them. He remembers with warmth how he was saved by his comrades by being given the means to pay the fine incurred after assaulting the colliery manager, when inwardly he believed "Prison seemed fitting. [...] Cardiff or Swansea" (88). The men of three local collieries had so generous a whip round for him on pay day, that he was left with £5 spending money after he had paid his fine:

Very many of the colliers who chipped in have passed away. I knew them all by name. (88)

His early relationship with cycling mate Vernon Rees, a fellow miner, taught him a great deal about himself: "Cycle racing exposes limitations, reveals what's in the blood" (73). The discovering of what those limits were is written about with great insight. In the implicit comparison that is so often part of his description of people, he discerns that Vernon Rees is heading for "monkdom on two wheels" (73), where he himself is prepared to curtail a cycling trip to meet a girl. The most detailed analysis of any in the book is of his relationship with Cliff Williams, tubercular from his teens from work underground, with whom he drifted and learnt harshly realistic life values. The final image of Cliff is utterly in character, as Berry, through early arrival at Cliff's funeral, is appalled, and then amused, witness of the cosmetic baling out with bucket and rope of the grave cavity:

Then I knew why Cliff mocked sufferers, misery-makers, whiners, alienation, flaws, shakes in the grain. He would have chuckled, scoffing the task of those young men drying out his grave. (23)

The concluding image of the book freeze frames Berry in an encounter of masculine co-operative bravura where he, uncharacteristically for his life's course, but satisfyingly, plays star role, as the Fernhill soccer team of 1937 wins the cup on his penalty goal.

Women appear infrequently, frustratingly and perplexingly. Apollonian Nancy, almost six foot tall, was mystifying: "When I came to realise things, her toughness collapsed in tears. Nesta lost herself in weeping every time [...]. 'You overstimulate my glands'" (105). Admirable Gwyneth moves away and is lost to him (124). The non-appearance of women does, of course, foreground the high value Berry puts on



his male bonding but this is not the whole story. A revelation late in the book suggests that he enjoys confounding his readers, who, through his candid analyses on so many fronts, may well have believed they were being offered a complete and honest picture of life as he sees it. Just eleven pages before the end, the reader may well experience an incredulous double take when Berry, after much wandering and many failed attempts at jobs, on the point of a new start at Coleg Harlech, announces (his italics) that he is “*married with three children*” (136). Neither his wife nor his children are mentioned again apart from the book’s dedication to his children. For, by his own assessment, a man of proven prickly temperament, he would have been guaranteed to bring elements of storminess to family life. Berry’s strong drive for honesty in his self-exploration would have involved the exposure of living people, who had shared intimate family life with him, to unflattering public scrutiny. In writing of his journals, used as sources for his fiction, he describes a typical reaction to the use of family experience being used even in a transformed way:

It’s [storing personal experience in journals for later use ] called *having something to say*, promoting fury from one’s nearest and dearest. Then, for the first time I recognised the cannibal in ‘creative writing’. Literature’s endless *cacca* too. (120)

It is more than possible that Berry’s family exercised a veto on being included. On the evidence of what does appear in *History is What You Live*, Berry’s mother (almost invariably referred to as “Mary Anne”) is the only woman powerfully and convincingly depicted. Without question, *History is What You Live* interprets cogently the nature of a particular sort of masculine identity and world view that grew out of the coalfield experience.

Aggression in the tough mining environment could almost be regarded as a necessary evolutionary adaptation for survival, yet Berry recognises something pathological in his own inordinate aggression. From adolescence he is aware of a need to defuse himself:

Innately vexed, equally liable to bouts of savagery and brightly meaningless standstill, sweaty bike rides depolarised some of my adolescent aggro. (68)

In the work place, he is aware that he “hankered for conflict”, leading him to challenge the “heftiest bullying haulier in the Graig [to a] stand up fist fight” (70). His image of feeling like “a solitary piranha among inedible weavers” (70) suggests how innately aggressive he feels, and yet how impossible it seems to find ways of channelling that aggression. Seeing his ego as “intact like a blocked biro” (85)

implies a recognition of his dysfunctionality. He felt he had inside the skull “a chrysalis waiting for Cain heat” (72). The charting and detecting of pattern involved in writing this autobiography have helped the-man-who-held-the-pen to see how compulsively he has resisted all authority, from the regular mitching from Upper Rhondda Junior Technical school (20); through his hitting the colliery manager when refused any job but one in the silicosis-inducing hard heading (88); through threat of military detention for “flout[ing] discipline” (114) for refusal to salute officers which results in his walking out on it all, and being absent without leave (114-6). At different times he is twice sent to psychiatrists and though longing for help — there is positive envy of Chunks Lewis at a later time whose breakdown is “classified, treated” (129) — he is unable to accept the proffered help. Typical exchanges with the psychiatrist run like this:

‘Name, rank and number?’

‘Yours in exchange for mine’ [...]

‘Why do you resent authority?’

‘Why do you have authority?’ [...]

[...]‘Are your parents alive?’

‘Are yours?’ (117-8)

Such intense resistance to authority often has its roots in early relationships with parents — as he seems to be well (and resentfully) aware — and later we shall be exploring what we can deduce from what we are told of these relationships .

There is a tone amounting to awe as Berry sees with hindsight the tragic nature of the agonising mental states he went through. He describes winter in a distant place doing a mindless menial job:

Against seepage of despair, I plugged bitty Cloud 9 aspirations. My worst flood of depression arrived in Huntingdon. The universe turned grey. Total greyness one Saturday night in a cinema, robots mouthing on the screen and hoar spreading from within. [...] Too sane for suicide, I got drunk. (127)

It is possible that Berry is aware that depression stems from anger and aggression being turned self-destructively inwards. Throughout this autobiography, there is an appalled fascination with madness and with cataloguing many of the different varieties of it he has encountered in others in his life. Having described a mortuary attendant at his place of work being carried off in a strait jacket, there seems to be satisfaction, even triumph, in his observation: “Most of us are blocked off from insanity. We abide, we hold our ground” (132). Yet there is recognition from his

end-of-life perspective that at times it has been a near thing. On a long ramble on the mountain with Cliff Williams:

Like pilgrims we visited a dugout built towards the end of my squeezed escape from the Merchant Navy. The turfed roof had collapsed. [...]. Had I tried to live in this dugout, God knows what brute stuff would have surfaced. That secret, desperate hideaway in the hills, bizarre to the point of exit. (124)

Berry would also seem to have been aware, on the fringes of his vision, as he catalogues what the world would judge as bungle after deliberate disaster, that there has been in him a determined failure to thrive, a need to abort resolutely on most courses of action that could end in satisfaction or success. Although at or near the top of his class at primary school (17), he fails the eleven plus and regularly truants in his final years at his technical school (20). He strikes the colliery manager and is thenceforth persona non grata in local pits (88). It has to be said that his resolute evasion of a second voyage in the Merchant Navy seems a clear indication of perspective and sanity (101). He deserts from the army (114). When offered government training, against all advice because of his damaged knee he chooses carpentry but does not complete the course (119-21). He later completes another government carpentry course but only exercises the skill briefly before selling his tools (134-6). When accepted for a one-year course at Coleg Harlech, he gives up his study of history after two terms (136-7). He is accepted as a mature student at teacher training college and gives up on that (143). A regular image of him perceived by others is “waster” (102) and seen by himself, that he is a “meanderer” (138), a drifter:

Since birth I think I've been possessed, measured for twilight drift instead of making a wage, the worst crime of all in chapel-hagged Wales. 'Him, that one, he's like Uncle Dan', they used to say, my own kin passing judgement. Solitary old Uncle Dan, tramp from youth to pension age, unkempt, [...]despised. (36)

There is a psychologically acceptable explanation of his self-thwarting behaviour that would be in keeping with the levels of emotional distress he sometimes describes. Painful mental states may seem less threatening when outer circumstance is congruent with inner feeling. If experiencing strong emotional pain, it is clearly more tolerable if one is able to find good reason for this in one's everyday situation, rather than be driven to accept that it is fuelled from inner sources over which one has no control.

Berry's end-of-life, hard-won ability to value himself comprehends an ability to see in his past self a seriously troubled human being. Frequently he expresses a neediness in himself in terms of hunger, and sometimes that hunger is orally linked. He describes

“gorging [himself] on flora and fauna” (58). He identifies the obsessive thirty-mile cycle rides he and Vernon Rees undertake every evening for a period after a day in the pits, as a result of “tap roots starving” (76). He declares that, “We find out what we are from hungering enough” (32) and that “I’ve starved for other things than bread” (111). A very powerful image of frustrated oral aggression is the already noted one where he sees himself as a solitary piranha amongst inedible weaver fish. One of the most vibrant images of the whole book is to do with feeding. He describes succour after fear when, as a toddler, he has accidentally started a fire and is comforted, presumably by his mother, Mary Anne: “Afterwards, snug as buddhas by firelight, we [he and his cousin] ate toast and jam” (15). He describes with pure love his perception of Mary Anne’s brief period of untrammelled happiness in the early years of her marriage as she sang songs such as “Myfi sydd fachgen ieuanc ffôl”:

That pulsing old love song, her young-wife contentment, fulfilment of her days. Mary Anne’s headaches came later when there were seven mouths to feed. (14)

There is one lyrically expressed occasion of personal pride for Ron Berry, accompanied by a photograph in the text, when he felt clearly special to Mary Anne:

On July 2nd 1927, Treherbert Hospital carnival. The Junior First Prize silverplated cup was bigger than my head. I heard women on the pavement ‘Well, yes, George’s boy, him dressed up as a little coster monger, them pearl buttons, silk scarf and blancoed daps. [...] Great idea mind. Trust Mary Anne, wonderful dressmaker she is’. (16)

The early ousting from the paradise of mother’s special love has been tellingly described by Laurie Lee in *Cider with Rosie*. We can hypothesise a similar sort of deprivation for Berry — but coming about earlier than Lee’s — from what we can read between the lines in Berry’s narrative.

Berry’s earliest memory, which is rather ambiguously expressed, is of a time when, a one-year old “still frocked and napkined, on Mary Anne’s lap”, he is “lost and found next to my unborn sister Marian” (13). He is ousted at the breast by this child, who is further special in being given a merged version of her mother’s name and quickly becomes special in other ways: “From childhood, Marian blazed quick delight, energy”, but dies before her twenty-first birthday (36). It is interesting to discover through collating various pieces of factual information, that this beloved child died at just the time the difficulties in communication with his father, which Berry described as being “hopelessly alienated” (68), moved into a period of stronger rejection by both parents.

Familial values sundered between '41 and '43. In my case, eldest son found wanting, fallen far short of expectation. [...] Villagers saw me as unsound, a young man of little account [...].

It was a time I had to live through. (101-2)

In a section where Berry has been pondering in a mystified way about grief, he observes: "When Marian died the old man wept and wept. She was his favourite" (36). One can imagine the misery of being the eldest child "found wanting" (101), out of work and drifting, when parents were grieving intensely for the seemingly preferred child. In such circumstances, the earlier displacement at a time of acute vulnerability would be bound to resonate.

Although there is always love and understanding in the way he writes of his parents, there is, too, a striking distancing in his use of his parents' first names, George and Mary Anne, throughout, referring to their role as mother and father very rarely. Surely this is a most striking "failing [...] to salute [...] officers" (114). Certainly some of the most traumatic events in the book are to do with his parents' rejection of their oldest child, sometimes recorded in a way that reveals the pain, sometimes set down noncommittally. When he abandons the army, is absent without leave, he takes fifteen days to plod painfully home, his long-injured knee causing near agony. When, at last, he makes it to Blaenycwm:

Local coppers had already made enquiries. Greater than my father's, Mary Anne's rejection was absolute. I slept in a railway signal box. [...] Ten days in military detention awaiting trial, ten days and nights of yet more delving inwards. [...] Stress times, insomniac's end, a time of repair even as flags of faith disintegrated, as ramparts cultivated since infancy toppled. (116)

Those "ramparts cultivated since infancy" seem to be to do with defences set up against awareness of a lack of love. He later records in turn his parents' lack of interest in or any sense of celebration of his success, at last, as a writer:

Years fled and wormed away to the moment when George hefted his copy of my second novel. He turned it front to back and front again. 'Good, aye, al'right, very good'. He placed it on the arm of his chair. 'Look, Fetch the clippers from the cupboard, I'd like a trim'. [...]

Fiction? George wasn't concerned about fiction. Not at all. (33)

Recorded reactions are more clear cut and more rejecting for his third novel:

Mary Anne slapped a terse verdict on my third novel, *The Full-time Amateur*. Simply 'Ach y Fi' disapproval clenching her mouth. Perfectly happy in his retirement from colliery deputy, my father nodded glum, brief silence. (145)

From what he takes trouble to record, albeit in an unshaped and unfocussed way, it seems probable that Berry was aware at some level that problems of mental distress often have their sources in early childhood, born crucially of early relationships with parents. Literary evidence, however, seldom provides much data for early infancy. It is of interest that Berry regularly chooses images clustered around the idea of hunger or starvation. What I have outlined of recalled rejection or coldness in later years would have particular resonance for someone who had been unsure of the strength of parental attachment in his early childhood. He interprets most sympathetically the burdens of life for people like his parents:

Working class parents had to be colossi of dedication and survival. (14)

In most respects, Berry seems a “native born slot fit” (67) in his Blaenycwm environment yet he clearly had ambivalent attitudes to his Welshness, in part related to his incompletely acknowledged anger with his parents, particularly his mother. He comments appreciatively of his sculptor friend, Bob Thomas, that he:

creates realities more everlasting than any Welshman since matriarchy ruled. Funny inheritance, Welshness. (125)

The fact that the Welsh language was used as a means of control by his Welsh-speaking mother has left feelings of resentment:

Mary Anne spoke secrets in Welsh to George. [...] Language used subversively leaves a legacy of mistrust. (26)

But he seems totally accepting of his great aunt’s (Granny the Farm) “pidgin English” and of her grandchildren who “were our playmates every August when we stayed at Ynystawe, Wynford and Nellie, giggling Welsh monoglots. No hassle at all about communication” (37). Measured against this model, the Rhondda seems a different country:

This Wales wasn’t Welsh. Some Blaenycwm families clung to Cymraeg with private hints, Janus-murmurs, hopelessly fragile against the ups and downs of Rhondda’s coal klondike. (26)

His evocation of his valleys idiolect rings true as a bell: “Yes, aye, illustrious vocation [...]”(70); his interspersing of characteristic “Ach y fi” to indicate particular repugnance expressed by relations (145); his use of sobriquets as in Eddie Jones Cochyn (79) (“cochyn” being a common valleys appellation for a redhead), and Dai Lewis Short-Arm (44). He has been stirred by aspects of this culture, as when he records his small child response to his mother’s singing of Welsh love ballads (14)

and his appreciation of Mari Lwyd nights (35). He tellingly evokes domestic habits of a South Wales mining community, when he describes “gnarled Granny treading *pele*” (18) in clogs, creating and shaping combustible bricklets from coaldust. Unmistakably, his native scene exerts a strong pull. After eighteen months in the wartime dangers of Portsmouth, he felt “*hiraeth* for mountains, for space, for green silence” (95). His essential moulding is the typical Welsh industrial experience, based on the geological given of coal seams mined in the valley, where industrial waste accumulates, but with the possibility of escape within moments of hard climbing to the beauty of the surrounding mountains. He writes pityingly of a fellow worker who was “affable in the loud, meaningless way of townees deprived of privacy from childhood” (132). As we shall see, Berry gave short shrift to idealised or stereotyped notions of nationhood or religion. He does, however, show every sign of valuing very highly most aspects of his own particular patch of Anglo Welsh native ground, with its particularities and idiosyncrasies.

Some of his resistance to strong Welsh identification is what he perceives as the “chapel-hagged” nature of Wales (36). By the end of his life, Berry inhabits hard won positions established from testing human experience. His exposure to religious narrowness and bigotry from early childhood onwards has revolted him, his scorn of it falling not far short of Caradoc Evans’s. He presents searing examples of punitive fanaticism in his own infants’ school head, who “polluted innocence as surely as law and order comforts bigotry” (16). Further, there was “Mr Minty for hate, Mr Elliott for Blood of the Lamb. Two scrawny zealots with brazier skulls” (27). His Merchant Navy experience of appalling inhumanity and fecklessness, when added to his compassionate sense of the blighted lives of so many miners, has not given him any sense of God alive in his world. As he caustically puts it, while commenting on Liverpool cathedral, “God’s house while he played absentee landlord” (98). Resistant himself to bending the knee to any power or person, he is incredulous, when Stukas dive bombed ships in Bone harbour, to see “slum hardened Scousers huddled below begging protection from the Holy Mary”(99), and comments. “Maybe Man’s a natural groveller”. He describes how, as a collier boy, he rejected “everything that smacked of other-worldliness”, for:

Life’s the clincher, inner and outer yeasting the matrix of YOU and ME. Christian adults preached cramp while trees, plants, fowls of the air and fishes in water, all things alive-O, alive-O gouted sap and spunk. (58)

As his only models for religious experience seem to be intolerant institutional ones with “Thou shalt not” writ large, he does not connect his own feelings of overwhelming awe and fusion with a life force with what others might classify as an experience of the numinous:

Once as a small boy, enraptured by swarming swifts in Wion gully, I felt universal, holier than ages, mightied by wonder. Another ecstasy a sunny morning before school, crawling over a hillock to watch a green woodpecker hammering its crimson-splashed head at the bole of an oak, yaffle and boy sounding alpha, alpha, alpha! (31-2)

As one seeks to identify similarities in the experience of self in the different writers under scrutiny, one becomes aware of the problems of taxonomy over experiences innately difficult to tie down. The exposure of some of our subjects to the excesses of Welsh Nonconformity has been so harsh that experience which, say, Denise Levertov would classify as religious is not regarded in that light at all.

Berry, from what he signals from the title of his autobiography onwards, would seem to belong firmly to the group Eakin in *Touching the World* describes as:

featur[ing] the active, conscious construction of the point of intersection between the individual's life and the larger movement of history of which it is a part. (**Touching** 144)

Weintraub recognised Goethe as the first autobiographer to insist “that his life would have been something entirely different had he been born ten years to either side” of his actual birth date, in his case 1749 (quoted by Eakin in **Touching** [148]). Berry's coming to young manhood at the outbreak of war was crucially formative:

The world I knew was a shambles, rags and tatters of pride, of convenience and shitten principles. [...] Civilisation, I thought, was becoming extinct. Even my allocation of it, night shift behind the Longwall cutter in Graig level. (85)

Up until the time he lost his job to a younger, cheaper man, at a time when Bevin's Essential Works Order had given enormous powers to Government control of workers, Berry seems to have seen himself as a typical hard-working, hard-playing miner, a good butty and a good mate. His image of his huge capacity to push himself to his limits cycling, experiencing the knock (delirium caused by fatigue and hunger) to such a degree that he briefly loses sight and feeling, establishes him as someone who has it in him to be totally, self-punishingly committed (77-8). His life attitude at the time seems exemplified by his assertion that he and his cycling mate, Vernon Rees, “believed in doing things right and proper, however wrong-minded by hindsight a generation later” (81). Yet his more enduring image of himself over a longer span is



as a “meanderer” (138) and he hardly quarrels with others view of him as a “waster” (102). Bevin’s Essential Works Order “dry-rammed up the ring of personal choice and rang ding-dong knell on anyone cherishing him/herself as precious” (86). He loses a job that he does well on the cutter, and, at a time when he is made brutally aware of the health risks of any underground work as his friend, Cliff Williams, develops TB with haemorrhaging, is offered only work which everyone knew was a virtual death sentence on the silicosis-inducing hard heading:

Miners were expendable in 1940. And *all* the men who worked that hard rock heading are in Treorchy cemetery. (87)

As a result of striking the manager who will offer him no alternative work to this, he will never be offered another local pit job. In recreating from the present his mood at that time, he powerfully evokes an objective correlative to his remembered misery in the nature of the war events he chooses to list:

After the court case, nothing much seemed to matter. Intimidation and fear, sanctimony and cant were everywhere. Fifth columns, pimps in office, Britain’s aristocracy shipping their children overseas, ration cheating, MI5 round up of Rhondda Italians, the blitzing of towns, these were the slush of War. (88-9)

When “the War net tightened”(90), he is sent to do wartime tunnelling in Portsmouth and experiences regular air raids over a long period:

feeling invulnerable, I relished clamour, panic, wholesale destruction, streets caving in, blazing red skies, ack-ack banging away. (94)

The searing clincher of what becomes a life-long obsessive need to be his own person, subject only to his own judgment, required to defer to no-one, was his experience in the Merchant Navy for which he volunteered “to avoid wearing uniform” (98). With hindsight, he sees “only the naive, bedevilled or frenetic” (98) joined the Merchant Navy in the winter of ‘41. To the recruits at the time, the fortnight’s training course in Liverpool seemed “a doddle”, for there was “Good grub, clean beds, school hours” (98).

Two of their number perished on their first trip, all hands lost in the Mediterranean. Berry’s one and only trip was cataclysmic in its horror and the way it modified his life attitudes permanently thereafter. He suffered constant, gut-wrenching sea sickness. The ship’s plumbing failed and food rotted. The depths of human depravity were revealed in all aspects of crew behaviour. There was constant, at times wild drunkenness in everyone from the captain down; predatory, power-based sexual behaviour was indulged in; rations were robbed from the lifeboats; the bonded cargo

was broken into, and food, drink and equipment intended for Monty's Desert Rats was sold; Big Mac indulged his taste for north African child prostitutes and looted a motor bike which travelled back to Britain with him (98-100). "We were defending Western civilisation" (99), Berry observes dryly.

This experience seems to set in amber the utter distrust in Berry to following any sort of herd reaction and total resistance to knee-jerk responses to notions of honour or patriotism. In commenting on a Portsmouth acquaintance, he observes:

Jock belonged to the millions who swallowed propaganda. He would have bled on any pavement for royalty. (91)

His retrospective look at the feelings evoked in his child self and in others by Remembrance Day is wondering and ironic:

And on Remembrance Day, Treherbert Brass Band glittering, bopping up to the Cenotaph like talkie extras [...] with a bugler fluting the Last Post up at Pen Pych, bared heads, stillness all over the country, my throat burning to the gristle, nape hairs crimped, prepared for reverence, ascent of the species via hallucination. (35)

Thereafter, as this backward look seems to interpret, there can be no sense of serving King and country and honour is a nonsense. As we have seen, in his attempt to give meaning to his whole life mythic tale Berry has identified himself as "Since birth [...] measured for twilight drift" (36). Yet, as we have already demonstrated, until his service with the Merchant Navy, he was absorbable within the bounds of what society at the time would regard as normalcy. A brief summary of Berry's subsequent wartime experience establishes how it "broke" him in conventional terms, while also consolidating within him an inalienable sense of the boundaries of his own fundamental selfhood. Through theft of the local library date stamper, he is able to fend off, for a period, any further Merchant Navy postings, while still receiving food ration coupons (101). After further drift, he ends up in the Army where he quickly reports that "the shuffleboard of army life was breaking me [...] and the result was eruptive", pushing him to "unleash fatuity" (110) in an essay, causing increasingly harsh army crackdown. Buckling under the pressure, he goes absent without leave, is rejected by his parents; yet, in this hindsight record, he remembers this as:

a time of repair even as flags of faith disintegrated, as ramparts cultivated since infancy toppled. [...] Clinically I was *out* of the mind one normally shares with other folks at all sorts of levels. (116-7)

In military detention, with "naked pretensions to be hard cases" (117), he is finally discharged from the depot in Woking, "terminal camp of emotional and physical

wrecks”, where “blokes wandered about with suffering faces, duffs on the patriotism road”(119). Yet even during the process of disintegration, the nadir of his life experience to that point, with hindsight he sees that at times he had felt “profoundly warranted” (115), able to return to a censorious officer “the only answer of my life: ‘I’ve starved for other things than bread’” (111). The process of becoming a reject of society as represented by the armed services in wartime has given Berry some sense of the hard core of self, what he must be true to if he is to survive. Throughout all the suffering which results from his resistance to authority, he clings to his inner core of defended space, his way of seeing the world, which others call arrogance:

At the centre, there’s a core greening like bronze, a private memorial deckled with shrivelled blossoms. They glowed once, in the lost country of childhood. (113)

One of Berry’s final images of self is as an almost life-long nonconformist, his obligation to self requiring a continuing “shaping the square peg of myself, escapee from round holes since before leaving school in 1935” (147).

Berry would seem to perceive the historic times in which he lived as crucially moulding the potential embodied in his natural endowment and early nurture. As we have already posited, the anger with his parents, which was transformed into anger at, and resistance to, any authority figure, reached such levels of intensity when he was caught up in the power structures of wartime that the system’s resultant crackdown almost broke him. He would seem to see two wartime happenings as crucially formative. Fifty years after the event, he refers with venom to the harshness of Bevin’s wartime Essential Works Order and sees that order as responsible for his loss of job on the mechanical cutter at Graig level, which culminated in his first dramatic resistance to authority, when he struck the colliery manager. During his brief service in the Merchant Navy, physical sea sickness combined with a spiritual horror, to bring about a subsequent tacit refusal to accept the state’s decisions for his life. War gave him harsh perceptions on the nature of humankind, particularly man, which he did not modify subsequently. Further, the time in which he lived, in which South Wales coal lost its traditional markets and the Rhondda valleys became largely a commuter dormitory, shaped and transformed his environment. Exceptional times created exceptional pressures. As Dai Smith’s introduction points out, one of Berry’s purposes is to “witness and to refuse the suffocating custody of the comforting, herded tribe” (11).

An important element of Berry's enactment of his sense of self is the way he succeeds in inscribing in his text the feel and singular texture of his personality, both for the moment of writing and for the time he is recalling. The style seems the man. Dai Smith writes of the Berry's style in general as a writer:

The language he spawned, with a neologising flair beyond any thesaurus, was a freewheeling riff, luxuriant and reflective, uncompromising and laconic, caressing and in-your-face tough. [...] He took whatever literary tradition he had to inherit about the places and people he wished to write about [...] and he broke its sentimental neck. (**Hist.intro** 8-9)

Of all the writers considered in this study, Berry is the most uncompromising in communicating from what he might feel to be the deep centre of self, through all the means available to him, his unique view of the world, and a sense of what he has been and is. At any one time, his memories cohere in significant shapes, coloured by the feelings of the moment and the particular life stage from which he is writing. An extended passage, his account of how his time as a miner comes to an end, provides clear examples of standard elements of Berry's style and characteristic techniques for affirming his sense of his unique individuality:

I asked [Mr Jones] for another job, anything except the hard rock heading. Scarcely a frown from Mr Jones, neither annoyance nor concern of any kind. My record was clean. Dependable in the coal face, plus two honest years of night shift behind the cutter. I could build a cog, lay sleepers, use a boring machine, drive a haulage engine, prime water pumps, pack a gob wall, clear bottom holes, fix posts and flats, actually drive the cutter, only I was too young by mining law.

Mr Jones said, 'It's either the heading or a fortnight's notice'. Miners were expendable in 1940. And *all* the men who worked in that hard rock heading are in Treorchy cemetery.

'I've had no pay for three weeks', I said.

He flicked cold glances as if I were valueless in all mongrel creation. 'Whose fault is that?' [...]

I swung a long one, looping across his desk, bang on the point. Mr Jones the manager toppled. His feet twitched.

Mr Hughes the cashier rushed in from the adjoining room, a short, portly autocrat blabbing threats. [...]

The lodge unexpectedly hired a defence solicitor for my appearance in Pontypridd magistrates' court. I felt steady in the dock, fully convinced punishment would fit the crime. Prison seemed fitting. What else for assaulting a manager? Prison, I decided. Cardiff or Swansea. Scrape the slate clean. Few months behind bars. But I did *not* feel guilty. Arse-over-tipped authority deserves a few cheers. Mr Jones was there, slim in a dark suit, brown hair brushed neatly on his worried head. A collection of JPs flanked the magistrate. This was Justice, old dangling whore of the ages, her head-end drilled for swinging the lead. The case proceeded to and fro in quietness. My solicitor performed very nicely in his iron-grey double-breasted suit, a franchised weed guaranteed unremarkably comfy prospects. Conspiratorial whispers up on the

bench, the magistrate and his colleagues nodding, nodding. [Berry is given a sentence of two years probation and five pounds costs.]

I didn't have five shillings. They gave me fourteen days to pay.

I felt hollow, sans pride much less daring. Conscious heroes fragment, they undo themselves. The following Friday, miners from the Graig, Glenrhondda and Gorllwyn pits held a whip-round outside the pay office. After paying the summons, I had five pounds spending money. Very many of the colliers who chipped in have passed away. I knew them all by name. (87-8)

The passage is a remarkable integration of a perspective of self at the moment of experiencing particular life events and the reflective, evaluating self at the moment of writing. In the opening section, we have a vivid sense of old Berry looking at young Berry, seeing his pride in his accomplishments, in work honestly done, in his ability to deliver on a whole battery of valuable collier skills. The quick succession of short simple clauses suggests the brisk execution of a range of accomplishments. One takes in the loss of heart when all this counts for nothing. Berry recreates as an old man his sense of appalled awareness in youth when he understood, soon after his friend and fellow miner, Cliff Williams, started spitting blood, that death was no respecter of tender years. The circumstances of the war, Bevin's Essential Works Order, gave managers the right to place workers in situations that were a death sentence. This is the epiphanic moment that brings Berry's inbuilt resistance to authority to a point of volcanic eruption. Every aspect of the construction of the passage underscores Berry's hatred of hierarchical gradations, his awareness of the unjust power and privilege they bring and his total inability to accept them. Class-based privilege is particularly odious. The manager "flicked" cold "glances": Berry, "valueless", did not merit a concerted stare. The cashier is an "autocrat". Life position shaped opportunities even for life continuance: as he has indicated earlier, there was no question of the overman's sons working in the hard heading (87). The images reflect the strength of the writer's feeling rather than they encapsulate precise meaning, as is often the case with Berry. Justice, as his youthful self anticipating jail expects it to deliver, is an "old dangling whore of the ages, her head-end drilled for swinging the lead". His solicitor is a "franchised weed". Is "weed" used botanically or colloquially? "Conspiratorial whispers" of the magistrates remind the reader of Berry's resentful feelings of exclusion when his parents spoke secrets in Welsh (26); from this echo, we register anew the conviction that the source of Berry's resistance to authority lay in his early parenting. But most striking is the aggression in the language. It is as though Berry is experiencing his notional reader as an authority

figure that he must pick a fight with: the adoption of a more restrained and literary register might be indicative of deference, of not being on equal terms. Here, as he writes of “arse-over-tipped authority” and “Justice, old dangling whore of the ages,” there is a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to the reader, “in-your-face tough”, as Smith puts it. At a less belligerent level, the demotic is a habitual element in his literary style. He “swung a long one, looping across his desk, bang on the point”. The cashier came “blabbing” threats. The miners have a “whip round” and all “chip in”. His is the perspective of the ordinary working man whose worth must be established through acts not through the deference given to particular classes. He stands four square to the world. He has acknowledged the adoption of an autobiographical persona in revealing that there is a family dimension which he is excluding totally (136): it is, however, a very consistent persona. He is what he is and he will not capitulate, temporise, modify or soften a jot. Yet, with the aggression, there is a remarkable, loving gentleness. The old man, near death himself, remembers the support and generosity shown to the young man and cherishes the individuality of each worker who stood by him in his hour of need: “Very many of the colliers who chipped in have passed away. I knew them all by name”.

*History is What You Live* is imbued with a sense of mortality, with memories of those now “gone to clay” (100) and an awareness of how little that has been thought worth human struggle endures. As Berry approaches the end of his own life, his final implicit perception is that a self that has written of itself has built a frail defence against the encroaching sea of annihilation. “Foul hooked on language” (130) at one time in his life, he has won through to bear witness to what he and his community have lived through. Although in *History is What You Live* he has often identified himself with “wasters”, who would have been perceived as the sediment of society, his final image is a triumphant one: of himself as a young man scoring the winning penalty goal that made Fernhill soccer team cup winners in 1937, and as an old man, the last survivor of that team, winning in another way by making an enduring testimony of what he and his community have known. For all its shortcomings, the fact of *History is What You Live* — its complex structure, its glowing and loving evocation of a world now past, its linguistic bravura and Berry’s final insight into his own complexities — stands in counterpoint to its record of failure. Berry wrote *History is What You Live* after he had won success as a writer. The self he there

explores is the self which has part found, part created, a meaningful pattern, in and from the fragments of his lived life. The accomplishment in that patterning is a triumphant part of his perception of self.

## 5. Gwyn Thomas (1913-81)

In the light of the rich diversity of possible candidates for scrutiny that have seemed almost to be jostling for inclusion in this study, it would have been possible to justify the omission of Gwyn Thomas. His was a presence that loomed over the early stages of this thesis, a towering enigma, in some areas so reticent as an autobiographer that it seemed possible his ramparts might prove impregnable. As this investigation progressed, an awareness of elements of particular value in the genre of autobiography grew. A strong appreciation of the searching and costing efforts of some other autobiographers to establish primarily, it seemed, for their own satisfaction, what they reckoned their lives had meant, gradually made it possible to identify Gwyn Thomas's delight in humorous obfuscation for the defensive strategy it was. His talent for display in the autobiographical or semi-autobiographical vein had seemed as rich as any peacock's, finding outlet in short stories, in his work as a television personality and critic and notebook jotter, as well as in attested autobiography. Yet, gradually, the spectacle came to be revealed as an elaborate fan dance, concealing as much as it flaunted in works or performances for public consumption, tantalisingly obscuring, often through humour, deep-seated vulnerabilities and pain. Then, as the National Library of Wales's acquisition in 1998 of the voluminous relevant papers of Gwyn Thomas's extremely diligent biographer, Michael Parnell, came through into the public domain, much that was potentially illuminating, ranging from transcripts of radio and television interviews with Gwyn Thomas to extensive transcripts from his notebooks, the originals since destroyed by Thomas's widow, became available. The challenge began to take on the dimensions of an attainable quest.

Moreover, Thomas seemed to be the most significant memorialist of a unique and substantial subculture, which flourished in south Wales in the first half of this century. Several writers dealt with in the present study — Berry, Coombes and Rhys Davies — worked the same soil, but it could be said that it is Thomas's version of the industrial experience which most defined it in the public imagination. Since Thomas could be judged, at his best, one of the most able of the Welsh writers in English of the twentieth century, his verbal energy and unerring eye for the ridiculous being particularly appealing qualities, an attempt to explore the conundrum that is Gwyn Thomas the autobiographer seemed, finally, almost a charge.



At first, it felt strangely difficult to take in the evidence of an initial analysis — that much of Thomas’s humour might have its origin in anger or aggression. Theorists of humour, however, have no such hesitation. Joseph Boskin, in his essay included in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour* underlines the aggressive roots of much humour, and quotes and comments on many authorities including Freud:

In Freud’s analysis, humor gives pleasure by permitting a gratification of a forbidden desire. “Humor is not resigned,” he observed of its energy, “it is rebellious”. Hostility takes the form of “tendentious humor”, a veiled attack which satisfies an aggressive motive. For Freud, derogation — assault by joke — is socially acceptable hostility. When expressed through humor, the penalties for aggression are diminished. Consequently, humor that is of hostile design often releases inner tension. (255)

The problem with laughter is that it disarms. It seems important, therefore, to start by taking the reader through an early attempt to analyse the nature of Gwyn Thomas’s comic effects and to reflect explicitly on the surprised coming to awareness of the aggression lurking beneath the often benevolent and seemingly high-spirited surface of his writing. While my analysis is of Thomas in fictional mode, it has central relevance for his practice as autobiographer. Michael Parnell, who edited Thomas’s short stories as well as writing his biography, seems to have been right in saying that Thomas made only a very blurred distinction between heightened autobiography and reminiscent fiction (**Parn.intro 9**). In this instance, anger and aggression is obliquely directed at Gwyn Thomas’s father, his sole surviving parent from the time he was six. According to Parnell, most of Walter Thomas’s twelve children throughout his life regarded him as something of a monster (**Laughter 7**). Certainly, as in the collection *Meadow Prospect Revisited*, Gwyn Thomas is drawn to write of his father again and again, giving him a remarkably consistent persona, and placing him in a range of situations where the gulf between his aspirations and delivery is a major part of the comic effect. The father of the stories is often portrayed with the biographical background of his real-life counterpart. A recurrent motif is of “Walter Thomas” regularly dispatching his sons and other characters into what is fervently to be hoped are highly fictionalised disasters. It seems probable that Thomas’s overblown fictional renderings of his incompetent, unreliable and selfish father served a therapeutic function in allowing oblique (and probably unconscious) discharge of pent-up feeling over his tragic lack of early nurture (for what is more oblique than infinitely deniable fiction?). A detailed analysis of the story is necessary, to reveal how the reader is distracted from becoming aware of the anger.

The much-anthologised “Arrayed like One of These” is, indeed, one of Gwyn Thomas’s funniest stories. The cumulative effect is of rising waves of intense belly laughter. The repressive effect of the culture of the Nonconformist chapel is shown to be pervasive and is presented as highly comic. Elsewhere monoglot English speaking Gwyn Thomas declares of his chapel life, “Little of the theology came through for the clues were conducted in Welsh” (qtd in Gwyn 8). The boredom he must have experienced in chapel, as impenetrable Welsh cascaded around him, is unimaginable. In the story, the opening description of the preacher surrounded by a *sêr fawr* of crow-like deacons in greening suits is magnificent. Gwyn Thomas observes that one of his “darkest recollections is being shepherded to punishment by a group of elders after some witless antics on the chapel gallery”, to the sound of the creaking of their durable suits (Arrayed 27). The public morality of the Nonconformist culture is austere but there is a deliberate and highly comic ambiguity about the actual activities of individual members. One of the early comic set pieces of the story is Aaron Phipps’s testimony on an incident where his mentor, Horatio Clemett the Cloth, has been sexually compromised: Thomas’s father declares with eloquent vividness of the tailoring of Gwyn’s hideous suit: “But I see the hand of Clemett in the design of the codpiece. Years ago he swore to make the libido feel like a war memorial. He’s done it” (35). Linguistically, much of the hilarity is achieved by zeugma, the yoking together of incongruous elements: after “a steady fall of rain and sermons the stuff [of the suits] went a deep green”(27); “still has people convinced that I was once a cripple healed in the revival of 1921, a splendid year for miracles and early greens”(29); “exchanging perplexities and roast cheese sandwiches” (29); “improved their work with morals and merchandise” (33). There is also a working up to highly mannered set pieces or maxims: “[Gwyn Thomas’s father] had a tic of compassion that made him find people on every hand who seemed to be dodging life’s eye [...]. At the end of each experiment, it was our necks that were in need of the sun lamp” (29).

The reader is swept onwards on a surging crest of a comic wave. To study the grotesque elements, however, is to make some surprising discoveries. Gwyn Thomas’s father’s “tic of compassion” is always directed outwards, away from his own family. The first highly grotesque element is to do with the shirt made for Gwyn Thomas when he was five. Gwyn’s father bought the hideous fabric from a packman, “and he was delighted to see what a load he had taken off the packman’s mind *even*

*though he was now going to lift it on to mine* (Arrayed 27-8 [emphasis added in this and ensuing quotations ]).

Next, his father employs a widow whose first such commission it is. As in the autobiography of Rhys Davies so in the semi fiction of this story, a monstrous shirt takes centre stage. The preposterous garment the widow fashions shadows life for months for the young Thomas, turning him into “some new gruesome type of bird” (28). Finally Gwyn Thomas dreams up a cringe-provoking situation so mortifying for his textual self and creates so baroque a grotesque in Aaron Phipps, that when we come to analyse this section there is real surprise that laughter has kept erupting in the way it has. For his Final Schools at Oxford, Gwyn Thomas needs subfusc, the elegant dark suit to be worn with white bow tie and gown, as he attempts the last and hardest hurdle of his academic career, a life stage when perhaps one might expect to rely on the imaginative support of one’s parents. True to type, Gwyn's father thinks only of the benefits to Aaron Phipps, who is as near complete disaster as it is possible to be without total dissolution. Aaron's range of idiosyncracies is described with wild abandon, but we then get narrator comments like: “I was wishing myself out in the light *and my father through the floorboards*” (32), and later, “As he saw the monstrous inaccuracies of Aaron Phipps twist my body into the likeness of Quasimodo *he did not show any depression*” (34), and finally: “*But my father remained complacent about it* to the very end. He claimed it was my revulsion from the chapel tradition that made my limbs contract or twist at the touch of that heavy, sombre material”(35).

So much of the charge of the language of the story has been directed outwards in the grotesque comic effects that it takes an analysing approach to pick up the anger in the situation. It is the grotesqueries that have been foregrounded, not the feeling. We come to understand how closely a comic drive may be related to a need to displace anger. A further cover device seems to be in use. It is almost as though Gwyn Thomas is denying that he is putting forward the fictional father as his real father. How could he? He has made a grotesque of him. What is let through by having a denial available is a real charge of feeling.

Getting a purchase on Gwyn Thomas, then, can be hard going. He regularly tells his audience, usually with a broad and disarming grin, if it’s a television interview, or its verbal equivalent in writing, that he is a deeply anxious man. The grin and the verbal

humour are formidable defences. You cannot easily probe someone who is happily admitting to the state that you're concerned about. Further discussion is discouraged because, the statement having been made, there is nothing further to say. Humorous juxtaposition prevents confessional statements being taken too seriously:

I have had more than one motherland. There was Wales and, alongside it, Spain, irony, an overtowering sense of the past, and an anxiety neurosis roughly the size of the Eisteddfod Pavilion. (Artists 72)

He returns frequently, as we shall see in *A Few Selected Exits*, to the sense that anxiety is his most powerful fuel; an exploration of what might be meant by this and whence it came is unavoidable. The clues are widely scattered, but cumulatively very telling, of a man who has taught "Despair [...] to sit up and grin at command" (Artists 72). Anyone who reads through what remains of Gwyn Thomas's notebooks, as transcribed by his biographer, is likely, at times, to quail before the grey bleakness of Gwyn Thomas's inner world. The disparity between the interior day-to-day experiencing and the façade of mirth and jollity must surely give the reader pause and require further probing. ✓

Certainly, in important ways, Gwyn Thomas's childhood was harsh. He was the twelfth child of an overburdened mother, who died when he was six, and a feckless father, and so his early life seems to have provided little in the way of nurturing care or protection. Of all the writers considered, Gwyn Thomas most repays a close study in terms of the branch of psychoanalytical thinking known as attachment theory. The practical influence of such writers as John Bowlby in drawing attention to the huge and often unnecessary suffering of young children in hospital when separated from their loved and trusted caregiver, a separation which often caused permanent emotional damage, has perhaps made attachment theory — though not all its ramifications — an area of psychoanalytical study which has some grip on the lay imagination.<sup>42</sup> In the introduction to this chapter, early doubts about engaging at all with Gwyn Thomas's autobiographical work were explored, reservations stemming from the formidably defended nature of his explicitly autobiographical offering. Defensive processes are operated for a reason and are usually a response to intense anxiety. Bowlby, over the three volumes and 1,500 pages of his *Attachment and Loss*,

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42 See John Bowlby, *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, Pelican Original ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), particularly "Care of Sick Children" 175-80, and John Bowlby, et al., "A Two-year-old Goes to Hospital," *Psychoanal. Study Child*.7 (1952).

sets human early attachment behaviour in the context of what twentieth century studies in ethology have shown about other primate behaviour in areas of dependency and vulnerability. Marshalling a formidable range of expert opinion, Bowlby reckons attachment theory is “widely regarded as probably the best supported theory of socio-emotional development yet available” (Secure 28), and in his monumental offering brings theory into close relationship with observed data. Attachment behaviour is any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is seen as better able to deal with the world, and is most obviously evident in early childhood. The biological function attributed to it is protection, particularly, in evolutionary terms, from predators. A feature of the greatest importance clinically, and one that must be properly registered in an evaluation of Gwyn Thomas, is the intensity of emotion that accompanies it. All neurotic anxiety is seen to be, in the last resort, separation anxiety, a response originating in separation or fear of separation, usually in infancy or early childhood, from a protecting parental object.

Bowlby summarises the three propositions central to his exploration of attachment theory:

The first is that, when an individual is confident that an attachment figure will be available to him whenever he desires it, that person will be much less prone to either intense or chronic fear than will an individual who for any reason has no such confidence. The second proposition concerns the sensitive period during which such confidence develops. It postulates that confidence in the availability of attachment figures, or a lack of it, is built slowly during the years of immaturity – infancy, childhood and adolescence – and that whatever expectations are developed during those years tend to persist relatively unchanged throughout the rest of life. The third proposition concerns the role of actual experience. It postulates that the varied expectations of the accessibility and responsiveness of attachment figures that different individuals develop during the years of immaturity are tolerably accurate reflections of the experiences those individuals have actually had. (Attach2 235)

Gwyn Thomas, be it ever so humorously, regularly declares a state of anxiety that is chronic and acute. Bowlby states that uncertainty about the availability of attachment figures results in increased susceptibility to respond with fear to such a wide range of situations that the person concerned is often referred to as suffering from “free-floating anxiety” (Attach2 229). Further, those whose confidence in an attachment figure has been shaky suffer enduringly in other ways. A securely attached child has the assurance to make sorties into the outside world for longer and longer periods, knowing that his base is freely available for support and succour, and aware that

parents understand and respect his dependency needs. An anxiously attached child, and the adult he becomes, find such forays into the world much more difficult, never inwardly believing that the support he needs will be readily available.

In the wider world beyond his front door as, originally, in his own family, Gwyn Thomas found abundant reasons for insecurity, for distrusting any perception of the world as a solid place. Yet his own uneasy imagination often transformed what was undoubtedly an unstable environment into something cataclysmic, full of portents of doom. In *A Few Selected Exits* he describes:

three [...] brutally recurrent dreams [...each with] its teeth and lips fixed around my thoughts with vampirical authority, leaving not even a muddy residue of calm. I plunge through the usual paraphernalia of unease: bogs [...], landslips, whole landscapes caught up in a rumba of crumbling perfidies. (Few 98)

Nightmare, humorously re-enacted, often invades his waking world. As a writer and raconteur he made frequent comic use of the vulnerability to subsidence of the whole neighbourhood of his childhood, built as it was above coal mines. Landslip has more than a bit part in his life writing: he begins his story in the American edition of *A Few Selected Exits* with a hyperbolic account of a landslip, which carried off a row of houses his grandfather had jerrybuilt (Few.Am 3); and a generous part of the section devoted to his student stay in Spain deals with the journey north homeward through landslide in the Basque country, “where there were more landslides than wheels on the permanent way” (Few 75). In his mining community, accidents and explosions were sad commonplaces of life. Psychoanalysts routinely check out the discernible life history of grandparents, because the moulding a parent received can have a profound effect on the family member who has actually ended up on the couch. Parnell records that Thomas’s maternal grandfather started work down the pit as a boy of seven and was early involved in an explosion, from which he had to crawl to safety over the bodies of his father and brothers (Laughter 5). So powerful and painful a story as part of one’s family myth would hardly promote a sense of the world as a secure place. Further, the Rhondda of his growing up in the twenties and thirties suffered extremes of hardship in terms of unemployment, poverty and hunger. Frequently, almost routinely, Gwyn Thomas deals with such features with humour: surely we need to see this as a distancing device and as the only means of controlling a painfully threatening and anarchic world.

Doubtless part of Thomas's hyperbolic thrust as an adult, in describing life's disasters, was to do with the profound insecurity experienced in his immediate family circle. Walter Thomas was as inept and irresponsible a father as it was possible to have. A letter from elder brother Dilwyn to elder sister Nana in 1985 recalls him thus:

I seem to be saying to myself I remember, I remember the house where I was born: leaking roof, crumbling walls and the head of the house (our dear father) not caring a damn whether the house fell down or the inmates starved as long as he remained idle and had his pint of beer. (Letdt)<sup>43</sup>

Gwyn Thomas himself said of him in an interview with Denis Mitchell in 1975:

He was quite a hopeless man, quite incompetent. [...] [During an idle period] he could just sit in the corner of the kitchen, get our names mixed up, because he didn't know who we were really — we were eight brothers and he didn't have any clear idea who we were. (Intgt3)

Michael Parnell, after extensive interviewing, concludes:

Apart from [Walter Thomas]'s potency in bed, and the rare charm he could bring to bear when he wished to wriggle out from some responsibility, he had little to offer the family in the way of wisdom, service or sustenance. (Laughter 7)

A largely unemployed underground ostler who appears, as we have seen, in many of Thomas's semi-autobiographical stories, he does not escape Thomas's anger or censure, often covertly expressed.

The exploration of Gwyn Thomas's mother, Ziphorah Thomas, and her impact on his life, will need to be done in stages. At times, as in an interview with Gerry Monte in 1976, Thomas concedes that he idealises his mother and that he has found it impossible to leave the area where she lived and died :

I am living now a mere eight miles from where I was born and I've always been a kind of lover of the mother idea — I hardly knew my mother in life but spiritually I'm very tied I think to what she represented, for she was a great creative woman who represented something enormous for me, and it may have been great good fortune that I didn't know her better than I did because I've idealised the idea of this woman, and somehow I am rooted to the soil where she lived. (Intgt4)

In the script of a talk "My View of Wales" it is over-the-top eulogy:

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43 Many of the documents in the Gwyn Thomas MSS and Papers are transcripts of letters or transcripts of official transcripts of media transmissions done by Thomas's biographer, Michael Parnell. There are, too, photocopies of what seem to be official transcripts, and in some instances, the original scripts or transcripts of programmes. Sometimes the slot in which a particular item was broadcast or used is indicated by holograph insertion on the typescript. Most of my analysis of Gwyn Thomas as media performer is done from such sources, although I worked on newspaper cuttings for comment on Gwyn Thomas as a television reviewer. I have, however, viewed a video recording of The Parkinson Show on which Gwyn Thomas made a thirty minute appearance and have studied the video recording of the programme in the *Kane's Classics* series in which Gwyn Thomas was featured, which consisted of many clips from different points of Thomas's television career.

My mother was a magician. Her love was incredibly boundless. [...] All the starvelings of the village knew my mother would never fail them. [...] To lash out with goodness, she said, was the only human policy which, in the end, would leave one unhurt. (View)

These extracts are typical of the way Gwyn Thomas wrote about his mother. In the story 'Not Even Then', however, Thomas writes in an uncharacteristic way. He has his young, orphaned protagonist show his great yearning for mother love, and at a time of great need, after incurring his eldest brother's searing wrath through failing the entrance exam for secondary school, meeting and being consoled by the ghost of his mother high on the hillside:

She came to sit by me. From her body came a wave of welcoming warmth, edged with all goodness, all pity, all consolation. I was happy. Her eyes, her unspeakable beauty and graciousness had charmed away my hurt and all the earth's hurt with it. (Not 62)

He is able to tell her freely all that he is currently feeling: "I laid my head upon her breast and wept in a complete and wonderful abandon" (62). As the brother from whom the young boy had fled comes in search of him, the mother's ghost takes on the anger of the brother and vanishes:

I threw out my arms to hold her, asking for mercy and patience, crying 'Mam, mam, mam' in a breath of anguish that must have made a wind all around the world. The warmth and security had again gone out of life, and I was alone with the pointed, menacing whisper of leaf and water. (Not 62)

The clumsy, joky framing of the story suggests that the ghost is angry with the boy for failing the exam but the ending of the story seems more ambiguous. The chief feeling the reader is left with is that this is, for Thomas, an undigested and unresolved imaginative experience.

From the problems he had in adult life, when required to move away from home base, as we shall see, it seems improbable that Thomas was securely attached to his mother in infancy and early childhood and felt he could rely on her care and responsiveness. There is an interesting detail in Michael Parnell's interview notes which might be regarded as a straw in the wind. At the back of his notes on an interview with Nest, widow of Thomas's elder brother, Walt, Parnell has jotted down in pencil:

[The eleventh child] Eddy, the apple of his mother's eye — her concern for Gwyn was no more than adequate. (Some Notes)

Bowlby summarises fascinatingly evidence educed by psychoanalysts from Freud onwards, that it is not uncommon for an individual to operate simultaneously with two



(or more) working models of his attachment figures and two (or more) working models of himself:

In a person suffering from emotional disturbance it is common to find that the model that has greatest influence on his perceptions and forecasts, and therefore on his feeling and behaviour, is one that developed during his early years and is constructed on fairly primitive lines, but that the person himself may be relatively, or completely, unaware of; while, simultaneously, there is operating in him a second, and perhaps radically incompatible model, that developed later, that is much more sophisticated, that the person is more nearly aware of and that he may mistakenly suppose to be dominant. (**Attach2** 238-9)

In an interview with Denis Mitchell, Thomas surprisingly and unusually lets down his guard, and, while still idealising, reveals some of the perceptions which perhaps belong to an alternative model that he holds of his mother. That he describes himself as “a totally unwanted child” and that, at her very best moments, she “would almost forgive [him] for being there” gives a real sense of the probable bleakness of Gwyn Thomas’s infancy before a defensive idealisation got underway:

And my mother, a woman of great beauty, I would say — I was about three when she died [he was actually six] — and she was in her early 40s, a woman of vast creative potential, and this is what has created one of the cornerstones of my philosophy, of course: Humanity has been far too prodigal in reproducing itself. Waste is the thing which I detest, the waste of human gifts, the waste of human promise that you have in the vast, ugly proliferation of people in the great slums of the world...I mean, here I was, the twelfth child, a totally unwanted child, and yet, you know, she had this faith in the world and the wind and the sky [...] and she would look at me, and she would almost forgive me at times for being there. Almost forgive me. And this is something that I will never forget as long as I live, those terrible moments when this lovely woman with this marvellous voice [...] in which I’m sure, I’m sure in the years when I didn’t comprehend a stream of human words that she was telling me in some inimitably bitter way of her own plight; that she had been the victim of a monstrous miracle of prolific waste on the part of a man who never wanted children anyway. (**Intgt3**)

The degree of idealisation and the nature of the revelation in the Denis Mitchell interview strongly point to the possibility that Gwyn Thomas was anxiously, not securely, attached to his mother. Her death when he was only six would have substantially increased the anxiety with which he engaged with the world. The formidable amount of evidence Bowlby has accumulated includes substantial research data, “that events of later years, notably loss of mother before tenth or eleventh birthday, when combined with certain other conditions can play a causal role in the development of depressive disorders” (**Attach3** 215). There is strong evidence to fear that the results of this loss shadowed Gwyn Thomas’s emotional life for the rest of his days. The general thrust of Bowlby’s third volume *Loss* is that, for mourning to be

healthily completed, the bereaved person, be it adult or child, must be supported while s/he takes on the full pain of loss and is buffeted by the powerful feeling of it. In a child, mourning is most likely to take a favourable course in the following conditions: that s/he should have enjoyed a reasonably secure relationship with his/her parents before his/her loss, that s/he should be allowed to ask questions and participate in family grieving at the loss and that s/he has the comforting presence of a surviving parent or substitute (**Attach3** 320). From Gwyn Thomas's own accounts, none of these features seems to have been present in his case.

A survey in Michigan revealed that 40% of bereaved children studied, referred because of emotional or behavioural problems, attributed a parent's death either to themselves or to the surviving parent; a potent source of anxiety and anger, surely (**Attach3** 316). Gwyn Thomas, in an early version of *A Few Selected Exits*<sup>44</sup> has one of his multiple narrators, Uncle Duncan, refer to Gwyn Thomas's father and children thus:

Now your father [...] he never was anywhere near the target. All he's done on this earth is reproduce himself with unreasonable urgency [and] knock back ale. [...] Such things as that and treating your mother to a quick, cheap burial. [...] If it hadn't been for that fruit fly there, my brother, that fertile and futile buffoon she would have gone on [...] to fill the opera houses of the world. [...] And the hungry beaks of you lot, that's what killed her. (**Few.Drafts** 38-9)

Studies suggest that for mourning to achieve a healthy outcome, children should be allowed to talk *freely* about their loss, ask questions and grieve openly. Again, in an early draft of *A Few Selected Exits*, Thomas writes:

I never once heard [my father] speak of my mother. I had the feeling that his thoughts about her were confused, inexpressible. There were things about her I would have wished to know. But no-one, except Uncle Duncan, ever spoke of her. It was as if we had each agreed to drop a meed [sic] of silence upon her. (**Few.Drafts** 44 deleted, 32 substituted)

Bowlby's evidence suggests children highly value photographs, which are a particular help in the process of grieving (**Attach3** 285). Dai Smith's *Writers World* pictorial biography of Gwyn Thomas indicates that no photograph of Ziphorah Thomas survives (5). Interestingly, Gwyn Thomas has his narrator provide explanation for such a lack in the story of a mother's ghost "Not Even Then":

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44 What remains of the early drafts. NLW Gwyn Thomas MSS and Papers B16 is a disorderly pile of typescript, with many duplicate runs and incoherent pagination, probably indicating different stages of drafting, now impossible to separate out, hereinafter referred to as **Few.Drafts**.

My mother had died when I was two and of her I remembered nothing. There was no photograph of her in the house. My father, during the three years he survived, had destroyed them all to blunt the stab of recollection. (**Not** 58)

A child must be helped to understand that death is final, that the body is in the ground or burnt and the beloved parent will never return (**Attach3** 271); yearning and searching is a natural part of mourning and children need to be helped to incorporate the experience of loss, so that they can move on from it. Fascinatingly, in his play “The Keep”, the plot of which he describes as “a kind of extension of autobiography” (**Few** 128), Gwyn Thomas has the daughter who has been looking after a tribe of brothers for years after their mother’s death in America reveal what she has recently learnt — that their mother did not die in the train crash in America but escaped from it to a new and more satisfying life:

Mam didn’t die in that accident. She got out and kept heading west [...] because there were certain things of which she had had enough. (**Keep** 90-1)

It is certainly possible that Gwyn Thomas is here tuning in to an enduring hopeful fantasy from childhood.<sup>45</sup>

In this beleaguered family, headed by feckless, improvident Walter Thomas, there simply was not enough sympathetic energy left to go round at the time of bereavement. Nana, the elder sister who took over care of the household of ten (father and the younger siblings), was only eighteen when catapulted into the role, and was further devastated the following year by the death of one of her fifteen-year old twin brothers (**Laughter** 12). There seems to have been no-one who was emotionally responsive and available to the youngest child, Gwyn Thomas. He declares variously and amusingly that he was “the strop for the tormented psyches of the family”:

When any pressure of anxiety among my elders needed to be relieved, standard practice was to take me to one side and belt me. And this often when I was in a mood of melting love for all my fellows. I got clobbered so insistently I could well have remained comatose into late middle age. (**Artists** 68-9)

In The Parkinson Show interview (1971) he repeats jocularly tales of being black and blue from beatings, at which the audience titters nervously. In his brief autobiographical sketch, he expands:

There was also a tiny, lightless chamber beneath the stairs into which I was periodically thrown and I would spend an hour or so banging defiant fists against the

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45 It is interesting to note that “America” was an important part of Thomas’s fantasy world, as revealed in his fondness for American popular films and literature and in his translation of certain elements of this culture to the “gulches” of his Rhondda.

door. [...] During this period I saw no theme of logic in human life and often said so in terms which won me yet another cuffing and a spell in that little crypt. (*Artists* 69)

Bearing in mind the traumatic bereavement at a tender age, without the humour this would be recognised as an account of bleak deprivation. Unsurprisingly in view of his early history, Gwyn Thomas seems to have had a lifelong need for strong attachment figures.<sup>46</sup> From his account in *A Few Selected Exits*, during his first year at County School, his devotion to Walt, his elder brother, the first in the family to follow an academic route, fills an important need for him:

During that period I was more devoted to Walt than any dog. (3) [...] During [his] last year at the school I served him as a sort of cut-rate djinn. I was there to serve. He studied right through every evening and never left the house. I wanted to match Walt's devotion to his books by my devotion to him [...]. As long as he was at his table, I remained at my post of duty, which was exactly halfway up the stairs. [...] Any word of command, any rustle of unease, and I was up the stairs like a whippet. [...](10)

I do not think those vigils on the stairs did me much good. [...] The stairs were an awkward place to sit on and the discomfort and loneliness must have done something to chill my psyche. [...] Hooked to Walt, I might just as well have been a Trappist. (11)

The account suggests an urgent hunger in his boy self for attachment, for proximity.

A tragic and enduring consequence of lack of dependable early nurture can be the inability to move far away from what is perceived as a home base, from compelling unconscious fears that whatever supplies of support and love that would otherwise be available might dry up. Thomas uses a most vivid image to suggest how the Rhondda took the place for him of the close maternal embrace that had regularly to be stimulated into action:

My growing up place, the dark octopal gulches I never wished to leave, whose embrace, whenever it grew slack, I would stroke back into pitiless rigidity. (*Few* 144)

It seems probable that a major element in his deep unhappiness at Oxford was his inability, after the precariousness of his attachments in childhood, to adjust to being away from the only base he had known. Away from home, he even seemed to have trouble eating, as though food was almost perceived as mother's milk:

A rejection of food was a theme of the experience. (*Few* 51)

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46 He was later entirely dependent on his wife to provide a total life support system in everything from secretarial services, every aspect of household management, complete financial oversight and to chauffeur him wherever he needed to go (*Laughter* 131 and *NB*, passim). However, the dependence seems to have been as much emotional as practical: Reg George, a teaching colleague and former pupil, found him a "very vulnerable person[...] helpless and hopeless without [Lyn]", during a brief period she spent in hospital (*NB* 89-96).

He seems to have gone through Oxford subsisting on transport café pies and Nana's Welsh cakes.

I had [...] been, when away from home, short of food, taking in less per day than many a caged bird. (Few 62)

Similarly, during the months in Spain during his second university year, his unease caused him to fashion a smaller and smaller cell for himself. First of all, he withdrew from the course at the University of Madrid (69). Next he withdrew from meals at his pension, offering as an ostensible reason the uncongenial political flavour of the conversation, and took to reading books in English at boulevard cafes.

But even from the boulevards I withdrew. I followed some kind of crypto-monastic urge that has flavoured a lot of my days. [...] I have only to take a peck at any single experience and I begin to fall back. (Few 71)

He calls his autobiography *A Few Selected Exits* and once explained, in The Parkinson Show, that he spent a lot of his life looking for the way out: escape routes really mattered. His autobiography ends by making totally explicit his need for what he saw as his secure Rhondda base:

I was home, at my earth's warm centre. The scared monkey was back in the branches of his best-loved tree. I've never had any truly passionate wish to be elsewhere. (Few 212)

Attachment theory provides a more than sufficient tool for explicating his behaviour.

Where escape was not possible, defensive strategies were highly developed in this vulnerable man. He declared, surely of himself, that Welshmen have an extreme facility for talking because they feared to hear what they might hear if they stopped talking (Parkinson). He could hilariously control situations by his skill as a raconteur, where he was not expected to give turns. In the same interview, he states that he could not be anywhere without reading, having a demented desire to isolate himself from awful threat. In an early draft of *A Few Selected Exits*, he showed how, through study, he attempted unsuccessfully to dissipate anxiety:

Whatever I could do to thicken the mixture of distemper and anxiety I tried, to the best of my ability, to do. I sank into my studies with manic zeal. Like my brothers who landed up in the mines, I worked more or less in the dark with a strong sense of accumulating methane and expecting explosions. Other people are described as burying their heads in books. I buried my whole being. (Few.Drafts 4)

Anxiety was clearly a chronic and oppressive state for him. A further symptom of potential depressive state was a sense of unreality. One of his notebook entries<sup>47</sup> for the war-time period when he was teaching in Cardigan reads:

Thursday: fire-watching. Anything, anything, provided it gives me a sense of my own existence. (**Parnt**)

In the short autobiography he provided for *Artists in Wales* he describes:

The chronic sense of unreality that has fogged me since birth, the conviction that I have come to the wrong world, tumbled down the wrong chimney, bringing with me a sooty cloud of alienation. (**Artists** 76)

Thomas, then, perceives an essential feature of his self to be his neurotic response to life. A notebook jotting avers:

For most men being nervous is second nature. For me it is first nature. Nothing else gets a look in. If it does manage to peer through the palisades of panic, it looks like Ben Gunn. (**Lyntr** 112)

As we shall see, Thomas found explicit autobiography — being committed to a position and held accountable for seriously-held views — severely threatening. He famously declared in the draft of a letter to Harold Harris, in reply to his of 28.6.67:

If I have an art, obliquity is its essence. I shall probably even go to the grave sideways. (**Letthom**1)

Some of his best enunciations of a life position come from the built-in obliquity of the stance of a television critic commenting on the work of others. This seems to allow observations to emanate from a still centre of self, in a way which enables Thomas to engage in genuine reflection. For many years, Gwyn Thomas produced a Saturday piece for the *Western Mail*, commenting on his viewing over the week. His piece of 20.11.76 on “Candid Camera”, a programme which exploited the gullibility of the general public by setting up practical-joke situations where unsuspecting passers-by were caught up in outrageous situations, earns his righteous scorn:

It is a lucky man who is not made a fool of at least once a day, so there is nothing in our social arrangement more splendid than the impulse of the average individual to trust and prop up another. It is the most beautiful trick we picked up in our march out of the jungle. That is why the practical joker, the man who abuses our general simplicity, inflicts deep wounds on the nerve of our social confidence. Existence is shaky and precarious and depends on a steady assurance that as things are said to be, so indeed they are. (**Rev.Thom.tel**)

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47 As already indicated, there are three known sources extant for the contents of Gwyn Thomas's notebooks, the originals believed to have been destroyed by his widow, Lyn: the most extensive, Michael Parnell's transcriptions (**Parnt**); sections typed by his widow (**Lyntr**); and extracts transcribed by John Ormond and incorporated into his memorial tribute, “Laughter before Nightfall”(**Ormtr**).

Such mulled, Johnsonian reflections on the human condition often produce writing of sensitivity and remarkable insight — Gwyn Thomas at his best.

Others, however, are deeply impressed by his abilities as a raconteur and Vincent Kane sees the strengths epitomised in him in full oratorical flight as the quintessential Gwyn Thomas: Kane, who knew him from his frequent appearances in the BBC studios and as a boon companion in the pub at Peterston, observed:

His great talent — genius — was as a raconteur and conversationalist. (NB 136)

Dai Smith saw him as a “coruscatingly brilliant conversationalist” (BCSDS). While, for the most part, this study has confined itself to autobiographical acts in writing, it has been possible, in the case of Gwyn Thomas, to hazard some evaluation of the self perceived and revealed in the exercise of his broadcasting persona. For this we are dependent on what the evanescent forms of sound radio and television have thrown up in enduring and accessible form: a video recording of the 1971 *Parkinson Show*, for example, clips from television archives in the *Kane’s Classics* series and transcripts of such sound radio programmes as *Any Questions* in which he took part. Sadly, no record has been preserved of *The Brains Trust*. From his own account, his habitual and characteristic nervousness was considerably heightened when broadcasting. For one who had declared, as we have seen, that one of his “motherland[s]” was “an anxiety neurosis roughly the size of the Eisteddfod Pavilion” (Artists 72), the “taste of self” in Hopkins’s sense, (referred to in the introduction to this study) might well have been particularly acute while on the air. A scrutiny of some of the remaining records produces some interesting insights.

To some he appeared as “the comic Welshman walking abroad” (Critical). From our vantage point of post-devolutionary political confidence, his assertions about Wales, often from platforms in England, seem ill-judged and sometimes offensive. Wynn Thomas, in a BBC television programme five years after Gwyn Thomas’s death, *Gwyn Thomas: A Critical Reputation*, had this to say of the man as displayed in his occasional writings, TV appearances and radio broadcasts of his declining years:

He could, at least on a bad day, sound to a Welsh speaker such as myself like a bizarre cross between Ian Paisley and Uncle Tom. [...] Ian Paisley in the sense that he voiced, however wittily, the bigoted opinions of anti Welsh language sectarianism, and Uncle Tom, too, perhaps, because he seemed so keen, on the Michael Parkinson Show for example, to play up to an Englishman’s expectation of what a picturesque Welshman should be and to play down the real thing. [...] Towards the end,

entertaining quips became Gwyn Thomas's fatal Cleopatra, for which the whole Welsh world was well lost at times. (**Critical**)

It proved possible to explore contemporary reactions to Gwyn Thomas with a group of friends who were formerly pupils at Barry County School for Boys.<sup>48</sup> They vividly remembered Gwyn Thomas in his heyday as teacher and emerging television personality in the days of *The Brains Trust*. I asked Peter Stead what his parents had thought of Gwyn Thomas. He replied: "My mother thought it a pity he was always making fun of Wales and ridiculing Welshness". Another, Gareth Williams, commented on the critical reaction of a teacher at Barry County to Gwyn Thomas's media performances, made clear to him as a pupil: "He believed serious topics should be treated seriously, not flippantly". Transcripts of *Any Questions* helpfully indicate laughter and applause and its degree. The record for the programme 5.6.64 shows Gwyn Thomas in characteristic action. In any individual programme, Gwyn Thomas typically elicits the greatest audience response of anyone on the panel. In this programme, broadcast from the University of Southampton, it is as though audience approval or amusement stimulates or goads him to further excesses. Seemingly playing to the preconceptions of his audience, he relates with gusto a surely fictional tale of the appalled reaction of an African visitor to eighteen lugubrious renderings of the "very lowering piece" "The Martyr of the Arena" by male voice choirs at an eisteddfod held in a disused wagon shed in Treorchy. Indeed, a colleague and friend of Gwyn Thomas at Barry County School, observed that Thomas's blind spot was an irrational antipathy towards Welsh nationalism (**NB** 103). Several people commented that, although he loved to make people laugh, it moved later into a kind of buffoonery — and, as Wynn Thomas indicates, often at the expense of Wales (Wynn Thomas **Critical**, Alun John **NB** 82, Glyn Jones **NB** 97). It may be productive, for reasons we shall be exploring, to interpret such behaviour as an attack on the "mother" country.

The motivation for what seems to have been largely unconscious behaviour would seem to have been complex. As we have seen, from the time of his mother's death, his childish ploys for attention were severely rebuffed. What we do not get in early childhood often remains an unsatisfied craving. At last, with his live audiences and

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48 These were: Gareth Williams, Malcolm Thomas and Dai Smith, all contemporaries and friends of my cousin, the late Christopher Reynolds (1945-72), at Barry County School for Boys and fellow history students at Oxford. Peter Stead was a near contemporary of theirs for some years at Barry County School. I am grateful to each of them for talking to me individually, Malcolm Thomas by telephone, between January-March 2001. Hereinafter, where necessary for clarity, I append **BCS** followed by the individual's initials as a short title in connection with these personal interviews.



spellbound groups in the pub, he was getting the positive strokes he longed for. Playing to the gallery seems to have become second nature. Further, an antagonism to Welsh seems to have been built in to his childhood situation; a linguistic fault line ran right down the middle of Gwyn Thomas's family. Whereas his parents habitually communicated with each other in Welsh, and the first six children had Welsh as their mother tongue, in response to the belief evolving at the start of the twentieth century that English would be the language of advancement in the world, children 7 to 12 in the Thomas family were explicitly taught no Welsh. Nevertheless, Gwyn was expected to attend a Welsh-language chapel; he testified to the boredom and frustration this evinced many times, perhaps most notably and entertainingly in a *Punch* article of 19.4.61, "Change Here for Strangeness":

The change of language sliced through a whole family. [...] The world was divided inside our very kitchen and there was already enough going on in that kitchen. Congested before, it became embarrassingly tight to afford stabling room for a ruptured culture and a covey of noisy young refugees spinning like schizophrenic tops as the ancient tongue went into its astonishing skid.

He describes his childhood experience of involvement with his Welsh language chapel:

[...]We were thrust into a cosmos of moralizing and mourning conducted totally in Welsh. We were surrounded by people who seemed to have a mania for hustling the young on to public stages as bullets in the fight against joy. [...] I became one of a troupe of lads on the didactic and propagandist side of the Sunday School and Band of Hope. We found no difficulty in learning the reams of Welsh and were no worse in our performance for not understanding a word of it. [...] Three attendances each Sunday at the Welsh chapel were compulsory and if I demanded that my theology be funnelled to me in Bantu as a change from Welsh I was cuffed as a renegade.

(Change)

Exasperation and boredom over matters Welsh are therefore very understandable. However, Gwyn Thomas's feelings seem to run much deeper than this. We have already observed that death of a mother figure before a child's tenth birthday can be a source of pathology in the future and that none of the features which experts reckon may help a child healthily to complete mourning and move on seemed to be present in Gwyn Thomas's family. While anger at the desertion of the beloved dead person can be a feature of all mourning, Bowlby states

All are agreed that anger with the lost figure (often unconscious and directed elsewhere) plays a major role in pathological mourning. (Attach3 28)

It seems probable that Gwyn Thomas found it impossible to hold and express ambivalent feelings for his mother: as we have seen, he had a tendency to idealise her. Bowlby, exploring defence mechanisms, writes:

To direct anger away from the person who elicited it and towards some more or less irrelevant person [displacement], is so well known that little need be said about it. The term 'splitting' is also used in this connection when an ambivalent reaction is aroused with the loving component being directed towards one person and the angry component being redirected towards another. (**Attach3** 68)

Thomas's mother, whom he, at times, both loved and hated, spoke Welsh for preference, a language which excluded him, and sang wondrously well. In the unconscious split that young Gwyn Thomas seems to have achieved — a split that lasted the whole of his life — his anger with his abandoning mother landed with full ferocity on her language of preference, Welsh. In all this, there was a kind of unconscious logic. He had experienced Welsh as the language of exclusion. Anger with the language therefore re-enacted his repressed feeling of being excluded by his mother before her death, by her death and from her grave. His love of her continued to find expression in his lifelong pleasure in singing and devotion to opera.

There were further deep-seated reasons, largely unconscious, for disparaging the Welsh language in later life. His widow, Lyn, explains in an interview with Michael Parnell:

Gwyn increasingly found himself being less well treated by the BBC after the arrival of the new Welsh-speaking elements in the hierarchy; everything altered; going to the BBC began to be like going to a foreign country. (**Intlyn**)

Gwyn Thomas had most painful memories of exclusion from his periods of incarceration in a cupboard under the stairs in the period of bleak deprivation after his mother's death; subsequent exclusion is likely to have been profoundly distressing to him.

Further, Thomas had a bemusing area of insensitivity to language. His teacher at Porth, Rochat, testified to his being "excellent at Spanish but he never fell in love with the language. He was not a natural linguist" (**NB** 6). Of the languages he had studied in the Sixth form he declared "the two living tongues I have never been able to use without feeling that I was walking down a main street with an ill-fitting mask on my face" (**Few.Drafts** 3). In his years as a schoolmaster, Thomas seemed to have perceived himself as a teacher of grammar rather than of language (**Few** 105). He seems to have sensed none of the excitement people who have deep knowledge of

more than one language experience, as they come to understand how uniquely and differently each language moulds the perception of the speaker, of how diverse languages extend the nuance and range of thought and feeling. He seems to have felt no emotional response to language. Perhaps his phobic reaction to being vulnerably away from home base when abroad prevented him from ever really appreciating the degree to which language is a vehicle of culture:

All around me were Spaniards and Spain and I had no real wish to know. (Few 71)

The fact that his own mother tongue was not his mother's mother tongue must certainly have produced some fracture. His total insensitivity to the feelings of those who perceived the world and lived their lives through the medium of Welsh made him many enemies. In a "Bookshelf" radio conversation with Frank Delaney in 1979, he expresses astonishingly provocative views on the Welsh language, perhaps partly exercising his *enfant terrible* persona:

I have never for one instant been tempted to compromise with my disapproval of the fact that Lazarus did not die. I think the language had been given its cue to leave the stage and I believe it would have been better for the health of the Welsh mind had it done so. Now this will outrage many people but it is adequately a truth as far as I'm concerned. (Intgt5)

In *A Few Selected Exits* he asserts: "Anyone who struggles to revive a language that is dying gracefully and without pain is guilty of a most harmful treason" (59). It is certainly tempting to interpret such combative views, from someone who was regularly fielded as a representative Welshman by the British media, as a mixture of insensitivity to the issues involved, attention seeking and powerful unconscious drives.

One further area of autobiographical enactment, his notebooks, needs to be explicitly considered before we turn to what his American editor describes as "An Autobiography of Sorts", *A Few Selected Exits*. The notebooks pose serious problems for the academic researcher, but in a study such as this, which is attempting to discern how Gwyn Thomas perceived himself, such evidence of characteristic mental states is of some importance. There is no reason to doubt that Lyn Thomas carried out her declared intention of destroying the notebooks.<sup>49</sup> The extracts which are now available for scrutiny have thus been mediated through others. There are some two hundred pages of selections typed by Lyn Thomas, and it seems safe to assume that

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49 Michael Parnell's widow, Mary, writes a preamble to this effect to her late husband's transcription of the notebooks, NLW Gwyn Thomas MSS and Papers N2.

she only preserved sections she believed her husband had composed, not items culled and copied from other sources; a substantial collection of extracts which Michael Parnell transcribed because they were of interest to him; and selections that John Ormond used in his memorial celebration of Thomas, "Laughter before Nightfall". Parnell records that for the later journals in particular, Lyn Thomas exercised a ferocious censorship, destroying as much as two thirds of one notebook before allowing her husband's biographer to see it (**Parnt**r Notebook 36, 25.5.73). There are further problems of provenance. Against many of the extracts, Parnell has written 'GT' — which may be a transcription of Gwyn Thomas's note to himself that particular aphorisms and *bons mots* were indeed his and not jottings culled from elsewhere, to guard against inadvertent plagiarism. However, from internal evidence, many entries which are not so initialled seem indeed to have been composed by Gwyn Thomas. Presumably, in some of the deeply personal (and sexual) outpourings, he felt himself in no danger of unwittingly publishing as his own extracts absorbed from the works of another.

A characteristic theme of the jottings, particularly of the later notebooks, is the timorousness with which he perceives himself having engaged with life and the bleakness and meaninglessness of the whole experience:

There are so many areas of life I have refused to touch through a secret revulsion or fear the final portrait of myself now emerging is of a single eye glaring from a fragmentary womb. The whole post-natal experience has been so partial, so evasive, my death certificate when it comes will be a frivolously unnecessary document. [Initialled GT] (**Parnt**r Notebook 18, 22.2.69 138)

As we have seen, Thomas's early life experience would have made him very vulnerable to depressive states as an adult: his notebooks, which were the receptacles of the unguarded expression of his raw feelings of the moment, offer convincing evidence of long-term depressive states.<sup>50</sup> A further, perturbing feature of the notebooks — the regular, intense nature of the sexual focus — needs some consideration here. While it seems near certain that Gwyn Thomas intended his notebooks for no eye but his own, transcripts of large sections are now in the public

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<sup>50</sup> Further jottings: "Sober, I am entombed. With a little alcohol laid along my veins, I float for a while in the wandering wake of Lazarus" (Initialled GT **Parnt**r nb 22, 13..6.70, 92).and, in the same notebook, "The mind is a burning house. Jump clear if you can"(Initialled GT **Parnt**r 95). "Freud: I have found little that is 'good' about human beings on the whole. In my experience, most of them are trash'. Yes, yes. Rain is wet. How do you make a mac?" NB 21, 31.3.70, 67 (**Parnt**r). "Look at the sad little fragments of experience that enter officially into the category of happiness and take sadly to drink" (**Lyntr** 41).

domain in the National Library of Wales. I attempt therefore an interpretation which may be helpful to an overall understanding of Gwyn Thomas's work, while seeking to avoid being officiously intrusive.

In the course of discussion, general and specific, with people who knew Gwyn Thomas — people who were taught by him, lived in his neighbourhood, knew him at summer schools — there has been no suggestion that Gwyn Thomas was anything but devotedly monogamous in practice. Michael Parnell seems implicitly to have reached a similar conclusion (**Laughter** 111). Particular specialist expertise has been helpful at this stage — that of an analytical psychotherapist and a consultant urologist — who have helped considerably to clarify the issues, although the conclusions are my own. In his notebooks, Gwyn Thomas frequently and enthusiastically expatiates on the zealous masturbation of his adolescence. Of several possible psychoanalytical explanations of his regular dwelling on the sexual act in his notebooks, what seems most convincing is that it performed the function of a sort of cerebral masturbation, the intensity of which lifted his mood from black to grey: it was a defence against the deepest depression. In the mid 1960s, Gwyn Thomas became diabetic. At that time and later, there are several allusions to and explorations of impotence in the notebooks and discussions of the close relationship between sexual potency and creative ability. Urologists have confirmed that impotence is a not infrequent consequence of diabetes.<sup>51</sup> Gwyn Thomas's obsessional preoccupation with sexual imaginings and *News of the World* type jottings can surely be sympathised with, when they are perceived as an attempted defence against depressive dwellings on death and disintegration. Gwyn Thomas's public persona of a happy clown, constantly keeping all those in his circle in paroxysms of laughter, as clips from his television appearances in the late 1960s and 1970s clearly show, is very much at variance with the perceived self of the journals at that time.

Writing straight autobiography proved to be immensely difficult for Gwyn Thomas. An entry in his notebook in 1970 — whether his own composition or culled from another — seems to capture retrospectively his feelings about writing in the genre:

For the humorous writer, the fantasist, writing straight autobiography is a cyanide trip. He serves up the living guts of his raw material to the visiting condors.

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example, "Pathophysiology of Erectile Dysfunction," *Campbell's Urology* 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Ed P.C: Walsh, et al. Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1998, 1169. I am grateful to Michael Rose, the former consultant urologist, for this reference.

(Parnter, Notebook 21, 31.3.70, 7)

We can build up a sense of what Thomas's early work on *A Few Selected Exits* was like from the fragments that remain. The randomly assembled pile of loose-leaf typescript has some long runs of several consecutive pages, some shorter sequences and some individual sheets: the overlapping pagination suggests that there had been several drafts. Early versions include rambling rather inconsequential accounts of his father, his brothers Dil, Emlyn and Walt, with some long-running digressions, and an interminable, less than fascinating presentation of a seemingly fictitious Uncle Duncan. As indicated earlier, however, Uncle Duncan, at one point is given an interesting narrator role, expressing vehement views of the wastefulness of the early death of Gwyn Thomas's mother and commenting on Gwyn Thomas's father as "that fruitfly there [...] that fertile and futile buffoon" (**Few.Drafts** 39), comments Gwyn Thomas might have found it well nigh impossible to make directly. The autobiography had been commissioned in 1965 and simultaneous publication in Britain with Hutchinson and America with Little, Brown had been planned. Both editors were personally known to Gwyn Thomas. Letters in response to readings of the manuscript he submitted are encouraging and tactful but make absolutely clear that the work as it stands is absolutely unpublishable. Harold Harris of Hutchinson, in a letter of 28.6.67, comments that all that the reader might like to know about Gwyn Thomas:

is in danger of being swamped beneath the eccentricities of everybody else he ever met, lost in a maze of digressional convolution and blown to smithereens by a succession of exploding images. (**Lethar1**)

He quotes extensively from a reader's report on the MS:

Possibly we all differ in our definition of what an autobiography should be. I believe that, although people famous or infamous can add to its value, the author's life should take precedence and should be described through the events which have shaped it. And his views should be clearly stated so that he himself emerges as the dominant personality.

His rumbustuous, rhetorical style frequently defeats his purpose. He forgets that hyperbolic writing can result not only in repetition [...] but also in a farcical exaggeration of incidents and of characters which produces total unreality. All his people are blown up to bursting point; he ignores lapse of time, dates and sequence and these evasions increase the confusion. [...] The whole book is a chaotic *non sequitur* [...]. (**Lethar1**)

Harris confesses to having read the MS editorial pencil in hand, and proposes an early meeting in Cardiff to discuss revision. Pencilled marks with 'Stet' written beside them on sections of the typescript in the archive highlight characters and incidents he

seems to have wanted preserved.<sup>52</sup> A large cast of characters subsequently disappears and characters such as Mr Denning and Mr Metcalf gain a prominence they did not have in the original work, when part of a larger chorus.

A letter from Harry Sions of Little, Brown emphasises his agreement with all the points made by Hutchinson and adds a few of his own:

[The book] really doesn't end, it somehow stops as though you had simply tired of the whole business or run out of typewriter ribbon [...].(Letsions1)

He finds it inexplicable that the autobiography should end at the point Gwyn Thomas leaves teaching and asks firmly for further work to include his experiences as a dramatist and television personality:

You are telling the story of your life and your pretence that you're an amiable nobody seems, forgive me, somewhat quixotic under the circumstances. (Letsions1)

Sions, who knew Lyn Thomas, made many attempts over a period to get her included in a significant way in the autobiography:

I realise that you are reluctant in that strange, wonderful way of yours, to admit to any of us your real or private feelings. (Letsions1)

Conclusions that may be drawn from these comments are that Gwyn Thomas found it difficult to reflect on his life, even to the degree of giving his autobiography some discernible structure. Sions considers Thomas had difficulty expressing his feelings; to the end, in spite three specific requests, he refuses to expand on his scant and cursory references to his wife.<sup>53</sup> And in his own autobiography, rumbustuous, outgoing Thomas found it difficult to foreground himself.

From a scrutiny of the portions of the early draft which survive, it is hard to disagree with the critical comments: the reader is in constant danger of losing the plot as s/he wades through verbose, chaotic and singularly unfunny text. It seems probable that an attempt to write an autobiography had brought Thomas much too close to unconscious material that had been repressed because it was too painful to contemplate. In an undated draft letter of reply to Harold Harris's criticism, he owns:

The book was chiselled out of vast unwillingness. The literal facts of my life are so loathsome to my mind I get a withering shock right up my arm whenever I set them down. (Letthom1)

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52 See, for example, a run, 143-61, of *Few.Drafts*, almost all carrying the instruction *stet*.

53 Sions makes further attempts to get more mention of Lyn Thomas in letters dated 5.2.68 and 29.3.68.

Thomas seems to have made a second attempt at an opening chapter (**Few.first**). In this, his first and concluding sections are verbatim recyclings of two articles he had written for *Punch*.<sup>54</sup> The first, which deals with his regular incarceration in the cupboard under the stairs, has a jocularly about it, understandable perhaps for its original audience, which signals in this context a determination not to engage with genuine reactions to experience. In his interview with Denis Mitchell, he describes comedy as an “act of weeping” (**Intgt3**). Here it seems an act of self protection.

This chapter, too, was abandoned. The British version of *A Few Selected Exits*, published by Hutchinson, starts with Thomas on the point of departure for Oxford. Harry Sions, however, urgently asks for a fresh lead-in for the American edition (**Letsions3**). What Thomas provides as a “new” opening proves to be a verbatim recycling of an article, “The Incomparable Cradle”, he seems to have published in the *Evening Standard* of 13.2.65.<sup>55</sup> He uses this for a third time when asked for an autobiographical sketch for Meic Stephens’s *Artists in Wales*. This piece, while written with Thomas’s usual comic exaggeration, does deal with important life events such as the death of his mother and his perception of himself as deeply anxious, even neurotic. Where Thomas does manage to achieve significant self-disclosure, it is often in what he would perceive as an ephemeral medium — as in this piece written first for a newspaper and as in the Denis Mitchell television interview. Thomas states elsewhere with what appears to be real conviction:

The limits of one’s activity as a writer are fixed by the imaginative antics of boyhood.  
(**Intgt1**)

A sensitive, detailed appraisal of that boyhood, therefore, would have been of great interest to the reader. But he couldn’t do it.

For the study of autobiographical works by Gwyn Thomas (as was the case with Margiad Evans), the researcher is helped by the availability for scrutiny of extensive material assembled by biographers or intending biographers. For Gwyn Thomas, the Parnell archive is particularly rich in records of interviews with people who knew him in many different capacities. Accounts of how other people perceived him in some cases add further definition to his proclaimed sense of self, in some cases run counter

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54 The redrafted chapter opens with “Brotherly Love” (*Punch* 12.4.61) and concludes with “Explosion Point” (*Punch* 3.5.61).

55 The typescript has a holograph addition indicating the newspaper name, and the date of publication.



to it, and sometimes provide insights into areas which Thomas has consciously or unconsciously repressed, as we shall see. In the version of *A Few Selected Exits* published by Hutchinson, we have a reasonably reader-friendly text, produced by two editors and a reader having flown formation on the author. Thomas finally structures his material into five chapters: the first deals with his departure for Oxford, with some digressionary swirls into his secondary schooldays and his account of local characters which gives some sense of the environment which produced him; the second records his university experiences in Oxford and Madrid, including one notable long vacation; the third gives his impressions of colleagues in his years as a teacher; the fourth is an account of his doomed forays into play-writing; and, in the fifth, he presents himself as a media personality.

In the introduction to this chapter, there was a consideration of the factors that made Thomas a problematic subject for this study — his inability to engage with his most deeply formative experiences, such as his childhood and his marriage, for example. The most evasive and the least interesting chapter of *A Few Selected Exits* is, arguably, the third, which ostensibly deals with his time in teaching. His “Autobiography of Sorts” was written in 1966-7, just a few years after he had quit the classroom after twenty years as a schoolmaster; teaching had been a focus of most of his adult life. His evaluation of this period consists of an account of an eccentric colleague, Mr Walford, described in such outrageously exaggerated terms that there is little danger of a reader believing that this is an exact portrait of anyone who ever lived. One can trace some of the models for the character. In Thomas’s Foreword to *Old Barry in Photographs*, he pays tribute to “the sparkle of unique character” in the many notable personalities with whom he had taught at Barry County School for Boys, and describes some of their most striking attributes, some instantly recognisable as traits bequeathed to Mr Walford. Clearly D.J.P.Richards, “the fanatical athlete circling the field in a ten-mile training walk after school, his razor-thin body covered only by a flimsy, bikini-type pair of shorts” (n.pag.), is part of this composite portrait. Another is David Walters, “who lived in a reverie of regret for the fields and streams of Cardiganshire. He taught Chemistry and hated it” (n.pag.). In this foreword, Gwyn Thomas asserts that that he once found him in the staff room fashioning a primitive sort of broom from twigs and a length of wire. To present a composite picture of the antics of his most eccentric colleagues as a monument to his entire

professional life is bizarre, even for Gwyn Thomas, and surely needs further investigation.

A strong motivation, as ever, for this particular approach would be the comfort, security and ease of recycling what had already found an enthusiastic audience. “Mr Walford” had already been a success in a radio play and *Punch* articles (**Laughter** 134-5,188). But there would seem to be more significant reasons.

In spite of his huge abilities, Thomas, an undisciplined maverick, seems to have been an indifferent teacher of languages. Many pay tribute to his innate abilities. A former colleague, Alun John, who said that he was “not a good teacher” (**NB** 81), described him as “the most entirely intelligent and alert mind” (**NB** 87) he had ever met. His Spanish teacher at Porth, Rochat, a man of great gifts, had found him a “most marvellous pupil” (**NB** 7). Pupils of the calibre of Dai Smith found him inspirational and testified to the extraordinary range and depth of his intellect (**BCSDS**). Yet many saw him as a poor language teacher ( Alwyn Williams **NB** 24, Edwin Brooks **NB** 107, for example), and one who had no sense of responsibility for the progress of slower learners: Alun John averred that he had never seen him mark a book (**NB** 82). During rehearsals for Thomas’s play “Sap” at the Sherman Theatre in 1974, there was an interview session, in which both Thomas and Keith Baxter, who played a leading part in the play, took part. Baxter, a former pupil of Barry County School, explained that while he believed Gwyn Thomas had “a very extraordinary influence” on pupils at the school, his practice as a teacher was highly unusual. As Barry County had no library to accommodate those with free lessons, pupils had to sit at the back of lessons in progress.

I don’t know how proficient his students became at learning Spanish. He was marvellously easy to sidetrack always and that’s why his lessons were always crowded. I mean, given the right cue at the right time by somebody that perhaps hadn’t prepared a Spanish essay, he could be diverted into a talk about the growth of the cinema in the Rhondda Valley or the effect on people of Greta Garbo. (**Intgt2**)

To be taught by him was an exciting experience — he certainly expanded his pupil’s horizons — but it could be argued that the exercising of his skills as a raconteur did not advance his pupils’ foreign language skills a jot. Reg George described laughing so much in Thomas’s lessons that he felt ill (**NB** 89). In his television interview with Denis Mitchell, Thomas revealed how alluring a temptation making people laugh might be:

That would create a laugh, you see, and laughter passes the time on in teaching; you don't have to teach when they're convulsed. (**Intgt3**)

It is probable that at the level of conscious strategy Gwyn Thomas ensured that his practice as a teacher did not deplete his energy too much. A former pupil commented that Thomas would be the first out of school when the end-of-lessons bell rang (**BCSGW**).<sup>56</sup> An unflinching routine of his was to write for several hours on returning home, and this seems to have been the most deeply important part of his day. Alun John felt that, for Thomas, teaching was an insurance policy and his heart had never been in it (**NB** 81-2). It is probable that, at some level, Gwyn Thomas owned all this to himself. Genuine autobiography encourages a reflective backward look which discerns patterns in one's life. If Thomas acknowledged to himself and the world that for twenty odd years he had punched substantially below his weight as a teacher, might that not force him — and, importantly, cause his readers — to examine other parts of his personal myth, however uncomfortable such an exercise might be? “Mr Walford” standing for his teaching experience could be an effective blocking strategy on all sorts of potential further uncomfortable rumination for Thomas and detection of dissonance by his readers, who might note, for example, how rarely Thomas's political convictions had been translated into any costing action, (with the one notable exception of his support of Howard Fast which is recorded by Parnell (**Laughter** 123, and fully explored and documented by Victor Golightly [76-80]).

An earlier analysis has traced Gwyn Thomas's neurotic need to withdraw from the world into smaller and smaller spaces both at Oxford and in Madrid: he was aware of this trait in himself, but saw it only as part of the story of his life away from home. An important element of the tale he told himself about his unhappiness at Oxford was his righteous anger at High Tory positions of fellow students. He believed that his withdrawing from college life, existing on transport café pies to avoid ever having to eat with his uncongenial fellow students, was largely motivated by the moral fire of his political position.

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56 Malcolm Thomas, who had been an avid reader of Gwyn Thomas's fiction in his schooldays and had a great respect for him as a writer, was something of a dissenting voice in this comment on Thomas as a language teacher. He described Gwyn Thomas as “the most distinguished person we'd met yet and one of the most memorable experiences of being at school”. While acknowledging Gwyn Thomas's indifference to the progress of the slower learner, he thought he “taught Spanish very well” (**BCSMT**).

In *A Few Selected Exits*, he declared that conversation at meals divided between that of those who revelled in orthodox piety, the Oxford Group, “who had surrendered all power and personal decision”( 52) to God. The other faction were:

the political zealots. [...] Many of them had spent vacations in Germany, and they had come back full of praise for the plans and notions of the then emergent Hitler. [...] Every sentence they uttered had me choking on my meat. ( 53)

For Thomas, meals were “ideological thicket through which I trudged in solitude” (54). He withdrew, in part, to avoid such engagement. Similarly in Madrid, he advances political reasons for withdrawing from meals at the pension:

In the dining room, our fellow guests were thickly bourgeois. Conversationally, lunchtime, dinnertime, the pattern did not vary a comma. From the soup right through to the fruit they cursed the Republic roundly. I withdrew again without fuss [...]. (70)

One can conjecture that his perception of himself as retreating, in part, in political indignation was a necessary defence for him, giving him a tangible reason for his deep misery and reclusive withdrawal. In his accounts of Oxford, in particular, one has a strong sense of what he is *against*.

One suspects that a major cause of his unhappiness was a willed resistance to what Oxford had to offer, a determined malfunctioning:

Had I planned my honours course a little more wisely my troubles with [my tutor] might have been fewer. [...] My aptitude for wrong decisions has never flagged. From every choice I have made a doom dangles. I recalled that E.T. [his headmaster at Porth County School] had warned me against taking up with the Middle Ages, so I chose the Middle Ages. E.T. felt I would not make a good medievalist. My tutor knew so and said so in some of the hardest Spanish I have ever heard. He detested the Middle Ages. (58)

Oxford represented, for him, a quite terrifyingly open door. Gwyn Thomas, through inadequate parenting, tragically lacked the internalised security for any of the take-off points Oxford had to offer. As Dai Smith inimitably puts it, “The ladders of escape were there. The career marked ‘Exit’ was available. But all the doors for Gwyn were revolving ones” (**Critical**).

Possibly the then recent death of his one friend at Oxford, Wynne Roberts, caused some painful reflection at the time Thomas was writing *A Few Selected Exits*. Wynne Roberts, also of Porth County School, had been a year ahead of Gwyn Thomas, on a scholarship at Magdalen College reading Italian. The warmth of Thomas’s tribute to him, the only time in the entire autobiography he risks communicating strong

affection for anyone, could have been inspired in part by stirrings of guilt. Certainly, his tribute to Wynne causes him to reflect on his own lacks:

I will never cease to be grateful to him, utterly different from him as I was, for I was in every regard so other from what I would have wished to be. I was clumsy at kindness, gifted at turning away, cursed with an imperfect sense of community, while denying myself the gains these ghastly qualities might have brought me in. (Few 82)

A study of the trajectory of Wynne Roberts's time at Oxford throws into relief the limitations of Gwyn Thomas's own awareness of self — his lack of political commitment, for example. Parnell's notebook records fascinating interviews with Nansi Roberts, widow of Wynne (NB 42-67, 150-61). From her account, Wynne was "greatly enjoying Oxford" (NB 45), until Gwyn Thomas arrived with "a huge chip on his shoulder" and "in a sense corrupted Wynne out of his liking for Oxford (NB 46). [...] Why was [Gwyn] always so miserable?" she asks rhetorically. Thomas took Wynne Roberts to Communist Party meetings. "He pushed Wynne in but stayed out himself" (NB 45). "Gwyn Thomas didn't join the Communist Party but Wynne did and Wynne's family thought that all Wynne's troubles began with his friendship with Gwyn Thomas" (NB 150). Wynne was subsequently frequently out of work as a result of his Communist Party allegiance. In *A Few Selected Exits* Thomas seems to have misrepresented the circumstances of Wynne Roberts's poor degree — he got a Third — and his feelings about that evaluation, Thomas possibly finding anger with authority more tolerable than self-censure. According to Nansi Roberts, her husband had switched from Modern Languages to English wishing, it seems, to do something more socially useful but leaving inadequate time to get on top of the heavily linguistic aspects of the course (NB 150). His Third therefore seems quite understandable. She insists: "Wynne did forgive Oxford for giving him a Third, unlike what Gwyn Thomas says in *A Few Selected Exits*" (NB 44). Thomas's account declares:

Wynne Roberts went down with a degree of low value, an evaluation that reflected absolutely nothing of his real talent, but that, I suppose, is the true function of degree giving. Intelligence of the more passionate kind is its own joy and fulfilment. Its assessment by people smugly dull enough to be assessors is hardly ever relevant. [...] He never really forgave his judges. Nor should he have. (Few 82)

Nansi believed that "Gwyn Thomas's spirit was sometimes rebuked by Wynne's conscience (as Antony's was by Caesar)" (NB 54).

At rare times and in particular moods Gwyn Thomas did take private stock and draw conclusions about his own shortcomings. An early notebook entry reads:

I am the root and flower of turpitude. I give people the impression that they are shortly to [be] led forth. I have that sultry, prophetic urgency about me when I speak to any number that causes to crack in their brain the glorious, apocalyptic thought that the way has broken open above their heads. [...] Yes, I get a lot of people that way. In certain moments I have a certain type of eloquence, sharp, pointed, and flickering with flame that melts the tortured question mark and hammers it into rigid statement — an exclamation of certain optimism in the immediate future of our species. Then I turn my back on them and take myself forth into a cinema, or pub, the marriage bed or any site whatever where I may forget all the conceivable terms of the hideous verb 'to be'. (Parnter from exercise book carrying the County School, Cardigan label)<sup>57</sup>

The business of actually writing autobiography for publication was, for Gwyn Thomas, only a limited means of coming to self-knowledge because of areas he excluded, deliberately or unconsciously: His declaration of how 'loathsome'(Letthom1) the exercise of recalling the facts of his life was to him suggests he was heavily blocked on exploring explicitly the realities of such elements as his parenting and childhood. Gusdorf's view of the autobiographical project as archaeological investigation was not for him:

As an aerial view sometimes reveals to an archaeologist the direction of a road [...] so the reconstruction in spirit of my destiny bares the major lines that I have failed to notice, the demands of the deepest values I hold that, without my being clearly aware of it, have determined my most decisive choices. (38)

There are, however, areas in which *A Few Selected Exits* communicates with zest and authenticity a sense of what it was like to be Gwyn Thomas.

He had an unparalleled ability to encapsulate his sense of self in vivid images, most of all his sense of "spinning alienation" (81) from much of life. In recalling a time when he was used as a theatrical extra, he most entertainingly fixes in the reader's mind an idea of himself as a perpetual outsider looking in, always carrying with him a penumbra of doom and disaster:

I [...] appeared as a passing stranger who peers through the window, a kind of omen of the doom that was surely on the way, and as doom was constantly on the way in the plays we performed, I was always somewhere near the window, leering. [...] [The producer] even had me enlarge the window so that the audience could get the full flavour of what was, in those days, a savagely saturnine and disturbing face. (142)

Not surprisingly, then, the title of his autobiography shows a constant need to exit, rather than engage with, situations in the world. In this heavily constructed autobiography, he crafts an entire chapter, where he features himself as a doomed playwright, to reveal his sense of predestined ill-luck as production after production

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas taught at Cardigan County School from 1940-2.

nose dives, for reasons quite beyond his control. Similarly, at the end of his first year at Oxford he observes:

I did not know that the sensation of falling off cliffs and going headlong over stretched ropes in the dark was going to be a fixed feature of my being. (88)

His overwhelming sense of being an outsider amongst the superior band of sophisticates and attested superintelligences on *The Brains Trust* is inimitably communicated:

In that company, you need to be as cool as an arctic seal not to feel like sending home for your leper's bell and hood. (170-1).

An utterly characteristic sensation for Thomas was:

of being a bee, buzzing with willingness but outside the wrong hive and stung by my leader for being laden with the wrong pollen. (151)

The talent for appropriate encapsulating images is as much a characteristic feature of the style that is Gwyn Thomas as his great appetite for meanders, lengthy digressional saunters through territory far distant from the main thoroughfare of his narrative. Thomas's characteristic discursive style resembles nothing so much as landscape gardening: serpentine paths, which lead to different vistas, which give a sense of spacious territory, which is really the result of judicious planting and building. He keeps matters within a controlled and bounded area. As we have seen, Thomas finds the idea of linear autobiographical narrative very threatening: it might lead him into territory that hadn't been tamed by him, perhaps to unexpected views where his defensive skills had no relevance. He seemed to feel a positive state of alarm about the possibility of being forced to research and record too explicitly details of his family and upbringing. Almost certainly, Thomas found the possibility of having to readjust his personal myth in the light of newly-gained insights painful, even threatening. His editors accomplished some rigorous pruning but substantial meanders remained, recognised as the essential style and expression of the self that was Gwyn Thomas.

At his best, Thomas genuinely persuades the visiting reader that the landscape that they're in, while blatantly improved, is both amusing and true to nature. Life *felt* like this for him. The digressions, as in the first chapter of *A Few Selected Exits*, often perform a marvellous function of revealing the hinterland of relationships or put out tentacles that draw you deep into a community. The story — the bare narrative line in time and space — of the first chapter, can be summarised succinctly: "Gwyn Thomas,

on the verge of leaving home for Oxford, is given a trunk and £5 for an overcoat by Mr Metcalf, a local shopkeeper. Now viewed as a prize pupil, he is invited to tea by his headmaster, E.T". The patterning of the discourse, however, takes one through bravura digressive loops festooned around Thomas's brother Walt, Mr Metcalf and E.T.

What makes parts of *A Few Selected Exits* outstanding as autobiography is the convincing way Thomas enters into or recreates the states of mind of particular stages: in the first chapter, Thomas's adolescent self. The digressive convolutions that spiral round E.T. are as good as anything Gwyn Thomas has done. He considers the ebbs and flows of his relationship with his headmaster over time. Now a prize pupil, he merits the use of the family silver, when he is invited to tea. However, he recalls his earlier scapegrace relationship with E.T. before he caught the infection of academic ambition and dedication from his brother Walt. There is a wonderful and hilarious sense of Gwyn Thomas's loitering, observing boy self on his way to school, noting all the fantastical ways in which the excess of water that poured into the narrow Rhondda valley from the hillside could be harnessed as excuses for not appearing in lessons: floods which could not be avoided, or drenchings which merited steaming gently in the cellar by the big boiler for many satisfying hours (28-32). There is a vivid sense of how, even as a boy, Thomas took the raw materials of life and twisted them into fantastical and fulfilling shapes. The sequence where Thomas describes the subculture of the bad boys, smoking and verbally exploring adolescent sexuality in the dark, clustered around the boiler, communicates vividly the security he derived from that contained, womb-like place, where intense exercise of oral needs through smoking and holding forth to an appreciative audience were freely allowed (32-7). The first chapter of *A Few Selected Exits* is generously peopled with Thomas's grotesques, portrayed with a combination of humour, appalled awareness of mutilating life circumstances and tenderness. The school cellar is the domain of Mr Williams and it is here that Thomas encounters Nemesis in the form of E.T., fetched by Mr Williams in time to hear the end of a bawdy story told by the chain-smoking Thomas :

The caretaker was a man who could have stepped with ease into any mythology. [ ] He had been a miner for a long time before moving up into this comparatively smooth, new employment. As a miner he had been so prone to accidents he had won a lot of sympathy. If a stretch of roof lapsed it seemed to insist on having Mr Williams beneath to make the landing less brusque and brutal. He broke each of his



limbs repeatedly. [...] He had more mis-set bones than any other man walking. [...] By most of the lads he was called Pluto. His type of slow gait always disquiets, then impresses boys. Mr Williams broadened this effect by wearing a huge oilskin hat. [...] The sight of him slowly descending into the cellar, with his hat and brush, and even more slowly ascending, suggested a small divinity keeping in touch with his private domain, conjoint thunderbolt and cleanser, King of the Shadows, product of mutilating ironies: Pluto. [Later, the miscreants in the cellar are discovered *in flagrante delicto*.] Mr Williams stood at the side of E.T.. [...] He looked like a medieval executioner in the service of a king or judge. I heard a voice behind me whisper that Mr Williams was going to fell us systematically as we climbed the steps. (32-7)

Here there is a wonderful mixture of tuning in to adolescent imaginative mythologizing, with its sense of impending retribution and memorable characterisation accomplished by more than a little caricature.

Thomas, as an autobiographer, is often at his best when recreating states of being of adolescence and young manhood. His communication of a sense of ineffable disquiet over barely understood aspects of human sexuality is delicately portrayed in his account of the enduring impact on his consciousness of Mrs Metcalf, part fragrant goddess, part drunken nymphomaniac:

Mrs Metcalf has rarely left my mind. The dichotomy of her being, the daily swing from a resplendent presence of loveliness to untouchable disgrace and exile jolted for all time my view of other people. [...] In the gallery of all my bemusements and terrors her signature is on virtually every article. (15)

What Thomas's understanding of his own sexuality contributed to his bemused view of self is too complex a topic to be dealt with properly here.

One sees what one brings. An important tool in this study has been the insights of psychoanalysis. How much of what has been discovered here about his various autobiographical utterances did Thomas himself explicitly perceive? He had shown that he had some psychological awareness when, in his essay on the poet W.H.Davies, he hypothesised an unconscious impulsion towards the accident that cost the future poet his leg:

If my theory of Davies's mental development holds water, the accident could have been half-deliberate. Men move dimly towards what in their essence they wish to become, and the things that happen to them have already been planted by them in the waiting darkness ahead. Davies wanted an end to his crass and futile loafing. [...] Only a broken body could have provided him with the spiritual drive that would take him away once and for all from the camp-fires of the hoboes and set him to forming the songs that must already have been loud and jostling in his head. (*A Welsh Eye* 91)

This seems an interesting observation to find Thomas making. Whatever the merits of his conjecture about Davies, such reflections suggest an understanding of the possible

power of unconscious processes and some awareness of the insights of psychoanalysis; however, Thomas shows little preparedness to apply them consciously to his own life. He is clear that his characteristic ways of responding to situations, particularly through reclusive retreat, are very self-defeating but he is not sure why:

The other members of the committee looked at me as if they had already marked me down as one of the few people who had a State Scholarship and the reflexes of an imbecile. They were right. Whatever lumbered me with my present set of reflexes is a half-read mystery. (Few 56)

He typically evokes guffaws of laughter in the reader as he describes his continuing colossal anxiety, surely as a defence against our registering it as the torment it in fact was:

I never undo my seatbelt once I have secured it. One day I will carry this phobia to a point where I will arrive at the hotel of my destination city dragging the plane behind me. (202)

He understands that the extremes of misery and depression experienced in his young manhood and as he was writing *Sorrow for thy Sons* were chemically induced by thyroxine, dealt with to some degree by an operation on his thyroid gland (102). He very obliquely indicates his awareness of the vast uncharted ground in terms of what he might feel about his mother and her early death (9).

After ultimata from his editors, the final version of *A Few Selected Exits* is highly constructed, often to highlight absurdity and anti climax. His first chapter ends with a magnificent send off as he is launched for Oxford “feeling like an emperor” and accompanied by a considerable village procession, including two of his brothers bearing Mr Metcalf’s splendid trunk as if “it were the covenanted ark”, launched for what turns out to be the most grimly unhappy period of his life. In the opening sentences of the second chapter he declares anti-climactically:

Had I been a Venusian I would not have made smaller contact with the place.(49)

In Chapter 4, each section ends with the production of a new play of his biting the dust, each for different reasons. This flamboyant wordsmith concludes the whole chapter with:

Myself, a lust for silence welling up from every part of me, looked up Trappists in the directory. (165)

His chapter on himself as media personality is constructed to accentuate absurdity, with himself in the role of buffoon. One section ends, not untypically, where, a film

he has been involved with having been presented with a certificate of merit at a lugubrious party at the Czech Embassy, he has to be prised off the newly-varnished china cabinet by a reporter and junior Embassy attaché (193). Every aspect of the crafting of the autobiography — chapter divisions, juxtapositions, climaxes, images, language — seems intended to illuminate the force of a key observation of Thomas's:

I seek in every circumstance a bloom of absurdity and the bloom is delivered on the dot. (Few 135)

In conclusion it seems important to return to a perception with which this chapter opened. Humour is not necessarily high-spirited, good-natured, innocuous: humour can perform an aggressive function, be socially accepted hostility, be a sign of unease.

In a notebook jotting Thomas avers:

Humour is a nervous condition. Listen to laughter. It has a strange, sinister sound: the yelping of an uneasy pack. (Parnter 2 Notebook 16, 20.8.68, initialled GT)

Unusually, at one point, Thomas, all masks dropped, thunders out an utterly bleak perception which seems to be true base line for him:

The onset of what most of us call wisdom is little more than a rusting over of parts of the brain made wet by tears of angry protest shed soon and violently. [...] After thirty, we are cooling fools. Too much blood has gone out with the compassion and we hear rumours that anaemia kills. Beliefs that had attained a tentative firmness liquefy and are lost. [...] Nothing matters: nothing changes. Crime and idiocy remain constant in every generation. (Few 172-3)

Sometimes he has choric figures utter important thoughts. The despised assistant Headmaster, Mr Denning, for example articulates observations that Thomas seemed not to have been able to express publicly in his own voice:

Of course you were small when your mother died, so you'd never have a chance to know what your feelings about her really were. (9)

Yet one of his earliest notebook jottings had shown a private grasp of his own disease:

I was born in July of a dying and unhappy woman. The heat and rage of that occasion became the abiding core of my own self. (Parnter from exercise book labelled Cardigan County School. Initialled GT)

That "abiding core" of self could not be probed directly, however, with the exploratory scalpel of the autobiographer. Similarly, he leaves it to Mr Metcalf to declare:

And there's no forgiveness for a man who goes through life empty and does nothing to fill the gap. (18)

The thrust of this chapter has been to uncover and analyse the void at the heart of Thomas's autobiographical utterance. Thomas jotted a bleak aphorism in his notebook which he recycled in his autobiography (Few 164) in a context that gave it a less desolating effect than in the original observation:

And in the middle of my life, a mountain of all the things that never made any sense  
(Lyntr 5)

Yet the conclusion of this investigation has been that Thomas was no existentialist figure, involved in a heroic adventure of self-creation in a meaningless world. His extreme pessimism and sense of "spinning alienation" (Few 81) grew from his lack of early nurture, an emptiness he lacked the courage and will to explore. Thomas was an inhibited and fearful autobiographer, writing to a commission rather than from a genuine desire to scrutinise his life. To accomplish what was for him the most painful and challenging of writing assignments, he brought into play a range of defensive weapons from an arsenal of humorous techniques that he had spent a lifetime honing. His often virtuoso and hilarious performance was indeed a masterly enactment of a self — the deeply defended public self of Gwyn Thomas.

## 6. Denise Levertov (1923-97)

This study engages with the literary perception of self of those who have been touched, in any one of a number of ways, by the experience of Welshness. The unusual, unexpected and powerful way in which Denise Levertov's experience of Wales was mediated to her is something which needs to be explored and established in advance of any consideration of her autobiography, *Tesserae*. Such a consideration is particularly necessary in someone who was regarded as a notable American-by-adoption: she was described, before her death, as "America's foremost contemporary woman poet" (qtd in the biographical preamble to *Tesserae*), while her revulsion at what successive American governments did in her name led her to another sort of fame, as she stood in the front line of high-profile campaigns against US involvement in Vietnam and South America. Ultimately, Denise Levertov saw herself as a world citizen, passionately committed to a visionary belief in the human family, yet this broader commitment grew out of a deeply unusual childhood. She has written in an autobiographical introduction: "I've written only about my childhood [...because] all that has taken place in my life since — all that is, that has any bearing on my life as a poet — was in some way foreshadowed then" (**Bloodaxe** 78). Feeling virtually an only child — her one surviving sibling, Olga, was nine years older than she was — Levertov was educated entirely at home until she was twelve by what she describes as "her 100% Welsh mother".<sup>58</sup> The nature of that upbringing moulded her. From much of her poetry and from *Tesserae* we see that her personal myth — the story that she tells herself about herself — is in part bound up with what she variously describes as "some interesting genes" (**Bloodaxe** 78) and a sense of colourful and courageous forebears, some of whom she celebrated in her poem "Illustrious Ancestors" (**Jacob's** 87). The fact that she was half Welsh was a vivid strand in the weave of her being, just as the ancestry of her Russian Jewish father was another, her upbringing in Essex a third and her American experience from the time she emigrated as a GI bride yet another. Yet until one has understood the nature of Beatrice Spooner-Levertov's own formative experience, and through that, the character of her daughter Denise's home

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58 In Linda Welshimer Wagner, ed., *Denise Levertov: In Her Own Province* (New York: New Directions, 1979). Levertov entitles a biographical essay on her mother "An American Poet with a Russian Name Tells about the Life of her 100% Welsh Mother". In a later collection, Denise Levertov, *Light Up the Cave* (New York: New Directions, 1981), she changes the title to "Beatrice Levertov".

and educational moulding, the thread of Welsh identity in the weave may not be discerned for the distinctive element it was.<sup>59</sup>

In spite of regular holidays in Wales, it seems likely that Levertov's understanding of what being Welsh involved came to her through the influence of her mother. Post Freudian psychology has evolved beyond Freud's own preoccupation with the Oedipus complex, to a focusing on the immensely important developmental effect of a child's relationship with its mother from earliest infancy onwards. Beatrice Levertoff was a more than usually key presence in her daughter's life, from factors to do with her own life experience. For reasons which are not made explicit, she undertook the education of each of her daughters (separated by nine years) at home. This decision may well have had a significance that is not immediately obvious. In an analogous situation — where, for example, a child seems to refuse to go to school — it is nowadays a commonplace in investigating the family circumstances of such a child to discover traumatic early experience in life endured by a parent who now compulsively retains a seemingly truant child at home for company (**Attach2** 304-6). Exiled from her cultures of origin (like her husband) Beatrice Levertoff decided to educate her children at home probably as a result of her own unconscious needs. Indeed, her own early life could be read as a bitter chronicle of grief and loss, parts of it retold in Levertov's biographical essay on her (**Beatrice** 238-43). Beatrice's mother died in childbirth when she herself was only two-and-a-half. Her father, a mine doctor in Merthyr, remarried not very happily. The stepmother, who neglected Beatrice, subsequently died and Beatrice's father died when she was only twelve. At this point she was transplanted from industrial Merthyr to Holywell, a country town in north Wales, to a maternal aunt's family where "she always felt like 'a poor relation'" (**Beatrice** 241). Escaping to Constantinople as a teacher, she married Paul Levertoff whose own Russian Jewish family connections had been severed on his conversion to Christianity. Harsh bereavement and loss continued. Their first baby, "a gift to be cherished as my orphaned mother/ had not been cherished" died suddenly ("During a Son's Dangerous Illness" **Breathing** 36). The family was put under house arrest in Germany during the First World War; they became Displaced Persons in Denmark once the war was over. When the family settled in Ilford, Essex — as an

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59 In an interview with M.Wynn Thomas (**Intlev1**) she discusses at length the issue of her "national identity" and other affiliations..

Anglican priest Paul Levertoff had been appointed to a church without a congregation, as it had been thought his interest would be in working with Jews in a highly Jewish area — they seemed like “exotic birds in the plain English coppice” (**Bloodaxe** 75). Without community links of the sort school inevitably brings, nor any extended family locally, Denise Levertov as an adult reflects on “how strong, in my case, (where in others place and community often play a dominant part) were inherited tendencies and the influence of the cultural milieu — unsupported by a community — of my own family” (**Bloodaxe** 75). At the living heart of that rather isolated family stood Beatrice Levertoff.

In evaluating the nature of Denise’s relationship with her mother, one must give high credence to Denise Levertov’s testimony, again and again, in autobiographical essays and poems, particularly those written at the time of her mother’s death and collected in *Life in the Forest*, that it was a very close and loving bond. One also has to consider incontestable family events. Children who suffer many harsh bereavements young — as did Beatrice Levertoff — often do not learn the necessary skills of gradual separation from parents in adolescence that those more normally parented learn, and can have difficulty separating from their own children when they become parents in their turn. Neither of Beatrice Levertoff’s children went to school and each separated from her family of origin in very clear-cut and dramatic ways: Olga ran off with a much older man and severed all connection with her family for a period and Denise married an American and moved to the USA. In such family situations, where separation has not been achieved at the appropriate age, the symbiotic relationship between mother and child can continue for much longer than is normally the case: the mother’s experience *is* in a sense the child’s and vice versa. In such families, then, there can, in general, be problems with boundaries, and we shall need to return to this in considering sections of *Tesserae*. Levertov’s elder sister, Olga, certainly regarded her sister as an extension of herself. In “My Prelude” (244), Denise tells the whole sad story of how she became involved with ballet school. Olga, nine years older than Denise, had wanted — too late — to be a ballerina. She manipulated Denise into ballet for “to give herself a little vicarious satisfaction” (**Prelude** 244). She greatly deceived both her parents and Denise, declaring that the owner of the ballet school had seen such promise in Denise that she was offering her a whole scholarship and the deception was not uncovered until Denise was thoroughly settled into the life of the

ballet school. Here there would seem to be real confusion of boundaries. The learning of respect for other people's space is something absorbed by imperceptible degrees in the family of most parents who have had normally healthy growing up experiences. Denise's autobiography charts the evolution of perception in what seems to have been, in some respects, an unusually undemarcating family.

As we have seen, Beatrice Levertov's childhood and early married life involved a great deal of being uprooted and having to move on. It is not surprising, therefore, that she seems to have taken great pleasure in rehearsing her locating myth to her children, through regular vivid tales of her life in Abercanaid and Holywell, memories which Levertov described as a "fascinating oral storybook" (**Beatrice** 239). She tells of her mother accompanying her own father on an evening outing:

Sometimes, at night, after supper she would go with her father to visit a miner friend of his who had built himself a telescope. All along the street the men would be singing, sitting on their heels in the dusk after a long day down the pit. The music and the stars must have been mysteriously connected for the little girl, out and about when the other children of the village had been put to bed; as they were connected for me at the same age, listening to her tell about it. (**Beatrice** 239)

In an interview with M.Wynn Thomas many years later, she comments, "So [my mother] gave me some sense of the Welsh background, and that's part of my psyche in some way" (**Intlev1** 13). So important were these tales to Denise Levertov that she asked her mother, in her old age, to give them more permanent form in writing (**Beatrice** 240). Sometimes, these tales evoked the physical reality of particular places so intensely for Denise Levertov that she recreates in a poem an almost tangible picture as in describing the play of light, the smell, the shifting colour in "The Vron Woods (North Wales)":

I was wholly there  
aware of each step  
in the hum of quietness (**Candles** 75)

When Denise Levertov, now living on a different continent, hears the sound of the wind in Scotch firs, what vividly presents itself to her mind is the sea scene her mother very regularly imagined when she heard that sound on a North Wales mountainside: "my now, her then/ intermingled as visions and sound/ mingle, and what is fleeting and what remains/ outside of time" ("The Sea Inland" **Sands** 61). So tenderly has her mother depicted the loving kindness of the Abercanaid woman who would seek out the neglected child and gently, "with the softest/ of soft old flannel/



soaped and rinsed and dried/ her grubby face”, that Denise Levertov herself feels that she has lived that experience and “shall carry towards my death/ [the] memory” of those kind hands” (“Inheritance” **Door/Evening** 91). In “Link” Levertov conjures up a picture of her mother before her death, bequeathing childhood memories — passing on “like earrings or brooches/ her lapidary trove/ into my vision” — as though these were the supreme inheritance (**Door/Evening** 158). At times, it is as though Levertov has taken in with her mother’s milk a sense of the beauty that comes from an awareness of transience and fragility. “Nightingale Road” (**Life** 8-9) evokes a picture her mother often described of an Abercanaid family of beautiful children, all of whom were dying of tuberculosis, yet who sang and played the harp so wondrously that the night air was alive with their music until weeks before they died in quick succession. “An Arrival (North Wales 1897)” (**Candles** 43) reveals a poignant empathy with her mother’s newly orphaned state. On her first arrival in Holywell, “Nostrils flaring/ she sniffed odors of hay and stone/ absence of Glamorgan coaldust/ and pasted her observations quickly/ into the huge album of her mind”. As she took in the new landscape, she came to terms with her new life “alone”, “weeping only in rage or when/ the choirs in their great and dark and/ golden glory broke forth and the hills/ skipped like lambs” (43). In one remarkable poem, “The Instant” (**Selected** 19), Levertov as a child is direct witness to the depth of meaning the Welsh landscape holds for her mother: as an adult, that moment has come to represent for her the fleeting, “given” nature of inspiration. The poem begins with a sensual evocation of the mood of an early morning holiday sortie, giving its tactile and visual feel, building to an epiphanic climax when a momentary parting of the mist reveals both the distant, high peak of Snowdon, and, through her reaction, its deeply-charged significance for mother:

‘Look!’ she grips me, ‘It is  
                   Eryri!<sup>60</sup>  
                   It’s Snowdon, fifty  
                   miles away’ - the voice  
 a wave rising to Eryri,  
 falling.  
                   Snowdon, home  
                   of eagles, resting place of  
                   Merlin, core of Wales.

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60 In fact “Eryri” meaning “home of eagles”. is the whole area of Snowdonia. “Yr Wyddfa” signifies Snowdon itself.

Light  
graces the mountainhead  
for a lifetime's look, before the mist  
draws in again.

Levertov later comments that she was deeply impressed that it was “the charged, legendary name, Eryri, not the common Snowdon that did spring atavistically to her [mother's] lips” giving Levertov a “moment's glimpse not simply of a distant high mountain but of the world of Welsh legend” (Sense 69-70). One can discern, particularly in this last poem, Levertov's unconscious “constructing” of an image of Wales that is compounded in part of her mother's intimate, insider knowledge and, from her own non native status, in part of a tendency to romance about her inheritance: “Snowdon, home/ of eagles, resting place of/ Merlin, core of Wales”.

Indeed, Denise Levertov saw the very process of being taught by her mother to look properly, to observe until everything cohered, as something borne of her mother's Welshness. In the interview with Wynn Thomas, Levertov pointed out that her mother:

did have a tremendous influence on my life. [...] She was the kind of person who pointed out beautiful things that she saw. [...] She started me off really looking at things. And I think that her feeling for beauty in nature had something very *Welsh* about it, very Celtic one might say on a broader scale. (Intlev1 13)

Levertov commemorates her mother as the one:

who taught me to look;  
to name the flowers when I was still close to the ground,  
my face level with theirs;  
or to watch the sublime metamorphoses  
unfold and unfold  
over the walled back garden of our street. (“The 90<sup>th</sup> Year” Life 24)

An understanding of the depth of her mother's commitment to the landscape, language and culture of Wales is one of the elements that highlight for Denise Levertov, after twenty years' residence in the USA, her relative lack:

Without a terrain in which, to which, I belong  
language itself is my one home, my Jerusalem  
("From a Notebook, October 68 - May 69" **Relearning** 97)

Further, it is in part a sense of what the Welsh historical experience of religion has been — mediated through her mother — that throws into relief for Levertov her own less committed position. She is deeply aware of how much her mother had been

influenced by the Welsh Religious revival of 1904-5, the profound conversion experience lasting her whole life.

A singer [...] she loved Handel's *Messiah* aria 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' and despised any performance of it which, though technically excellent, failed to give the emphasis of conviction to that word 'know'. (**Work 247**)

Levertov comments, "Such passionate knowledge, recurrent, intermittent, or in some cases, even sustained, is what I know I don't have" (**Work 247**). On the other hand, she sees in Welsh history "too many centuries of somber nonconformism interven[ing] between the Wales of my mother's generation and that [legendary] heritage, cutting the people off from their ancient heroes far more sharply than the Irish country people seem ever to have been from theirs" (**Sense 69**).

In a poem written in her mother's advanced old age, "The 90<sup>th</sup> Year", she is saddened that her mother's rigorous brand of Welsh nonconformity had not allowed her "to know the flesh as good in itself/ as the flesh of a fruit is good" (**Life 24**) while her own celebratory love poems reveal her own very different position.

Yet the myth of her more distant origins is something that clearly provides Denise Levertov with a sense of nurture and particular rootedness in the world. By the last decade of her life she finds that she has finally reached a point of acceptance of Christian belief and in *Tesserae*, as we shall see, she becomes aware of how gradual that process of conviction has been. As early as "Illustrious Ancestors" (**Jacob's 87**), she celebrates a sense of uncanny appropriateness that at the same period in history, yet separated by thousands of miles, two of her forebears were bearing witness to similar perceptions of the grounding of their being in religious awareness. Schneour Zulman founded Habad Hasidism and Angel Jones of Mold, the tailor, her great great grandfather, had apprentices come to learn Biblical interpretation from him while cutting and stitching.<sup>61</sup> She intends the poem to carry the sense that she had and that was

shared by my late sister, I believe, of having a definite and peculiar destiny which seemed signaled by our having had among our ancestors two men who, living at the same period (late 1700s, early 1800s) but in very different cultures, had preoccupations which gave them a basic kinship (had they known of one another and been able to cross the barriers of language and religious prejudice) a kinship that Olga and I felt must be recognised in heaven, or on earth would somehow be redeemed in us. [...] The presence in the imagination of such figures and their relation to oneself is

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61 Levertov indicates in **Beatrice 238** that Angel Jones of Mold was portrayed by Daniel Owen in his novel *Rhys Lewis*.

a kind of personal mythology and can function as a source of confidence and as an inspiration for the artist. (Sense 70)

This is a telling instance of Levertov's fascination with secret connections and coincidences of the sort we will be exploring further in *Tesserae*. In fact, very distinctive to the sense of self that will emerge there is an awareness of the importance in her life of hidden patterning and mysterious coherences. As is revealed here, the lived life of her forebears, "thinking some line still taut between me and them", had a discernible effect on the self she develops in a very different here and now ("Illustrious Ancestors" **Jacob's**). Many threads of connection with Welsh culture, history and landscape ran in the weave of Levertov's adult self. It is indisputable that there was an overlap between Levertov's own personal myth and the pool of collective myth on which Welsh people commonly draw.

After a necessarily long contextualising preamble, we come to *Tesserae: memories and suppositions*, Denise Levertov's fragmentary autobiography, which, she herself owns, "has no pretensions to forming an entire mosaic" (Author's note). It is a mosaic in two senses: each separate section depicts an event, character or scene, which, when put together with other scenes, gives a panoramic sweep of much of what had led up to where Levertov stood at the time of writing; and each one of its twenty-seven contrasting fragments contributes something towards a partial portrait of Levertov. A most important insight to bear in mind in reading *Tesserae* is Levertov's deep conviction, repeated on several occasions, that one of the important defining characteristics of human beings is that "man is the animal that perceives analogies" (Sense 84). My first reading of *Tesserae* will be to see it as a verbal equivalent of a sequence of Byzantine mosaics. "Thus Celt [Beatrice Spooner-Jones] and Jew [Paul Levertoff] met in Byzantium" (Tess 11) writes Levertov early in the work. Although much Byzantine art was destroyed by the Iconoclasts, the still largely-preserved Monreale cathedral in Sicily gives a full sense of achieved Byzantine mosaics.<sup>62</sup> In that cathedral, every wall is covered with mosaic scenes and, in its original design, had sequences of "precursor" scenes leading up to the life of Christ — Old Testament scenes, a series of depictions of the life of the Virgin Mary — before coming to the infancy of Christ, Christological scenes, the Miracles and Christian mysteries. Filling

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62 An account of a fully achieved Byzantine mosaic which seems to illuminate Levertov's intentions in *Tesserae* is given in the entry on "Monreale Cathedral" in the *Dictionary of Art* Vol 21, J. Turner ed., Macmillan Publishers 1996, 897-901.

the whole bowl of the apse is an image of Christ enthroned in majesty. Narrower surfaces — piers, spandrels — bear single saints, prophets, angels. The nave has two tiers of scenes, the transept a triple tier. Evolution in Byzantine techniques had introduced gold tesserae which were used to particularly marvellous effect on curved and uneven surfaces where the play of light could give a sense of vibrant movement.

As we shall see, one of the strands of her life Levertov is exploring — delicately, unobtrusively — is how she came to recognise God's power in her life. A vivid telling of the seemingly predestined conversion of her Jewish father is clearly of "precursor" relevance (*Tess* 4-11). Other vignettes reveal her youthful noticing of religious power in other lives — "The Voice" (101-2), "The Two Ancients" (40) — culminating in Levertov's own creation of a Cathedral of Pearls in the final section, her Christ in Majesty equivalent (147-8). The "Gypsies" (24-32) and the "Oracles" (95-9) sections are analogues of the prophet mosaics, tracing both the exciting and bitter experiences which have convinced Levertov of the power of Destiny and the ability of Seers to prophecy it. A mystery analogue is her coming to understand in a dream, thirty years after hearing the unearthly beauty of an enclosed nun's singing and wondering that such a treasure should be kept hidden, that praise is of deep importance to God (102). Much of her mosaic is of richly inhabited scenes — the Tonga section (114-35), "Janus" (52-6), "What One Remembers" (138-46) — but there are pier and spandrel portraits of such individuals as the gardener (47-51) and the two Ancients (39-42). The delightful animal portraits of Jinny (72-3) and Mildred (136-7), her dream pig/dog, represent the animals which frequently adorn mosaic friezes. Sometimes Levertov stands outside herself and is objectively aware of groupings, looking at herself as part of a scene: she comments on the strange little family group that visited the artist (75); on herself at twelve in knee socks, reefer jacket and pigtails, selling "The Daily Worker" (67). *Tesserae* is vividly visual, ranging from the total blackness of the London city scene in wartime (86) to scenes where she makes full use of gold tesserae: the mysterious and transforming effect lamplight has on darkness at twilight (36-7), a glorious sunset (35), the epiphany of the magnolia (54), the Cathedral of Pearls (147-8), the vivid description of the Balkan gypsies with their gorgeous embroidered clothes and the great strings of silver and gold coins worn as necklaces (26). Levertov, too, creates the spatial sense of tiered mosaics: her mother in a high-storey flat in Hungary, observing a poor child receiving

the wondrous gift of a pillow at ground level (14), the flying pedlar of the opening fragment, her alarming experience with an ostensible lover as she is travelling on the down escalator of the underground (93). The tracing of such analogies runs the risk of making what is a delightful but relatively unobtrusive informing idea seem laboured, which in the text it certainly is not.

At times, Levertov implies a great wall mosaic peopled with many figures involved in a range of interaction, in which she plays a small part. Thus while there are scenes of great significance in her life, we are constantly aware of tracks leading off into other people's stories: Denise's mother's special relationship with gypsies starts long before Denise's birth and the prophecy of the misery ahead for Olga is something Denise witnesses at a distance (24-31). Her sense of self is most importantly relational. Although, undoubtedly, *Tesserae* is a spiritual autobiography, one is struck by its difference from many early examples of the genre. John Bunyan, for example, in that early classic, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, places the drama within the individual soul both at the centre of his religious experience and of his narrative as do the Welsh "Seiat" testimonies that would have been part of the recent tradition of Beatrice Levertov's Welsh nonconformist growing up. Levertov's, however, is a self-decentering autobiography.

The second analogy signalled by the title *Tesserae* and the experience of the text signals is that of a quite different sort of mosaic, one that has been eroded by the passage of time and where the detection of pattern is left, perforce, at times, to the construing mind of the beholder. In his interesting book, *Romanticism and the Form of Ruin*, Thomas McFarland sees in the Romantics' fascination with fragments a deep understanding of a fragment's power to evoke imaginative worlds beyond itself. He sees the symbol, in particular, as "always a fragment incomplete in itself". He continues:

In every symbol the mind proceeds from the contemplation of a fragment of reality to the apprehension but not the comprehension (to use a distinction favoured by Coleridge and Kant before him) of a larger entity, which in direct proportion to the grandeur of its putative wholeness eludes all conceiving. (27)

In an autobiography that seeks to affirm its author's belief in barely understood connections, synchronicities, spiritual dimensions beyond rational understanding, fragments stimulate the very faculties necessary for apprehension. Each of the twenty-seven chapters of *Tesserae* is a constellation of tesserae, often with symbolic

resonance, and part of a larger picture that readers must discern for themselves. This particular model of a mosaic allows for the gaps, the incompleteness, the sense of as-yet imperfectly understood purpose that is an essential part of the effect of *Tesserae*. Writing from the Christian vantage point of her final decade, and trusting, from her clear sense of destiny that there is a designing creator, Levertov nevertheless has affirmed elsewhere: “Why should I for one moment suppose that I or any other human mind can comprehend paradoxes too vast to fit our mental capacities and, thus, never perceived in their entirety?” (**Poet's** 242). As in her poetry, so in her autobiography, Levertov celebrates mysteries. “Acknowledgement and celebration of mystery probably constitutes the most consistent theme of my poetry from its very beginning” (**Poet's** 246).

As, near the end of her life, Levertov pieces a mosaic together fragment by fragment, discerning shape, texture and form in what had possibly before seemed inchoate experience, there is a sense of her finding organic form in her own life. In an early critical essay, Levertov has shown herself to be a firm believer in organic form in all things, which a poet can discover and reveal. Using Hopkins’s term “inscape” — intrinsic form both in objects and objects in relation to each other — and in “instress” — the actual act of perceiving inscape — she makes clear that in her poetry she is frequently seeking out the inscape of a sequence or a constellation of experiences (**Organic** 67). In this verbal mosaic, then, she may be said to be apperceiving the inscape of her life at a particular time, well aware, in Pound’s image of “periplum” which she finds illuminating in considering works of art, that vantage points change in life, constellations regroup and it would not be profitable to see her life in a static way, “not as land looks on a map /but as sea bord seen by men sailing” (**News** 57). There is a sense of a self constantly aware of its own dynamic process in *Tesserae*.

In an autobiographical essay, Levertov asks explicitly of herself the standard autobiographical self reflexive question: “Who are you? and how did you become what you are?” (**Bloodaxe** 75). The questions are similar but implicit in *Tesserae*. In an autobiography of twenty-seven sections of varying length covering no more than 148 pages, its writer has needed to be very selective. As Elizabeth Bruss declares in *Autobiographical Acts*: “Facts are never ‘bare’: they are the trajectory of the questions with which one began and the needs which initiated the enquiry” (128). As has already been indicated, one of the meanings Denise Levertov is tracing is the

trajectory of her arrival at religious belief. In one of her final essays, she explains that the writing of “Mass for St. Thomas Didymus” (**Candles** 108-15) had been the final means of her arrival at religious faith: “The experience of writing the poem — that long swim through waters of unknown depth — had been also a conversion process, if you will” (**Work** 250). Yet the movement had been gradual, “indeed I see how very gradual and continuous only when I look back at my own poems, my private notebooks, and the many moments throughout the decades when I stepped up to the threshold of faith only to turn away unable to pass over” (**Poet's** 242). A communication of the multifarious ways religious outlook and awareness has been fostered in her is most delicately achieved.

Levertov has described elsewhere the need for “rifts” in poetry, “great gaps between perception and perception which must be leapt across if they are to be crossed at all” (**Organic** 73). In *Tesserae*, too, the construing mind of the reader is encouraged to make imaginative leaps to detect pattern. The fact that Levertov has eschewed the dishonesty of narrative links makes the relationship of individual sections to one another much more fluid: at times one feels one is looking at a Cubist painting where several perspectives are revealed simultaneously. She offers a delightful vignette of an observer, her mother, being granted complete understanding of an event when of the two participants in the incident, one was mystified and one perhaps prepared to believe in magic. Indeed, Levertov’s mother’s viewing of an instant of a Budapest child’s life in her only night ever spent in Hungary has all the power of a travel haiku. From her bird’s-eye vantage point, Denise’s mother sees an airing pillow left by a maid fall from a high balcony, to land at the feet of a surprised and delighted child, who scampers off with it (**Tess** 12-14). With her privileged sight line, Denise’s mother is the only one who understands what has happened. This anecdote appears in the fourth section. In the first we have a sense of how her father and Chagall were retrospectively shown to be linked by a similar perceiving of a flying pedlar. The second, “Inheritance”, evokes a sense of a Welsh traditional way of life stretching back over a thousand years as she tells of her mother’s visit as a child to an “ancient great uncle”, a fisherman, who, as a drummer boy, had seen Napoleon at his moment of defeat at Waterloo.<sup>63</sup> In the third, there is a tracing of divine intention for her father’s life, from the time he was an eight-year-old boy, understood, again,

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63 Further details about this relation are provided in the poem “Link” (**Door/Evening** 158-9)



retrospectively. The fourth section shows an observer given a particular perspective understanding something that the two immediate participants did not understand. These interconnections could be seen as symbolically re-enacting the strange conjunction (Wales and Russian Jewry) that gave Levertov her unlikely being. She is a living embodiment of the exotic nature of the products of “destiny”. These early sections tentatively map glimmering perceptions of a network of affinities and analogies which help the finite human mind live with mystery, particularly, in this autobiography, the mystery of destiny. The pillow incident encapsulates beautifully the sort of meaning that Levertov wonders at in William Carlos Williams’s poetry. “The mystery and richness of *further significance* which such poems of [Williams’s] possess is akin to what R.H.Blyth delineated for us in his commentaries on Japanese haiku. The allusive nature of the Zen art [is] possible only in a culture alert to the ubiquity of correspondences and familiar with an elaborate symbology” (**Ideas** 45). She quotes Blyth: “It is only when we see a part that we know the whole” (**Ideas** 45). Levertov’s mother’s perspective granted her total understanding — the meaning of the event — and she remembers that child affectionately all her long life. As Levertov goes on to say, again of Williams, that his poetry has “that sense of discovering, in a vivid part, the adumbration of an unnamed but intensely intuited whole” (**Ideas** 46). For Levertov, the one small incident in the material world adumbrates the sort of understanding fleetingly achieved of the spiritual and numinous world.

Levertov’s great poetic power of intuitively perceiving analogies makes the material world something of an emblem book, bodying forth deeper truths for her. As she delineates in a necessarily fragmentary way what she now perceives were childhood religious insights, her starting point chronologically in terms of her own religious awareness is the powerful family myth of her Jewish father’s seemingly predestined conversion to Christianity, explored in “A Minor Role” (**Tess** 4-11). She evokes all the wonder she must have felt as a child hearing the story told: her good father as a daring Russian child playing an end-of-winter forbidden game — ice-floe-hopping in the thawing Dnieper river. Trudging home, he found on the ground a scrap of Hebrew text telling of a young boy in the temple expounding the scriptures to wise old rabbis. His father, a great respecter of the printed word, was inexplicably angry when shown this paper, tore it up and burned it. “Secretly, he wished he had not

given up the mysterious fragment” (Tess 5). Many years later as a student in Germany, realising what he had found as a child was a page from the Christian Gospels, her father decided to see what this mysterious forbidden text contained. In this way, in this fragmentary autobiography, Levertov reveals the active power a fragmentary text contained to stimulate the mind to discovery and revelation. As he read these gospels, he experienced “a profound and shaking new conviction” (7) that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah. The rest of his life was lived, at great cost, involving severance from his Jewish family, in the light of that unshakeable conviction. Such was the basic myth in Denise Levertov’s awareness of her father, a foundation part of the answer to her question, “Who are you and how did you become what you are?” She depicts individual selves as receptors of the numinous to very different degrees, her own lifelong journey towards faith, which had its seeds in perceptions of her childhood, seeming a much paler thing than the glowing ardour of her own father’s youthful act of faith.

Continuing to track Levertov’s movement towards religious faith, it is not surprising to find Levertov, very characteristically a celebratory poet, being fascinated in her growing up by those who seem to her to be most essentially served in the act of praise. She observes in “Two Ancients”(39-42) a frail old man in her father’s congregation fervently singing “Living Waters” who evoked for her “a green pasture with a sparkling fountain at its centre” (41). When in her youth she thrills to the most beautiful singing of a nun in an enclosed order, she feels “awe to think this treasure was so well hidden”: thirty years later in a dream, she comes to understand the possible deep gladness in God from acts of human praise (102). In a talk entitled “Dying and Living”, Levertov sees the central function of a poet to praise. “When Rilke — within a poem — is asked, what do you do? he answers, not for himself alone but also for the archetypal Poet ‘I praise’. But this praising does not mean a disregard of negatives [...] Praise rather is rooted in recognition of fragility, transience, mortality” (Dying 98).<sup>64</sup>

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64 Although Levertov was deeply read in some areas of Welsh poetry written in English — for example, such was her admiration for R. S. Thomas’s work that, as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she wrote, in December, 1995, a letter in support of his nomination for the Nobel Prize — it is not clear to what degree she was acquainted with the thousand-year-long tradition of praise poetry in Welsh literature, admirably traced by A. M. Allchin in *Praise Above All*. Knowingly or not, she is part of that tradition where, in poetry, “the practice of praise can be said ‘to recreate an unblemished world’” (Allchin 4). I am grateful to Rosalind Harries for providing me with a copy of Levertov’s letter to the Nobel Committee.

Moreover, *Tesserae* records an ecstatic occasion when she herself, as a child of seven, was swept up into a spontaneous act of praise. Fanatically coached in ballet techniques by her sister for her own self-interested reasons, towards the end of a seaside holiday Denise Levertov has the means to articulate a joy she is feeling. Interestingly, for someone who, as a young adult, believed she would be an artist and later became a poet, it is movement and gesture that expressed most deeply for young Denise Levertov both her own sense of self and the need for that self to express wonder as she dances on the beach before the evanescent beauty of the setting sun. Joy and wonder and its expression were inseparable:

The sun had vanished, but the sky deepened its pink and gold, which each turning wave reflected before absorbing them into its green; and each wave was briefly reflected in the wet sand. A small wind lifted my hair — and without any thought for Olga, or exams, or the correct way to hold my fingers [...] I began to dance for myself, for the afterglow and the *hush: hush:* of the sea receding. [...] At that moment, on that smooth and hard-packed sand, whatever was dubious and self-interested about her fanatical coaching was of no importance: she had enabled me to express the ecstasy I felt. I leapt, I glided, I twirled, I invented steps and used my whole sturdy seven-year-old body to be at one with the luminous and now fading sky, the soft air, the farewelling of the waves. (35)

On another occasion, most unusually for this solitary child as part of a group, she is caught up in a trespassing adventure climbing a boundary wall of a shuttered and boarded-up mansion. “Squabbling” and “out-of-breath chatter” abruptly stops:

For what we saw came out of a fairytale or a poem: a tree of medium height but wide-spreading, concealed till now by those towering walls, and covered in huge white blossoms bigger than tulips, waxy, perfect; a tree such as none of us had ever seen [...]. The silence this ecstatic vision imposed on us all for that long moment makes me believe our response was fully collective. (54-5)

She seems to be observing that before this radiant vision of beauty, the spontaneous response of young minds is an ecstatic and communal awe. It is a short step from awe to praise. Central to the perceived self of *Tesserae* is its awareness of a beneficent creative power, to which the individual self relates most powerfully and significantly in the act of praise.

Further, it is implied that Levertov saw that power as having intention for individual lives. In “Oracles” (95-9), she describes two occasions when total strangers recognised a particular destiny in her. The first time, Levertov found this definition “awesome, portentous and *confirming*” (96) and, in later life, talked with a lover who had a similar awareness of destiny:

In the seventies, my friend Jon and I would talk about the sense of *having a destiny* which both of us had from an early age. It's a kind of extension of the sense of identity, of being an *I*, a *me*. When a sense of destiny is added to that awareness, it says to one not 'You are more important than anyone else' or 'You are the true center of the world' — nothing like that — but: 'You will not have a dull existence, life's events will have significance for you'. (97)

The second oracle spoke when Levertov was about twenty, again the result of a seemingly trivial chance encounter, seeing in her "something big, something impressive, a future for me that was altogether astonishing" (99). In her old age, Denise Levertov is giving meaning to events in the past, identifying a track which leads up to where she stands now. A deep and early sense of there being intention for her life is likely to have fuelled so much in her life course: her extraordinary dedication to her craft of poetry, her extremely courageous public stands for human rights and on environmental issues. In *Tesserae*, she does not pursue connections, does not trace outcomes from beginnings; but, in the very selection of life events she chooses to highlight, the later course is implicit. Part of the answer to "Who am I?" is clearly "a self who was chosen for a particular task in life".

*Tesserae* traces many of the moments of awareness in Levertov's developing sense of self that she is some sort of "artist person", committed to perceiving in the act of expressing: her dance on the beach to the setting sun; her youthful dancing to next-door's piano player, when her whole being is focused on expressing the mood of the music. She traces the course of her obsessional belief between the ages of twelve and twenty-two that she is to be a visual artist. She wryly records her attempts to get great artists to take her on as a pupil, culminating in a climactic moment of truth, almost a conversion experience, in the waiting-room of the great avant-garde artist Kokoschka:

At some imperfectly articulated level I faced the fact that, all along, my pursuit of art — visual art, that is — had been half-hearted, not a true compulsion. My true vocation was, and had always been, virtually from infancy, poetry. (81)

*Tesserae* identifies most characteristically growth points of the emerging self. In this very writerly book, Levertov frequently offers the reader what seems to be a narrative anecdote: it is often left to the reader both to articulate what growth points are being implied and to connect such delicate germination with the later burgeoning of the poet, visionary and campaigner. In the conclusion to her *Bloodaxe* autobiographical introduction, Levertov, by then a seasoned anti-war and anti-nuclear campaigner, writes, "One is in despair over [...] the seemingly invincible power of rapacity" (*Bloodaxe* 79). Delicately, in "At Tawstock" (20-3), she recreates a sense of her first

awareness of such tendencies in living things. She evokes a holiday in a stately home when she was about four. While walking, the family hears “a dreadful scream, a searing, terrifying sound” which her mother accounted for as “the cry of a rabbit caught by a weasel or stoat”(20) and the small child first dimly perceives Nature red in tooth and claw. Later sent on an errand by her mother, little Denise mistakes the room and instead of the expected, friendly bedroom, wanders into a space full of stuffed predatory birds. “OWLS! The room was full of owls and other big nameless birds, all motionless, all staring and glaring at me, baleful, indignant” (23). When she retreats “lickety split” in fear, and emerges into “the never, ever before so bright and glorious sunlight” (23) she arrives at an important further understanding, linked to the new awareness of the predatory nature of living things. She tells no-one of her experience. She thus discovers the power of a frightening experience that is contained and not shared, and how it throws its opposite into relief: fear makes emerging into sunlight doubly glorious.<sup>65</sup>

In “By the Seaside”, she dances “to express the ecstasy I felt”, possibly in her first awareness that wonder expressed is transformed into praise, an undertaking she will later see as the deepest activity of the human soul. In “A Dance” (43-46) she and her friend Margaret regularly operate a player piano, taking turns to dance to its music and in this way experience “the sweeping passage of grand emotions”(45-6): she needs to experience and interpret the powerful feelings of others as a prelude to becoming an artist herself. In “Oracles”, as we have seen, she finds it “awesome, portentous and *confirming*” when her own sense of what she is, and what she will be, is perceived in an instant by others who do not know her at all, and it seems likely that this sort of endorsement made it possible for her to go on to embrace her destiny as wholeheartedly as she did. Although Levertov’s poetry bears witness to how entirely she has been caught up in the transformation of love, it is her first awareness of its chemistry through acting as a go-between for Olga that she chooses to record (57). She powerfully evokes the moment when her callow “presumptuous twelve-year old self”, caught up in notions of Communism and selling ‘The Daily Worker’ door to door, has an experience which “took the wind out of [her] ignorant little sails” (69) as she confronts the misery of an actual long-term unemployed man. It is a moment

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65 Wordsworth, too, perceived the important role of fear in his youthful creative experience. He affirms in *The Prelude* (1805): “Fair seed time had my soul and I grew up/ Fostered alike by beauty and by fear (301-2).



It is, then, an autobiography which traces what Levertov believes to have been her essential shaping, by discerning the web of influences that stretch out through time and space; human interaction in which she has been involved and the influence of what she has read and absorbed from other artists; places and situations that have moulded her; and something of the effect of the historic time in which she lived. Her formed adult sensibility celebrates the web of all that is connected in and through her. Mourning the memory of how her father had stirred a “provocative and most unpleasant devil” (38) in her, when she had ruined a cliff walk by always deliberately running too near the edge, she muses that his final recollection of that time might have been quite different from hers:

He may, recalling Clacton, have collaged its images with memories of the Baltic or the Bosphorus. What vast and solitary labyrinths, crowded with oceans and with shells and shards, room corners and fleeting smiles, with cities and intentions each of us encloses. (38)

The thought that every single human being’s inner gestalt consists of a unique collage of images is an awesome one. Levertov’s human identity depends on her being at the centre of an enduring web of human connectedness.

Celebrating or acknowledging connectedness is deeply important to Levertov. The only chapter to have a dedication — “The Last of Childhood — For Jean in This Life or the Next” (59-64) — records Levertov’s sense of “abiding grief” for having severed a deeply important childhood attachment with a “kindred spirit”, through what she sees as her “intransigent pride and hardheartedness” (60). Further, she remembers a friend, Pauline, known only briefly, who remains a “vivid reality” (146) to her. Denise was only allowed to know years later of the tragedy which befell this child’s family soon after their parting, when the child’s elder brother had committed murder and had been executed. All these years later Denise shows concern and love for her, as she ponders “Did she survive the war? Did her charm and sweet nature survive the tragedy that drove her family to some place unknown?” (146) Connections, once made, bring enduring commitment. These instances suggest also Levertov’s awareness that those connections which have, in a sense, moulded us, that link us to others, may stretch away beyond our sight, indicating the way unknown and unknowable to ourselves. We are links in an infinite chain of existence, in relation to which we have meaning. Levertov clearly feels that recognition of attachment is a healthy and deep necessity in everyone and at the end of the section exploring the

contrary and aloof ways of Old Day the Gardener (47-51) — a worker shared with many other families in their street — she records with evident satisfaction that, after she has married and left for America, “Old Day asks after me. My mother is amazed” (50).

Connections can be to do with people, objects or scenes which may have encouraged particular qualities of character or sensitivities. Levertov’s affection for writers, musicians and artists who have permanently touched her through their vision is considerable. She devotes a whole chapter to Cézanne, describing the effect of her “pilgrimage” to his studio.

My dream-like half-hour, breathing the very air the grand, grim, passionate old hero humbly and doggedly breathed, remains in me as one of my intangible, inviolable treasures. (106)

“Lost Books” (110-13) gives a sense of how deeply books may take root in young minds, encouraging visions of the future that the adult may later act on. We are part one of another through communicated visions, Levertov feels.

In appalled contrast to her tracing the web of meaningful connections stands the Tonga chapter—“Some Hours in the Late Seventies” (114-35) — quite the longest section in the book. Here Levertov is trying to interpret the world view of mutually antagonistic or indifferent people and feels “a sort of shudder, a sharp sensation — of dismay, is it? Or just a kind of amazement at how fragmented is the human species and how odd it is to hold in mind, in some kind of unity of perception, individuals so mutually unaware” (124).

We are connected in indefinable ways by forces, systems, synchronicities we only partly understand, she seems to be saying. Levertov delights in discovering on viewing a Chagall painting many years after her father’s death, that they had shared the same idiosyncratic view of a neighbourhood pedlar. As she tracks her parents’ movement towards their meeting in Constantinople, she invests their trajectory with the inevitability of the movement of a planet or a comet (4-15). Gypsies foretelling the misery that lies ahead for Olga and her family is a tapping-in to a premonitory awareness not understood by the generality of people (26-31). Human selfhood must learn to trust far more than rational processes, she declares unequivocally.

In the metaphoric structure of *Tesserae* which acknowledges gaps, Levertov gives a sense of how incomplete is her understanding of what in the past has most



significantly given being to her present self. Edward Thomas in his wonderful poem “Old Man” explores a cognate feeling as he tries to recover the significance and associations of the smell of a particular herb for him:

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray  
And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;  
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait  
For what I should, yet never can, remember. (“Old Man” **Edward** 104-5)

Total recall is not only a personal impossibility for Levertov, a lack exacerbated by weak memory, but also an existential impossibility for humankind. The answer to the question “Who am I and how did I become what I am?” must be, for everyone engaged in the autobiographical act, partial, incomplete. Faith, therefore, in connection that stretches beyond memory or awareness is owing to a truth about the nature of our existence. Yet, in maintaining this web of connection, so integral a part of her sense of self, memory, the *sine qua non* of identity, is of importance, and Levertov knows that her memory is “relatively poor and vague” (**Beatrice** 240). As a poet, her most characteristic process is the capturing of evanescent beauty in flight. This quicksilver observing and recording needs the briefest of short-term memory ; it is a process she has described poetically thus:

Again to hold - ‘capture’ they say -  
moments and their processions in palm  
of mind’s hand.  
Have you ever,  
in stream or sea,  
felt the silver of fish  
pass through your hand-hold? not to stop it,  
block it from going onward, but feel it  
move in its wave-road? (“Staying Alive”**To Stay** 39)

Earlier in the same poem (written in her late forties), Levertov is positively smug about “the superb badness/ of [her] memory”, allowing as it does “What pain! What sharp stabs of recall! What revelations!” (**To Stay** 38) as she retrieves in an involuntary way forgotten treasures. In old age, it all seems to feel rather different. The American edition of *Tesserae* was published two years before Levertov’s death at the age of seventy-four. Her two final volumes of poetry show a calm acceptance that she is in the final phase of her life, moving towards death. In many ways *Tesserae* — from the fragmentary and at times cryptic nature of the whole autobiographic enterprise — suggests this is more a taking stock for herself than an achieved offering

for the world. At the time of writing *Tesserae*, so much that was personally significant to Levertov was now dependent on memory. As she mourns the loss of particular objects, she grieves: “Treasure by treasure falls away” (109). Finally one is left with just memory. In the section “Lost Books” (110-13), she mourns her copy of Heylyn’s *Cosmography*, an ancient volume found in a symbolically aspirational spot, a church steeple, and given to her as a child by Mr. Bull the mason who had some sense of her capacities. The book “included not only maps and accounts of islands and continents so far as they were known in Heylyn’s time, but also lands of fable and fiction” (112). One can conjecture that the book in a sense plotted the possibilities of the world for young Denise Levertov and its loss left its treasures — all that it encapsulated imaginatively — at the mercy of a weak and perhaps failing memory. “A Loss” (108) mourns the disappearance of a luggage strap of iconic significance for Levertov, symbolising — from the circumstances in which it was first given to her mother, and from much subsequent journeying by her mother and herself — so much heroic endurance and intrepid venturing forth that she feels “something more than my suitcase is insecure without it” (109). The record of much courageous struggle will live only as long as her memory lasts. “How much of what I feel impelled to write [...] has to do with loss!” (110) she observes.

Indeed, so much of Levertov’s sense of who she is is rooted in family myth and memory, that her sense of insecurity, as loved repositories of that communal memory die, and objects which evoke them are lost, is entirely comprehensible. From Levertov’s account, her mother’s memory was vivid and exact, both a necessary stiffener to Levertov’s own, and someone capable of making the memories glow. In the “Gypsies” section, Levertov seems to transcribe some of her mother’s very vivid and detailed memories, and shows how, perhaps habitually, her mother’s memory deposits can become her own: “my mother retained not only the vivid memory of what she had seen, which she passed on to me so that it became my memory in some measure” (27). As we have seen, towards the end of her mother’s life she asked her to record the beloved tales of her life in Abercanaid and Holywell so that Denise Levertov would have something more enduring than unreliable memory. She concedes, in her loving recollections of her childhood friend, Pauline, that she remembers her “because she was a delightful friend, and, later because of a photo showing us both posed by the Albert Memorial” (144).

Autobiography is, to some degree, an audit of memory, and in *Tesserae* Levertov draws regular, rueful attention to the inexactness of hers: the Two Ancients have identical faces in her recollection; Stan, her companion in selling the 'Daily Worker' had become "a sort of stick figure, supernumerary in a faded episode" (71). She is aware that memory, particularly of youthful experiences, latches on to trivial detail rather than important meaning. She remembers that she was wearing a new off-white three-quarter length coat when she was taken to meet Paul Robeson, but recalls nothing of what was said (138). Where Nathalie Sarraute, in *Childhood*, one of the most brilliant and moving autobiographies of the century, explores her grave hesitation in embarking on an autobiographical project at all, because — as Sheringham adroitly summarises — "the lived reality of her individual past will have been eroded and contaminated by prefabricated elements culled from literary and cultural stereotypes" (Sheringham 306), Levertov seems to find the words a helpful anchor to what is fleeting and seems to retain, uncritically, an awareness of only the words, not the living experience behind the words. Of the breathtakingly beautiful voice of the nun she writes: "I have remembered it always" and then amends this to "Or have remembered at least what words and images might have described it: the pure silvery cold quality of a coloratura conjoined with something dark, honeyed and sensuous" (101). She remembers Mildred, her dream dog, because she "woke from the dream you starred in full of the words which would make me remember you" (137). She emphasises that one attaches significance to particular memories because of the strength of the accompanying feeling: the oracular statement of her mother's hat maker that Denise — then only seven — would be something special "flooded me with lasting feeling" (97). Memory is all one has, yet one is subject to its caprices: "Moments of childhood lodge in one's memory sometimes for reasons — their beauty, drama or comedy; others equally tenacious are unaccountable: why that instant rather than a million others?" (52)

Levertov seems on altogether surer ground in her trusting of unconscious process as an important dimension of self. Elsewhere she has written:

Our still tentative awareness of the great gulfs of the unconscious, in constant transformation, like the marvelous cloudscapes one sees from a jet plane, must surely lead to awe. [...] Therefore, if our poetry is to seek truth [it...] must allow for all the dazzle, shadow, bafflement, leaps of conjecture, prayers and dream-substance of that quest. (**Admonition 58**)

Her poetry is characterised by a remarkable ease of access to unconscious process. *Tesserae* contains accounts of four dreams: the high spirited depiction of the dream dog, Mildred (136-7); a dream of her father where she longs for reassurance that she will know him again in some future state (115); and her dreams of religious insight into the value of the enclosed nun's singing (102) and the transforming power on everyday life of the Cathedral of Pearls (148). Levertov's appreciation of and trusting to that hinterland of self makes her an unusually aware autobiographer. Further, the fragmentary nature of *Tesserae* which eschews narrative connections, that would seem to fix experiences in a particular cause and effect state of being, allows the reader to group thematically in different ways in different readings, much as memory arbitrarily selects and connects.

Indeed, Levertov shows considerable affinity with Jungian ways of perceiving. It seems evident from the subtitle of *Tesserae* — *memories and suppositions* — that she chose, in the penultimate work of her life, to make explicit some of the supra rational suppositions in which she had faith, evoking means of perceiving which enable humankind to be sensitive receptors, seeking to be attuned to signals to which a clear label cannot be attached, rather than continuing on a course where entire trust in the rational faculty fosters further compulsive quests for domination. In her subtitle, she seems to be echoing the title of Jung's autobiography *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, in which he records the discovery through his own inner journey of many of his key ideas. Jung has, perhaps, provided Levertov with a map for her own inner quest. In "Interweavings: Reflections on the Role of Dream in the Making of a Poem" (**Light**), she reveals that her mastery of Jungian perspectives has been hard won, in no sense a painless and shallow taking-on-board of "notions". She makes clear that Jungian therapy, first for her husband and then for herself, was "a time of great pain and a lot of growth" (35). She goes on:

Looking back I see that the sharing of our dream-life, and of what we were learning about how to *think* about dreams, was what kept us going and held us to one another in those years more than anything else. Whatever conflicts we endured, we nevertheless found ourselves linked in the unconscious. (35-6)

Anthony Stevens in his book *On Jung* emphatically reminds us "The only way in which we can *know* the psyche is by *living* it" (27). This Levertov seems to have done very fully. Perhaps with adroit academic manipulators of theory in mind, Stevens warns: "One must never forget that the devil enters psychology through

reification — the process by which we are beguiled into treating a concept as if it were the real thing.” (28). An attempt to describe the theory that underpins some of Levertov’s exposition of her own process may seem a lame thing in comparison with her vibrant enactment of a particular state. Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious posits fundamental components of the unconscious psyche shared by humankind, which contain continuing residues of the primitive human psyche. This collective unconscious is composed of archetypes, potentially powerful inherited modes of functioning. When these are activated, they may sweep the experiencer into symbolizations so vivid that through their resonance s/he may feel the connections of the experiences represented to those of our forebears, to the “primal experiences” they mediate. Levertov includes such a sense of powerful archetypal experiencing in *Tesserae* in the section already considered, where she describes, after trespassing and climbing a wall with friends, their being struck dumb by the vision of the beautiful magnolia. In his book *Alchemical Studies* Jung considers at length the significance of the tree as archetypal image, tracing the more common symbolic meaning ranging from “growth, life” to “the maternal aspect (protection, shade, shelter, nourishing fruits, source of life, solidity, permanence, firm-rootedness [...])” (272). In “Janus”, Levertov seems to be remembering a vivid and communal awakening of such an archetype in children with the sense of the numinous that often goes with such experiencing. As archetypes — modes of being and experiencing that are potential in us — are awakened, we are linked to the powerful human experiencing of our forebears. A turning away from valuing ways in which humankind has in the past found meaning is to run the risk of being only partly alive; archetypes should not remain dormant. Levertov deeply shares Jung’s trust in non rational human processes.

Jung’s sense of the dangerous severance of modern humanity from its roots is something Levertov explores searchingly in *Tesserae*, as we shall see. In *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* Jung avers:

Our souls as well as our bodies are composed of individual elements which were all already present in the ranks of our ancestors. [...] We are very far from having finished completely with the Middle Ages, classical antiquity, and primitivity as our modern psyches pretend. Nevertheless, we have plunged down a cataract of progress which sweeps us on into the future with ever wilder violence the farther it takes us from our roots. Once the past has been breached, it is usually annihilated, and there is no stopping the forward motion. But it is precisely the loss of connection with the past, our uprootedness, which has given rise to the “discontents” of civilization [...].

We refuse to recognise that everything better is purchased at the price of something worse; [...] of the terrible perils to which the most brilliant discoveries of science expose us. The less we understand of what our fathers and forefathers sought, the less we understand ourselves, and thus we help with all our might to rob the individual of his roots and his guiding instincts, so that he becomes a particle in the mass, ruled only by what Nietzsche called the spirit of gravity. (263)

In the 1980s, in a speech on survival, Levertov declared: “The truth is that as a species we have made some very bad mistakes [...] Our future depends upon our developing a different sense of values” (Address 179-81). Levertov revels in treasuring tangible connections, as we have seen, but delights in a sense of synchronicity, of visions being attuned, as in the linking of her father and Chagall in the first chapter. She believes in as-yet uncharted human capacities. In “Cordova” (16-9), she describes an experience of seeming recall when, as a small child on a message, she had an imagined visual sense of what her retrospective adult knowledge tells her was a Kasbah: her later knowledge that her Jewish forebears were exiled from Moorish Spain in the fifteenth century causes her to attribute her visual perception to “an atavistic shred of kinaesthetic impression”. She has no problem in allowing conscious headroom to such atavistic sensations and seeks to understand them. She trusts in self-as-process, allowing herself to be nudged into awareness by what her dream life tells her of unconscious needs, as when the dream dog Mildred’s forays into “forbidden territory” were such fun. On a more serious level, her life has shown her that groups and individuals are able to prognosticate the future. As we have seen, she trusts in the sense of her own destiny. She believes in the utmost loyalty to people with whom one has shared experiences which revealed deep affinity, and some fifty years later has a sense of abiding grief at her betrayal of her friendship with Jean.

*Tesserae* has to be seen as the culmination of a lived life. Aware of the multifarious ways humankind is set on a disaster course, she is alert to ways of being that either enable or cramp and deform the human spirit. She is despondent at the speed of change in our century. Not surprisingly in an “elective” American in exile from her country of origin, and child of exiles from theirs, she sets high value on connections with traditional patterns of life and communicable skills. She shares with Jung a belief that a healthy sense of self grows out of an awareness of and attachment to what has gone before and the rootedness that brings. In “Inheritance” she feels a sense of vivid connection with a Welsh great-great uncle, a former drummer boy at Waterloo,

returned to pursuing the simple, meaningful life of a fisherman : his “mode of life differed in few respects from that of some ancestors of his (and mine) long before the Norman Conquest” (3). In “Link”, making a poetic interpretation of her mother’s childhood visit to this uncle, Levertov reveals how intimately a sense of history is, for her, bound up in people: “our sense of history/ has only such barely-touchings, uninterpreted/ not-forgettings to suffice/ for its continuance” (**Door/Evening** 158)

The “Inheritance” section stands in sharp contrast to “Some Hours in the late Seventies” (114-135) where Levertov is dismayed by the “lethargic population” of Tonga: “Overfishing has, I’m told, reduced the once-teeming supply and the men no longer go to sea; the canoes are now to be seen only in museums of anthropology. They raise a lot of pigs here, not as a laborious task, eat a lot of fat pork, put on weight early and die of heart disease” (130). Traditional crafts and building modes have disappeared, the beautiful traditional “fales” have given place to “tin-roofed shacks built of cinderblocks” (129). “Traditional island modes are being debased and violated, tricked out in plastic and tinsel for the tourists” (127). The listlessness she saw everywhere she interpreted as “endemic depression” (129). Her depiction of Tonga and the Tongans is a tragically exact illustration of Jung’s despairing account of people adrift when severed from their roots. Levertov was delighted at the effort of two pioneer souls to jump start the young into animating mental curiosity through the fledgling University of Tonga.

Levertov is, of course, aware that every individual sense of self is a constructed one and, as a visionary poet, finds hope in that. She reveals rather ruefully how totally taken over she had been on occasion, as a child, by what she was reading, transposing an author’s life-view to the “real” world. As she followed the lamplighter through Clacton, the “magical transformation” he achieved when he “performed an alchemy on both light and darkness” (37) is very much increased for her because “He was not just a lamplighter, he embodied the mystique of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Leerie* with all the added depth of drama Charles Robinson’s black-and-white drawings gave to the simplest words” (36). Levertov’s reading affected her very sense impressions. Her obsessional pursuit of great artists as teachers, she realised finally was

*not* out of a burning desire to learn but in search of a world: the old imaginary world of *The Light That Failed* and *Trilby*; a world of thrilling conversation and midnight oil and Bohemian *camaraderie*; of the stimulating company of people dedicated to creative vocations (82).

She turns to *Lord Jim*, to her mind the great literary exploration of the ramifications of guilt, when she needs help with coming to terms with her own guilt at having, she feels, failed her mother during the process of her dying (125). It is because she has just finished reading Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet* and, from it, has so clear a sense of the pernicious effect of the colonial constructed landscape of race and caste, that she finds Mrs Groby's outdated life attitudes particularly obnoxious (126). Levertov is aware that Tongans construct the world differently, and that the patronising white does not consider that there might be a disparity, let alone bother to tease out wherein it lies. She would have shared Jung's sense of shock:

When I contemplated for the first time the European spectacle from the Sahara, surrounded by a civilization which has more or less the same relationship to ours as Roman antiquity to modern times, I became aware of how completely, even in America, I was still caught up and imprisoned in the cultural consciousness of the white man. (*Memories* 275)

For her part she declares: "Our minds are narrow, narrow and proud" (127). She is aware that the University of Tonga could transform the lives of the young Tongans, already at some distance from traditional ways of life, through enriching the mental concepts with which they view the world by exposing them to aspirational literature. Australian Ray, early school drop-out, petrol pump attendant, reveals through his use of the phrase "fucka girls" (118) his impoverished and demeaning life view.

Levertov's active campaigning against nuclear arms has made her look clear-eyed at the possibility of the ultimate world destruction. The confident world view of Heylyn's *Cosmography* is poignantly juxtaposed with Levertov's awareness that nuclear holocaust could be imminent:

In Perth a month ago, reading about a Chinese incursion into Vietnam, and about US and Soviet naval vessels loitering off the Vietnam coast, I wondered if IT was about to happen, and [...] whether my death, in the midst of the Great Death nuclear war would mean, was to take place under strange constellations about as far from home as it was possible to be. (123)

Poetry written in the same period as *Tesserae* has shown an appalled horror at the impersonality of hi-tech warfare, distancing, as it does, perpetrators from any awareness of the human cost of their actions, as in "The Certainty":



They have refined the means of destruction,  
abstract science almost visibly shining,  
it is so highly polished. Immaterial weapons  
no one could ever hold in their hands  
streak across darkness, across great distances,  
threading through mazes to arrive  
at targets that are concepts. (**Door/Evening** 175)

Connected to all things, pain, destruction and death of others are also her own. Her sense of wonder, therefore, is considerable in “Inheritance” that there is only one generation between her and the Welsh relation who saw the campaign instigator, the commander of the French army, the Emperor, Napoleon himself, in person take responsibility for his defeat at Waterloo

So I, living in the age of jets and nukes, am separated only by the lifespan of one person, my mother, from looking into the eyes of a relative who had seen the Emperor at the moment of his defeat. (**Tess** 3)

Thought forms that at present venerate impersonal technology could learn again to be accountable in human terms. Unexpectedly, and never more than implicitly, *Tesserae* delicately reveals itself to the careful reader as a political autobiography.

*Tesserae* is infused with Levertov’s view that human selfhood roots and burgeons in what is small-scale and personal. Her appreciative “little envelope of money left discreetly on the bar” on the eve of her departure from Tonga has Philomene “come liltng out of the kitchen and — positively with tears in his eyes — [place] an ornate necklace of shells about my neck”(126). (One remembers ‘Heylyn’s Cosmography’ had been particularly valued by Levertov as a gift from Mr. Bull who had seen qualities in her [111].) Against such examples of human regard, she sets the misanthropy of the “odious Mrs. Groby”, totally imprisoned in her “anachronistic Mem-sahibism” and directing “prepared antipathy” at the hapless Ray (120-3). Australian Ray himself, content with a “vegetative existence”, who, through “unacknowledged loneliness [...] innocent curiosity and sheer, crass ignorance”(119), seems to have got himself infected with syphilis “from what he disgustingly calls the ‘fucka girls’”(118), represents a distressing level of human unawareness capable of its own exploitations. In delineating her pleasure in her acquaintance with the little monkey Jinny, Levertov is showing the sort of regular intimacy that was possible in the containedness of a small, corridorless, train compartment on a daily journey — a possibility now long vanished (72-3).

Levertov undertook public acts of great courage during her campaigning life, acts which set her beyond the social pale. She reveals in her poem "The Day the Audience Walked Out on Me and Why" (**Selected** 100-1) that she insisted in commemorating black deaths elsewhere, in a church memorial service for white students accidentally shot at Kent State University. One of the aspects of the self she is implicitly delineating is how she came to be less conditioned by needs for social acceptance than most. Levertov would see cultural and social moulding as central to most people's sense of self. In any portrayal of her Christian convert father, she emphasises the intense importance of his Jewishness to him for the whole of his life. After his conversion and severance from his family, "he simply continued in the disciplined fervour of his own cultural and familial traditions" (8); for "it was not in order to be absorbed into a Gentile world that he had broken, in sorrow, with his father and mother, but to be, as he believed, more fully a Jew" (11). All his life, on special occasions, he would break out into the Hassidic dancing he had learnt as a boy, most movingly, as is recorded in a poem written by Levertov's sister, Olga, and reproduced in *The Sorrow Dance*, as an acknowledgement of his own impending death (**Sorrow** 95-6). From early adulthood, Beatrice Levertoff never again lived in Wales, and the final twenty years of her life were spent in Mexico, yet "the Welsh hymns and secular songs like Davydd (sic) y Garreg Wen, sung or remembered or heard on records, never fail to bring tears to her eyes" (**Beatrice** 242). As we have seen, the influence of the Welsh Religious Revival 1904-5 formed basic attitudes that endured her whole life long. Denise herself, educated at home by parents who seemed exotic in their neighbourhood, was much less shaped and moulded by any ambient culture beyond her family. She is fascinated by the different social norms implied in the Courtwells' use of its house space in the adjacent "semi": "inside it is a different world"(43). They use their drawing room only for special occasions and there "the blinds are down, only a subaqueous light filters in upon the white-shrouded furniture"(44). Preserving an area immaculate for very occasional use would not be a way of presenting themselves to the world that would occur to the Levertovs. The quarrel with her good friend, Jean, which caused Levertov "abiding grief" (63), seems to have been a ferocious response to what Denise Levertov recognised in a subliminal way was the stronger conditioning to which Jean was being subjected. Retrospectively, Levertov understands that Jean's assertion that she would no longer take her shoes and socks off and paddle because "now we were older it was *not ladylike* to mess

about in the stream” (61), was probably a result of her mother’s preparing her for her first menstrual period. Levertov’s reaction is so violent that she severs all contact with Jean. The strong implication is that, even at eleven, Levertov was refusing to accept the limitations on behaviour that class and gender would wish to impose — and that this was possible because she was outside society’s most rigorous pressurising and conditioning institutions. In the Tonga section, she is appalled at how particular sorts of social conditioning have stifled human possibility. Mrs Groby loathes the eccentrically dressed Ray because he hasn’t taken in the idea, dear to the Grobies, “that the White Man is supposed to uphold a different set of standards” (121). In Mrs Groby’s “anachronistic Mem-sahibism” (122), Levertov sees an individual isolated, suffocated and totally out of touch with other human beings, as a result of totally false ideas of superior caste and nationality. As she implicitly traces the trajectory of her own ability to be a free-standing campaigner, less subject than most to the ways society has of moulding conformists, Levertov sees powerful role models in her courageous and principled parents who, while retaining important cultural norms of their early years, were able to use their judgement to cast off the shackles of much early conditioning: Levertov’s father is first portrayed as a eight-year-old boy engaged in ice-floe-hopping sometimes *against* the current (4); and her mother sets off for distant Constantinople with the words of the Welsh small-town washerwoman ringing in her ears: “Miss Jones, I do admire your *bravety*” [sic] (12).

Indeed, fragmentary though it is, *Tesserae* shows a preoccupation with boundaries. Levertov, reflecting on her life as a child, discerns the zeal with which neighbour separates from neighbour as back gardens “are separated from one another with brick walls as tall as a grown person, and often a further privacy has been given by well-grown trees or lilac bushes planted along their three sides” (47). Unlike their neighbours, the Levertovs have no screening Venetian blinds nor net curtains. The transition from childhood to adult life is perceived by Levertov as crossing a considerable frontier, symbolically embodied in a Saturday morning play place. She and Jean were allowed to play on the outskirts of Wanstead park, an “ancient and romantic domain”, but the interior, where an act of violence had been done against a little girl many years before, was “the one place considered out-of-bounds” (60). In their happy place of childhood freedom, Jean creates another boundary, movement towards ladylike ways of behaving, a limit Levertov refuses to accept. In “An

Encounter — and a Re-encounter”, Levertov describes the liminal adolescent state as “resembl[ing] border country, where two cultures lie side by side, the customs and language of each spilling over into the other for some distance beyond official frontiers, or the marshes of a broad, meandering estuary: what is marsh and what is the many-throated river itself?”(65) There comes a clear-cut moment of understanding that takes her over that border when, selling “The Daily Worker”, though “a child, in knee socks and a reefer coat with two long braids” (67), she takes in that her sort of campaigning is not a game to be acted out but an engagement with human misery. “But this was the first time the meaning of the words [unemployment] in somebody’s life came home to me” (70).

In *Tesseræ* there is a powerful sense of the dangers yet rewards of moving over boundaries. As we have seen, Levertov’s mother had a very unprotected early childhood and Levertov herself seems to have been allowed to wander freely at will: her Saturday exploration with her sister verged on the reckless.<sup>66</sup> The sense that amazing discoveries often come accompanied by fear is not surprising in one not much protected. The trespassing adventure in “Janus” brings the glorious epiphany of a magnolia in bloom, followed immediately by terror as an old tramp appeared, “purple-faced [...] waving a stick”. Levertov ponders on the meaning of the memory:

We had scaled a wall, trespassing; by forbidden means we had partaken of a glory not ours to taste; and though no god transformed us from human children to stags or some other life-form, we had to pay for our transgression: is that it? (56)

However, her final conclusion about why this memory resonates so is to do with “how intimately opposites live, their mysterious simultaneity, their knife-edge union: the Janus face of human experience” (56). Her experience, when barely beyond the toddler stage, of the fear of a room full of stuffed owls would again suggest that the wonder which so often comes from the unexpected is frequently, for her, won at the price of fear. She universalises from her own particular experience: fear and wonder go hand in hand. It is doubtful whether someone with a more protected upbringing would necessarily feel as she does.

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66 “Growing Up, or When Anna Screamed” (*Light*) which tells of the Saturday outings, is described as a “story”, presumably because of the aesthetic shaping the events receive. The family circumstances, and events such as Olga’s severance from her family, are biographically true. In this piece, Levertov gives an account of her nine-year-old self setting off for weekend walks with Olga, taking any bus that came along, striking off across country from a point that looked interesting without having the least idea where they were, and frequently being overtaken by darkness while still deep in the countryside.

On the social level, snobbery is a clearly demarcated frontier and one Levertov will not observe. After the family's stay at Tawstock, they delight in remembering lavatories labelled expressly for high-ranking members of the aristocracy (21). The "What I remember" section is a mixture of remarkable and well-known acquaintances and "ordinary" people, loved and remembered for their human qualities. There is a tone of sardonic amusement at the pretension of it, as Levertov views her young self frequenting the Cafe Royale: "this was [the world] I wanted to think I belonged in" (85). Although her affectionate portraits of her parents show them constantly in motion over frontiers of all sorts, there is one enclosure she comes to see as an empowering one: the grille that sealed in the heavenly-voiced nun (102). On one occasion, Levertov surprises in herself a totally unexpected need for the preservation of accepted boundaries. Maurice de Montfaucon, a declared lover whose passion she has never believed in, catches sight of her on an underground down escalator as he is progressing upwards, turns "and [begins] frenziedly running down the up escalator [...] crazily bucking the escalator's imperturbable tide" (93). She presents this as the most frightening of her wartime experiences.

Perhaps the most important tracing of self Levertov undertakes is in her low-key awareness of herself as poet, visionary and seer. "It is given to the seer to see, but it is then his responsibility to communicate what he sees, that they who cannot see may see" (*Testament* 3). She elaborates on this in her essay on Chekov: "To be human, his stories seem to say, is to be a creature in a state of modulation, of evolution, not a forever fixed category; to be human, as we experience it, is to belong to a species of *forerunners*, to some of whom is given from time to time a glimpse of a distant future for which we carry the potential." (*Chekov* 281). As Levertov identifies growth points and potentialities in herself, they act as markers to possibilities inherent in all human beings. In much of her campaigning, she is drawing prophetic attention to politically inconvenient human truths which cut through short-term national self interest to larger issues of human justice and even human survival. What she affirms retrospectively as valuable in *Tesserae* are insights derived from a lifetime's costing engagement.

In *Tesserae*, Levertov is often recreating memories of times when she first became aware of particular human capacities or states that she subsequently learnt to treasure, and which became, in some measure, the cornerstone of her sense of adult self. As a

visionary, her abiding interest is in the human capacity to connect in a meaningful way with others and with creation and to be receptive to the numinous. She is aware that her highly sensitive senses provide her with deep inner nurture and she grasps at the ineffable beauty of mystery . Her final section, “A Lost Poem” (147-8), evokes a sense of a dream cathedral of pearls, and the joy and wonder it brought to people’s dark lives. Set as it is as the final chapter, it seems to show an acceptance that her lifetime’s devotion to recording a fleeting sense of awe and wonder in poetry, and thus evoking these states in her readers, has been no trivial use of her human gifts.

## 7. Lorna Sage (1943-2001)

*Bad Blood*, Lorna Sage's bravura account of her unusual growing up in the rural Border backwater of Hanmer in the then Flintshire Maelor in the 1940s and 50s makes an exciting end to this consideration of Welsh twentieth century autobiographic writing in English. The key figure in Sage's early life, her grandfather, was a charismatic and disreputably unconventional Church in Wales vicar: R.S.Thomas was his curate in the years just before Sage was born. With imagination, insight and a humour that provokes laughing out loud (and doubtless deflects some of the pain of this act of retrospective evaluation), Lorna Sage draws out hidden meanings as she ponders on the complexities of her growing up, revealing how the fantasies, traumas and frustrations of previous generations had a profound effect on her family circle and her own development. This autobiography is sharply written, witty, and, above all, courageous.

*Bad Blood* as a title for an autobiography suggests an intention to trace family traits and signals to the reader an ambivalent attitude, at best, in the author towards her genetic inheritance. Lorna Sage sees idiosyncrasies in her forebears merge to take new forms in herself. In her vivid portrayals of her maternal grandparents, she characterises her grandfather as so obsessive a bibliophile that he sabotaged potential borrowers by blacking out titles on the spines of his books, and her grandmother as an inveterate hoarder of objects as diverse as sugar lumps and paper bags. In depicting herself as a hoarder of stories (94), she shows herself to be in the family line. Skilfully she reveals how nature and her unusual nurture worked to create a particular sort of inward-turning imaginative being, pondering long on meanings and driven by a need to find some sort of truth through mythologising and making narrative sense of her past. The need to tell stories to oneself about oneself is a universal human one; as Olney so aptly puts it:

For better or worse, we all exist and only exist within the circumference of the stories that we tell about ourselves: outside that circumference human beings know nothing and can know nothing. (qtd by Eakin **Touching** 221)

Yet in Sage the imaginative need to body out a version of her own story, be it mentally or, as in this work, in print, seems always to have been a facet of the crucial need to create a space for herself in the world.

Seven years in the writing and published when its author was 57, *Bad Blood* takes a retrospective view of the first twenty-one years of her life. For the reader, a consideration of the vantage point from which Lorna Sage writes is important for an understanding of the view. As Professor of English, a literary academic, she was heavily involved in her working life with theoretical perspectives which emphasised the constructed nature of individual universes. Just as nineteenth century Wales abounded in autobiographies of ministers of religion, where the story of their lives was told in terms “natural” to their profession, so the story of Lorna Sage’s life comes to be told in the terms of a late twentieth century academic and critic, as we shall see. She is able to stand in the shoes of each of her key significant figures and make a very convincing stab at constructing the world each saw, what their operant ideas might have been shaped by and the sometimes insane logic which seemed to have stimulated particular sorts of self-defeating behaviour. She accomplishes the complex writerly task of deftly sketching in individual perspectives, how those perspectives impinged on her as she grew up and what sense she has been able to make of it all in retrospect. One of the most striking aspects of the sense of self she reveals is of a seemingly innate propensity towards being analytic.

A naïve view of the resources on which autobiography draws might posit that memory is the all-important and perhaps only essential ingredient. Good academic that she is, Lorna Sage, as she attempts to make the imaginative leap into the constructed world of her significant others, draws on artefacts of various sorts in her work of creative reconstruction and interpretation. Perhaps the most important documents are two diaries of her grandfather’s for 1933 and 34, which came Sage’s way after her mother’s death in 1989. As we shall see, they were crucial in reshaping Sage’s personal myth. Equally importantly, they provided incontrovertible evidence of the shallow draught of Grandpa’s inner life which Sage had previously romanticised:

The sinner I was expecting was guilty of pride, lust and spiritual despair, not merely of sloth and ineptitude. This was the diary of a nobody. So I nearly censored January to June 1933 in the interests of Grandpa’s glamour as a Gothic personage. (47)

Love letters from her grandfather to her grandmother, found after the latter’s death, were read once and destroyed (to the considerable mortification of the later autobiographer), so appalled were Sage and her mother at the mutual confidence trick (44) — “they must have been mutually blinded by their dreams and needs” (38) — a



preliminary to a marriage that became one of deep loathing. Particular works are exemplary in suggesting the immense influence of the world of books in shaping the perceptions of the family's obsessive readers, Sage and her grandfather, linked at a deep level by a "bookish complicity" (51). From a child Sage is aware that her own name, Lorna, was her grandfather's choice, plucked from one of the books with blacked-out titles (15), and she later comes to believe that it symbolised his class scorn for her father, the haulier's son, Grandpa, like Carver Doone in *Lorna Doone* "inwardly seething [...] at their wedding, marching his daughter to church and handing her over to this honest John" (167). Books mould Lorna Sage's perception of the real world with catastrophic consequences. At sixteen, she is appalled, mystified and outraged when told that she is pregnant. By analogy with Amber in *Forever Amber* and Lady Chatterley in her "A" level text, she had

absorbed the notion that real sex was some kind of visionary initiation involving the whole of you. It seemed until that moment Amber had only been half alive. [...] That's why I was so sure I hadn't done it. (239)

She clearly shows how ideas absorbed from books can become prisms through which individuals' views of reality are refracted.

As well as written documents, photographs scattered through the text offer at times a particular sort of evidence. Lorna Sage enacts the way in which her early-flowering sexuality caused problems in her life and was a constant source of heated family remonstrance. A photograph of her at fourteen, a nubile, sexually attractive young woman, endorses her account of herself at that age. Many of the other photographs surprise by their ordinariness. One of grandfather, grandmother, mother and Lorna as a toddler might have come from anyone's family album, yet the rather dowdy-looking grandmother squinting into the sun in fact blackmails her husband and has left him facially scarred, after attacking him with a carving knife when he was drunk. Lorna's smiling mother lost two front teeth at sixteen, after falling downstairs when attempting to separate her parents during a murderous row. Yet the possible truth Roland Barthes arrived at in his late work, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, strikes one at times. He came to see the power of the photograph to refer to and achieve the representation of being in most absolute terms (87-71). This is hauntingly suggested in Sage's parents wartime wedding photograph. The happy couple revealed are youthfully vulnerable, and capable of sustaining the myth Sage sees them embodying:

Clean-cut local lad and younger son [...] falls in love with dreamy virgin in thrall to her corrupt, spell-binding father; he goes away, wins his spurs in Normandy and the Ardennes, comes back to rescue her from the sterile, vicious vicarage and carries her off to the realm of real life — the virtue, order and daylight decency of a proper marriage and wholesome children. (112-3)

Two trunks which “held the compacted residue of her lifetime’s squirrelling” come to light after Grandma’s death and appear as the autobiographical text of hoarder Grandma (44-5). They contain the incriminating diaries for blackmail purposes (which are supported evidentially by an account containing £500 which came to light in Grandma’s lifetime) and the love letters from the time when “a juvenile Grandpa and an even younger Grandma met and married and inaugurated hell” (38). A lifetime’s squirrelling of paper bags folded within paper bags with bank notes slipped between, reveal Grandma’s typical obsessions, as do regular scatterings of sugar lumps her regular craving for sweet things which culminated in insulin-dependent diabetes (44). Bars of scented soap, never used in the vicarage life of “secret squalor” (36) nevertheless symbolised Grandma’s continuing preoccupation with the trappings of the “posh” urban life she had left behind in marrying Grandpa (33).

Sage can show an archaeologist’s interest in reconstructing the nature of other people’s lives from physical traces. At times one has a powerful sense of the aspirations and vicissitudes of lives which have touched hers, however tangentially. When her family becomes upwardly mobile, leaving their council house for an Edwardian villa, Sunnyside, she evokes both the gentrified way of living of a very recent past and the tragedy that can devastate the best laid plans. The house — built “for fun” by a “dashing Irish Guards captain”, with “five tiny bedrooms for the help” above the billiard room, cellars with wine racks and hooks for hanging game, a tennis court and rare rose bushes — quickly passes to another family when he is killed in the Great War (224) and the last scion of that family led, in his old age, a squatter’s existence in the house (224). In the dust of years, the track which exposed mosaic patterns of the hall floor revealed the regular path of that elderly man between the only two rooms he used, the kitchen and the sitting room (224). A tackle shed, neatly stacked from floor to roof with empty Gordon’s gin bottles, suggested the alcohol-befuddled confusion of his final years (224). With a few bold brush strokes, Sage imaginatively tracks the nature of the lived life from the shards left behind: at times, *Bad Blood* has the feel of a novelist’s autobiography.

Sage sees her earliest sense of her identity as being shaped in part by the long-standing social pattern of the Border area, which had persisted since the establishment of Marcher lordships after the Conquest, but, in her childhood was on the cusp of change. Hanmer, though undoubtedly in Wales, was an untypically Welsh village, because there was no chapel, as the Hammers would not lease land to Nonconformists. Hierarchical social gradations were tangibly part of her early scheme of things. The churchyard as play area was within her gift as vicarage child, and it seemed totally normal that Kenyons and Hammers had family vaults, while the relations of the children who played with her were consigned to unmarked, untended, tussocky ground after death (25-8). Life felt very feudal with so many families living in tied cottages. The social *status quo* was preserved at the primary school by what Sage terms the “muck shovellers’ curriculum” (250), which virtually institutionalised illiteracy and where homework was set to three people only, on a basis of social class (20). In spite of Grandpa’s reputation as a boozier and philanderer, while she is vicarage child Sage’s status is assured because vicars are gentlemen. That status is seriously diminished after the move to the council house, neither their families nor the village approving of her parents’ cross-class marriage (112). In the wider Border context, Maelor Flint is hardly revered. In adolescence, when she and her friend Gail are bused across the border to Whitchurch High School, Whitchurch girls would see “our Hanmerness against us [...] being bused across the border [...] accounted [in part] for the slackness of our grip on the real world” (201). Further, “None of us spoke Welsh, but we had broader Shropshire accents than Whitchurch people, marking us out” (146). The “backwoods” sense of Hanmer is exacerbated by the traffic across the border on Sundays ferrying drinkers from dry Wales:

Then the same blue bus that I caught to school turned into a drinkers’ shuttle, ferrying thirsty Maelorites over the border into England, leaving the bus reeking of Wem ales and Woodbines on a Monday morning. (145-6)

Whitchurch disparaged backwoods Maelor Flint, setting a quota for girls from the sticks for High School places. When she moves to live in Whitchurch at the age of 14, the complacent self regard of that small town, coming after her early nurture in the sleepy Maelor district, provides considerable incentive to succeed academically in order to get away to somewhere more aspirational. Sage, in her retrospective look, sees this detached part of Flintshire which only ran to villages as “more and more islanded in time” (5) as the years go by.

This, then, is the world in which Sage perceived herself coming to consciousness. Sage's considerable skill as an autobiographer comprehends an ability to show distinctive ways of looking at people and events at different stages in her life — to communicate a sense of the experiencing self in the immediacy of childhood encounter and the reconstellating of particular experiences with the new vantage points provided by maturity, striking new information and the wisdom of hindsight.

For the child Lorna, Grandpa is her early minder whom she loves: "I was like a baby goose imprinted by the first mother-figure it sees" (4). From him she acquires a lifelong orientation, a recognising of the central importance, magic and refuge of the world of books and "one momentous day, before I was four, he taught me to read in self defence. [...] Now he'd given me a special key to his world. We were even closer allies afterwards" (15). She becomes a member of the church choir very young, aware of Grandpa's "shamanistic glamour" (56) and "watching [him] dress up in the vestry, processing behind him, listening to him intone the liturgy and preach, I basked in his reflected glory" (16), "stay[ing] spellbound when other members of the cast returned home to reality" (83). Grandma impinges much less powerfully in Lorna's infancy, remembered as a largely nocturnal being in a permanent rage at being deprived in this "dead-alive dump" (6) of her real dimension, the world of shop windows, trams, teashops and cinemas (6-7). The mutual loathing between her grandparents, their preoccupation with grievance, created an atmosphere in the vicarage that was "pungent and all-pervading" (7). During the time the vicarage was home, Sage remembers her own mother only as a nebulous "shy, slender wraith" (8) whom the grandparents had turned into a domestic drudge.

In her vivid characterisation of her immediate family, Sage preserves, then, a sense of the different stages of her awareness of them. For her, the disclosures contained in her grandfather's diaries for 1933 and 34, which came her way only after her mother's death when Sage herself was middle-aged, caused a strenuous refashioning of her personal myth. Through the diaries, she came to an astonished understanding of the exact nature of the family dynamic she had lived through as a child. The diaries, providential for Grandma, provide the means of a DIY separation within the vicarage, "complete with alimony" (82) as she uses the details of his affairs contained in them to blackmail Grandpa for the rest of his life. The awareness imparted by the diaries becomes part of Sage's adult sense of how much of Grandma's rage was born of an

infantilism which refused to recognise the adult human realities of sexuality and childbirth: this caused her to project onto Grandpa entire responsibility for her misery.

It was as though he'd invented sex and pain and want. [...] That is, he was making it up as he went along, to spite her *and with no higher Authority to back him up*. [Sage's italics] (39)

The adult autobiographer perspicaciously places Grandma in the context of her family of origin, now seeing how her obsessive hoarding tendencies come out even more bizarrely in her brother Stan "who'd had a colossal breakdown and was never quite right again" (34). As a Rhondda shopkeeper in the years of the Depression, he had taken as pledges such things as bicycle wheels and piano keys, part of expensive and treasured objects, in the absence of which the original objects would be of no use to their owners. When they were not redeemed, Stan continued to hoard these sacksful of junk, "as excited and pleased as if he'd invented his own currency and was a secret millionaire in it" (41). These hoarding tendencies would certainly suggest an entire sibling cohort, fixated at the anal stage. Sage is impressively astute in reconstructing the notional universe inhabited by her grandmother. The annual return to the "paradise lost" of Hereford Stores in the Rhondda was a return to where "Life was unfallen, prelapsarian, as though paying for things hadn't yet been invented" (33). Grandma's lifelong sense of entitlement from a youth spent "lounging around upstairs, nibbling at the stock" (33) was only assuaged in the Rhondda visits.

Even as a child Sage had felt unease there. It is as though all the adults are occupying roles appropriate to a time before she was born:

Infinite regress threatened down there: promised and threatened [...] in the smothering, spongy womb of the Stores. And [...] I was always glad to get away. [...] I didn't know who I was there – didn't need to know. It was as though I hadn't been born yet (43-4).

It was understood that cooking, cleaning and washing up were properly the duties of a skivvy (35) and as there wasn't one, it didn't get done. There is an implicit authorial marvelling at the lengths to which people will go to keep their personal myth intact, at how unchanging the stories they tell themselves about who they are can be in totally new circumstances.

Thus Grandma's sense of being a considerable cut above the Hanmer peasantry came from her shaping in the Rhondda.

Her sense of what class amounted to was remarkably pure and precise, in its South Wales way. Owning a business in a community where virtually everyone else went

down the pit for wages *would* have seemed, in her youth, thoroughly posh. And the simple fact of *not working* when all around you were either slaving away or — worse — out of work would have been sufficient to mark you out as a ‘lady’. (33)

Grandma, a woman “of nearly no brains at all” (38), remained in thrall to the values of her early home until her dying day.

She stayed furious all the days of her life – so sure of her ground, so successfully spoiled, that she was impervious to the social pressures and propaganda that made most women settle down to play the part of wife. (39)

For Sage, Grandma constituted an awful warning, a life model to be avoided at all costs:

She scared me a lot, in truth, because she represented the prospect of never growing up. (43)

Child and adult valuations are juxtaposed, without losing their discrete identity, so that we have a clear sense both of the experiencing child and the adult overview.

Later perspectives modified Sage’s childhood apotheosis of her beloved Grandpa too. His diaries for 1933 and 34

turned out to be a bit like eavesdropping on the beginning of my world [...] how life in the vicarage got its Gothic savour, how we became so isolated from respectability, how the money started not to make sense and (above all) how my grandfather took on the character of theatrical martyrdom that set him apart. (46)

Two affairs are recorded in detail, one with the district nurse which starts virtually from the moment of his arriving in Hanmer in advance of his family, and, more shockingly, one with Marj, Sage’s then sixteen-year old mother’s closest friend, propelling Sage into a compassionate understanding, sadly after her mother’s death, of how she believed her mother came to be as she was. The diaries are singularly revealing of character. As the pioneer autobiographical theorist, Gusdorf, explains:

If exterior space – the stage of the world – is a light clear space where everyone’s behaviour, movements and motives are quite plain on first sight, interior space is shadowy in its very essence. (32)

Her grandfather’s own autobiographical utterance prevents Sage from romanticising his inner world. Grandpa himself shines a spotlight on his interior space through his diaries and vacuous areas of his inner life are revealed. They give evidence of day after day of desultory drifting, with Grandpa having no more to record than the ruination of yet another pipe, through ham-fisted whittling or hours spent twiddling the knobs of his expensive new radio — “a pottering, Pooterish, almost farcically domesticated life” (47). Grandpa was seen to drift, too, in terms of taking the pleasantest line of least resistance in taking any delights that life seemed to offer, with

little attempt to take stock or reflect on his behaviour. The manner of reconstellating her view of Grandpa in the light cast by some of the diary recordings is worth considering in detail, as it demonstrates, in generous measure, through the accomplished panache of the mid life literary critic, an important area of established self. In her attempts to understand — and have the reader understand — an appropriate way of reading Grandpa's relationship with the district nurse, she frames it in a range of different ways, seeming to take a ludic delight in the possible different ways of apprehending the affair. She is virtually there as an eyewitness, as she evokes in lavish detail a likely scenario for their illicit coupling (they "hug and knead each other among the mallows and Queen Anne's lace" [54]), imagined possibly from her own sexual adventures in the same countryside documented later in the book. She even imagines the contraceptive techniques they might have engaged in and recalls the restrictive social codes of the time which would have prevented a nurse marrying and keeping her job. Denied the chance of making Grandpa a Gothic figure, she finds it:

inviting to picture this love affair – the Vicar and the Nurse – in the style of a Hogarth etching of carnival appetite on the rampage. Flesh triumphs over Spirit. An allegory of hypocrisy. (56)

Finally she looks at the scene in "less moralising transformation", imagining the couple remade by Arcimboldo in fruit and vegetables (56). While highlighting the ludicrous elements in the situation, through imaginative play she sets the acts of an individual life within the flow of archetypal human behaviour across time, thereby, perhaps, reducing the uniqueness, for her, of the pain. Her postmodernist pastiches are in keeping with the fictional style of the period in which she is writing, the last decade of the twentieth century, and, of course, are very revealing of one aspect of her sense of self — her interests as a literary academic and critic. As she ponders on suitable ways of presenting and framing the activities (or antics) of a progenitor, her autobiography becomes a story about storytelling.

The second affair detailed in the diaries is one whose shock effects have considerable impact on Sage's own life long after the event. Sage discovers that one of Grandpa's affairs had been with his sixteen-year old daughter's closest friend and that he had made his own daughter a cover for the relationship. Sage sees her mother's resulting alienation from her own father, to whom she had been very close, as having a

profound effect on the rest of her life. She turned away from everything he represented, including the world of books. She became

shy, fearful [...] saw herself apologetically as inept, unable to cope with life. She wouldn't talk about intimacies of almost any kind. (75)

This impinged dramatically on Lorna Sage's sense of who she was. The mother's fierce censoriousness about her daughter's sexuality, which I shall be considering later, grew from the terror of the rampant power of the unfettered libido she had learnt from her father:

You're just like your grandfather, my mother had said when we rowed over clothes or make-up but now [when Lorna becomes pregnant at sixteen] it was almost too blatant to need saying. (240)

A further serious consequence of Grandpa's betrayal of his daughter, given that Grandma had no interest in mothering, was that Sage perceives her mother as being incapable of surrendering her own daughter role. Of the vicarage family at the time of the arrival in Hanmer in 1933, Sage writes:

This family, though, is dangerously fissile, falling apart, orphaned since nobody wants to play the part of parent. (72)

After Lorna Sage's mother gains her own council house home as her husband returns from the war, Lorna is often witness to a strange relationship when her mother regularly visits an "exclusive" little shop, run by a Mrs. Smith, that is in effect selling second-hand clothes of good quality. Her mother regularly puts herself in debt to acquire these clothes. The adult Sage, reflecting, concludes:

It was my mother's need to feel mothered that drew her back to be fussed over and flattered by Mrs. Smith. [...] For it seemed that nobody inside our family wanted to be mother, everyone was a daughter in perpetuity. (161)

Such conclusions have serious implications for the sort of adult self Lorna Sage is prepared to contemplate for herself.

The high level of self-knowledge achieved in this autobiography includes a real understanding of the process of the writer's own functioning. Sage's considerable emphasis on the great importance of defended space for her own sense of self strongly suggests that she is an introvert (a concept which will be further explored later), centrally aware of her need for withdrawal and privacy for effective functioning. The very nuanced sense she communicates of her own individuality suggests a reflective more than an interactive temperament. Interestingly, Paul John Eakin in *Touching the*



*World* emphasises the birth of the autobiographical genre in the evolution of domestic defended space:

Modern autobiography seems to have emerged concurrently with – and is perhaps a symbolic manifestation of – people’s acquisition of a distinctly personal space in which to live, rooms of their own in which [...] the bourgeois values of privacy, intimacy and ‘home’ could flower. (100-1)

Sage reinforces structurally the importance she feels that living space has had in her life by dividing her autobiography into three parts, each dealing with a distinct phase of her growing up and each section, for the most part, being centred on one of her three childhood homes – the Vicarage, the Council house and Sunnyside.

In spite of the permanently poisonous atmosphere engendered by her locked-in-loathing grandparents, the Vicarage was most deeply home. Grandpa was her principal attachment figure and his role as Vicar conferred some status and extended the territory — the graveyard, the church, the vestry — that she could regard as home ground, and she could “curr[y] favour with the pack” (25) by offering play benefits, and “even managed — on some blissful days — to feel accepted, a member of the child world of Hanmer” (28). The roomy vicarage, lit by candles and oil lamps, was splendidly mysterious, an imaginative feast for a child. Grandpa was centrally important in that early sense of self:

He was the source of my sense of having an inner topography, a sort of vicarage soul; also the author of my bookishness. (92)

Sage remembers her early entry into school playground rituals as “hell” because of her lack of demarcated territory:

I think that we all forget the pain of being a child at school for the first time, the sheer ineptitude, as though you’ll never learn to mark out your own space. (22)

The move with near strangers to open plan council house living, where individual private space is abolished, seems cataclysmic:

Even being locked down the horrible cellar by Grandma for being naughty, although terrifying, was not so threatening as the return of my father from the army and the birth of my brother when I was six. My real family didn’t seem congenial to me at all. (88-9)

She found nuclear family living emotionally claustrophobic – “no-one had enough private space” (110) — and felt very much an interloper, more comfortable roaming the countryside, ever the outsider looking in:

Everything about our situation felt exposed, it was somehow safer outside. And although very soon the council put up concrete posts and a chain-link fence to mark our garden, it wasn't a boundary you could believe in. (102)

She found "a place to hide" (131). She was allowed to help with chores in Watson's farm, ambling after cows:

with a stick of office pulled from the hedge for show (137). [...] The particular bliss of Watson's farm was that it combined the reassurance of routine with the freedom of wandering off. (133)

She developed a number of rituals for bringing about a loss of sense of identity, the best way of alleviating the pain of consciousness being through a sort of mesmeric "riding on the tractor and feeling its hammering engine in your bones" (134). Within a year, another sort of demarcation of space becomes an issue, when she travels to the high school daily by bus, where "an elaborate unspoken seating plan" (146) proved a mine field for a nervous child who "just felt very lonely" (147). A formula for survival in the utterly uncongenial family environment is provided by an imaginative doctor who, when she becomes worryingly insomniac, instructs her parents to allow her to keep the light on at night and she thus achieves much more reading time and, in a sense, a room of her own, in spite of the presence of her sleeping brother. "Dr. McColl had won me space in the council house, a lighted box of my own" (110). After five years, when the open plan council house is bursting with the frustration of family members, they move to Sunnyside, "a shady, reclusive house with lots of solidly separate rooms" (223). Sage has the reader feeling that, for her, an unassailable sense of self can only be preserved within secure territorial parameters.

In a sense, this act of writing an autobiography has been for Sage a retrospective demarcating of self in the world. By academic orientation, she has a panoramic view of the multiplicity of codes through which humankind has structured its reality and, in this postmodernist autobiography, she has implicitly analysed several of them. Eakin in **Touching** refers to the argument by the French autobiographical theorist Philippe Lejeune that:

The private speech of the individual engaged in the autobiographical act is derived [...] from public discourse structured by class, code and convention. (**Touching** 94)

Sage has an impressively nuanced awareness of the assumptions of her cast of characters in all of these areas.

We have already seen how Grandma was immovable in the class and code assumptions of a petit bourgeois shopkeeper in a mining area with a grafted-on

awareness of the establishment position of the vicarage family. When Lorna is found to have headlice at Primary School, Grandma declares that they cannot be seen buying the necessary lotion in any local towns where they are known (28), so she is left infested and infesting others for several years until, with maximum humiliation for her, they are again discovered in her first year at high school. Sage is deeply aware of the codes covering choice of mate amongst the yeoman farmers of the area. She writes:

Hanmer still lived in the era when most engagements were really contracted between legacies and land, abutting acres, second cousins twice removed or, at least a tied cottage and a tea service. (112)

When playing mixed doubles with rather older Young Farmers, she sees her attractive friend Gail's "glamour dwindle. Her mother's history and her family's plentiful lack of land were entirely anti-aphrodisiac for them cancelling out the way her thigh muscles were moulded" (208). Both she and her boyfriend Victor Sage know they have to do well at school and Lorna had further picked up a sense that in the Rhondda there was real enthusiasm for scholarly success, which was a means to getting on (44). However, in this complacent farming area, "trying too hard was in Whitchurch a sign that you were an outsider and socially shifty" (230).

It is, however, in her analysis of the codes dealing with the nature and position of women in the 50s and 60s that anger and distress breaks through. From her position at the time of writing of being a most able and successful critic and literary academic, the sense of how near she was to missing any opportunity of higher education is chilling. Her life story seems to exemplify Rowbotham's assertion about the situation of women:

A woman cannot [...] experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined *as woman*, that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture. [...] Her mirror is the reflecting surface of cultural representation into which a woman stares to form an identity [...] That mirror does not reflect back a unique individual identity to each living woman; it projects an image of WOMAN, a category that is supposed to define the living woman's identity. ( qtd by Friedman 38)

From what one can piece together from her account, Lorna Sage went through the High School with an excellent academic record, usually being at the top of her class. A different sort of education seems to have been thought proper for girls and science was not on offer at examination level in any form: for that you had to go to the boys' grammar school in the Sixth form. She becomes pregnant at 16 in her "A" level year.

Her parents' first plan was that she should go to a Church Home for Unmarried Mothers from which her baby would be adopted and "from now on you could count yourself lucky if they let you learn shorthand and typing" (237). As the months pass, the young couple successfully apply pressure within their families and are allowed to marry but have to leave school. The male GP assures Lorna and her mother that her immediate future is taken care of, as it was well known, as pregnancy advanced, "you became absorbed by it, serene, preoccupied, reconciled, round" (244). Nevertheless, Lorna determined to take her "A" levels, which would just about be possible if the baby arrived on time at the end of May. Her headmistress tries to discourage her from entering the school, the local "open centre", to take her exams (269). She has missed French dictation and oral while giving birth but otherwise does spectacularly well in her "A" levels, in spite of the hormonal changes of parturition and having undergone a difficult "breech" labour. She ends up a few marks short of what is needed for a State scholarship, because of the reduced French score. She is denied a discretionary county award because she is married, although her husband would be allowed one. She has earlier explained:

You were supposed to choose between boys and books, because for girls sex was entirely preoccupying, your sex was *more of you* than a boy's appendage, you *were* your sex, so you had to do without if you were to have enough energy, self-possession and brains left over to do anything else. (232)

She goes to the doctor for advice about contraception and he refuses her any help:

What he was saying [...] was that he wouldn't aid and abet me in acquiring any control over my own fertility. In any case, he must have thought, I was now in all probability going to revert to white-trash type and have more babies, and, in a way, decorum demanded that I should; I was some sort of nymphomaniac and shouldn't be allowed to have my cake and eat it. (270)

In terror of further pregnancies, she and Vic continue a pattern of abstinence from sexual intercourse. The Afterword to the autobiography proper reveals that they are divorced within a decade of graduating from Durham, where they have both achieved first class honours in English. The publicity their success generates, with their photograph with their daughter in the *Daily Mail*, produces a letter from a young woman who had had her first baby in the bed beside Lorna in the maternity hospital. Living in a tiny house on a small holding, she now has five children, including two sets of twins. Sage does not explicitly comment from her turn of the century perspective: the interpreting mind of the reader is left to form its own shocked

judgment at the construction of female reality that was the norm in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Sage is adept at revealing the sometimes ludicrous yet malign nature of particular constructed universes. In her espousal of value judgments, her practice is somewhat at odds with mainstream post-modernist theory and practice. Crosshouses, the specialist maternity hospital to which she is sent because obstetric complications are expected, is deep in the countryside, having no public telephone, short visiting hours, no bus service, giving full scope for the exercise of repressive power. Nothing that might improve morale is tolerated:

Anything that might make you feel less wrecked and dirty was disallowed on principle, because Baby came first and by Crosshouses logic washing your hair was vanity, therefore traitorous to Maternity, morally unhygienic and dangerous. [...] By contrast, the nurses, Sister and Matron were as good as vestals, unmarried or at least childless, their baby worship was pure. They served the cause of motherhood selflessly, unlike the feckless women in their charge. (261)

In this isolated spot, “the ward was the world” (261). Sage experiences it as a sort of prison:

Breast feeding [...] had suddenly become the rule and created many more minor offences to do with having too much milk or not enough, or the wrong sort of nipples (261).

Interestingly, it is this regime that provokes an epiphany for Sage. She has an embattled encounter with the Day Sister in her attempt to get herself released in time for her exams:

I was shocked and elated. I'd never had a row as savage as that with anyone outside my family, in public. (264)

Carolyn Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman's Life* emphasises:

Above all other prohibitions, what has been forbidden to women is anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life. (13)

It produces the desired effect and she is discharged:

Crosshouses was grim, but the fact that they were so much better at moral hygiene than the other kind had taught me a lot. From now on I was making my way against most people's assumptions, I'd have to count my friends and fight back. (265-6)

Entering Whitchurch High to do her “A” levels feels like crossing a sort of Rubicon.

When the headmistress appears at the gate and tries to deter her:

I walked around her as if she were a mere personification of prudery. [...] The lines she drew had lost their power, you could just step over them. (269)

Indeed, the process of her own mythic reconstruction had started from early pregnancy. From their marriage and exclusion from school, working together in embattled intimacy, the young couple “from cellmates [...] turned into soulmates” (243). Inventing a story for themselves that “soon took on a life of its own [...] patch[ing]together a new mutant myth out of poems and stories and sheer necessity. Our brainchild. In it we grew up overnight and cast off the mind-forged manacles of Hanmer and Whitchurch” (243-4). They refused to accept themselves as “corrupt children” (243). There is a sense of rapid reconstruction of personal myth in ways that will give two beleaguered young people the strength to survive. There is a feeling of empowerment, too, in the portrayal of two intelligent and determined young people constructing a world of new values for themselves, aided and abetted by the social changes which heralded the swinging Sixties.

Yet, in spite of her triumph towards the end of the book at stepping over the lines her headmistress drew, there is a preoccupation throughout the autobiography with boundaries, for Lorna’s mother was particularly bad at drawing them and trusting in them. Although Sage’s description of her mother’s efforts as a cook make hilarious reading, they are imbued with Sage’s adult awareness of the pathology of her mother’s fear of food :

All meat had to be made safe by boiling [...] even then it was dangerously full of knots of choking gristle and shards and spikes of bone. [...] And, if anything, she thought vegetables even more dangerous and difficult to subdue. They had to be cooked all morning, particularly green ones like sprouts, which got very salty and stuck to the pan as their water boiled away, and came out in yellow mush (120-1). [...] She simply could not take food or leave it at all, for it was a sign of a larger unfocussed fear (123). [...] Her fear of food, which was a fear of the outside getting in, was a key to her character as a wife. (123)

She was hugely incompetent as a housewife, ruling over a “blatant shambles” (119).

Sage gives a powerful sense of a mother who was not really there:

The absent and amorphous aspect of her daily self — ‘miles away’ she’d say innocently, not apologising — gave her in addition the air of a child wife, the daughter of the house. (126)

For Sage, the move to the uncongenial nuclear family, based in the unappealing council house, coincided with the death of her grandfather, which left her in a “disbelieving and desolate state” (91). As we have seen, in this new environment she could not trust the material boundaries between her house and the rest of the world and, as the momentum of her life carried her inexorably on to that first entry into

Whitchurch High, she cultivated experiences which brought about a diminishing of the sense of self:

In the spring, the ground sucked at your feet; with every step you could savour the pull of the mud. [...] You could hypnotise yourself with it. [...] This way you could lose yourself until you slowed to a dazed standstill. (104-5)

A fundamental insecurity for Sage seems to arise from the fact that the “child wife” cannot demarcate boundaries:

My mother’s timidity and her dread of confrontation meant that it was horribly easy to defy her and bully her and so we [Grandma, Clive, Lorna’s brother, Lorna] did. (164)

Until adolescence, Sage herself is regularly put across his knee and spanked by her father, “until I say I’m sorry, I won’t do it again” and “howl and writhe with humiliation” (165). Thus Sage’s father is regularly invoked to impose what seem to be the only clear boundaries in her world, possibly boundaries which Sage unconsciously craved. Yet she is aware that her father’s chastisement of her is to do with the Sir Galahad role he needs to play in his wife’s life and is not to do with setting consistent limits for her:

She couldn’t cope with me and *she couldn’t stand rows*. It was always the last line that did the trick. Rows meant the old vicarage misery, he was honour bound to save her from its clutches. (164)

As a child Sage looked with wonder and admiration at Mrs Edge, her friend Valerie’s mother who:

lived in her [council house] with style, not only were her net curtains whiter than white, but the whole space and the whole shape of the day, had an elaborate decorum. She changed her wellies on the back step for carpet slippers with fake fur around the tops, or hid her curlers under her turban, or combed out her hair and put her lipstick on to a regular, reassuring rhythm. (107)

The sense of the certainty of someone discovering a regular pattern to a day seems to be a modelling Sage longed for; such a lack in her own family is possibly the source of her highly developed adult sense of how “codes” order life.

While Sage is a friend of Valerie Edge and another neighbourhood child, Janet, she gets caught up in a far more decorous way of being. She spends a lot of time at boundaries.

Gates and gardens figured large in our friendship because we spent a lot of time together leaning or swinging on one or other of our gates. With Valerie and Janet you didn’t wander off [...] because they were too grown up, they saw no point in it. They were busy being big girls, practising for real life. [...] It was like a dance, a

dance of belonging with no private space in it, all inside-out intimacy, and I found it euphoric, intoxicating. (106)

This is a period when Sage seems to glimpse briefly the bliss of being an insider, ordinary, although “when [Valerie] wasn’t around I was still out of step” (109). Her sense of her own position in the early years of nuclear family living in the council house was that of an “interloper” (102). She’s “on the outside looking in” (103). The adult who grew from the child is, unsurprisingly, a writer uncannily sensitive to the strangeness of the ordinary, looking in with the analytic perspective of a sociologist.

In retrospect, she conceptualises the nature of the family myth and the dysfunctional needs on which it was based. “[My parents’] obsessions had met, fallen in love and married” (186). The mother’s domain was Fancy and indoors was her department (125); “[her] acquired ineptitude fitted [the] postwar pattern” including the amazing achievement of forgetting how to ride a bike (118-9). Her father sees himself as the practical realist (126), although the adult Sage is caustically aware of his limitations in this area. The sense of self each parent needs depends on a collusive role assignment, however far short the actual qualities of each falls of their imagined fulfilment of role.

Trips in the family car and one particular disaster become a potent metaphor for how Sage feels about family life and its insecurities within the parental claustrophobic closeness and the very flimsy family boundaries provided by the imagined world of her parents:

They left *no room*. Family life was the open-plan living-room, the family car. It was like a nightmare council house on wheels.(186) Clive and I in the back seat [...] were made to know our place. We were the passengers, they were in charge. Except that it was all tied together with string. (185)

After one family trip, returning home through the dark, mother comments on the pretty patterns of the headlights flickering on the hedgerows. With horror, the father realises the engine is on fire, and leaving the family standing “in the circle of firelight and watch[ing] the car burn” (185) races off to find a garage. A passing motorist shoos them away because of the imminent danger of explosion:

The-car-that-went-on-fire became a family story in which somehow my mother’s fey remark supplied the point, not my father’s sketchiness as a mechanic and definitely not our escape from being barbecued. Our family life may have been a fragile construct, my parents may have been making it up as they went along, but they were good at improvising – at least as far as their story went. [...] They always closed ranks and pretended everything was solid, normal and natural. (185-6)



The chasm between family myth and observed reality for this sensitive, highly intelligent girl was a source of powerful insecurity.

Sage, in this retrospective interpretation, ascribes her mother's ineptitude and loss of faith in herself to the rampant transgression of boundaries represented by her own father's behaviour with her friend Marj. Beside the betrayal of his loving daughter that such a relationship implied, Sage comments in pondering on the diaries on "the sheer moral untidiness of the breaking down of boundaries between generations and classes (Marj being neither respectable nor safely an outsider)" (74).

Pondering on the confident, outgoing girl she believed her mother to have been at sixteen, she concludes:

[Grandpa] certainly scarred his daughter's sensibility horribly. [...] She became fiercely censorious about bodies and their wants, so much so that it always seemed a bit of a miracle that she'd managed to make an exception for my father. (75)

The resonance of the title *Bad Blood* is experienced at many levels. It suggests that Sage sees herself with some ambivalence as her grandfather's heir as transgressor of boundaries. It further captures the overall sweep of the book, Sage's somewhat ironic sense of how far back she could trace elements of dysfunctionality in her family. "Bad blood" is a labelling given Lorna by her mother for her early-flowering sexuality, and, most of all, for her pregnancy at the age of sixteen. She is perceived as Grandpa's creature long after his death. The degree of inhibition Sage's early pregnancy brought in her subsequent sexual relationship is perceived partly, too, as a legacy of her grandfather's priapic tendencies and her mother's resultant very timorous inhabiting of her sexual identity. The "bad blood" of the title further suggests Lorna Sage's rage at being trapped by the fertility of her body after the onset of menstruation, of how the mere fact of being female can slam the door on possibilities:

I wanted my body back [...] Pregnant I was my own prison. (245)

Through this pregnancy

My treacherous body had somehow delivered me into other people's hands. [...] If they were outraged, *so was I*.(236 -8)

From the vantage point of the much greater sexual liberty of the end of the century, the degree of isolation and suffering Sage experienced as a result of this pregnancy is chilling, as is the sense of how easily, in slightly different circumstances and with less personal resolution on her part, she could have become trapped in that self-

condemnatory view of what she was — a carrier of bad blood, doomed. The social changes beyond the end of the book in 1964 stand in implicit counterpoint to this title. The final sentences of the autobiography proper describe the young Sage couple's graduation photograph, with four-year old daughter Sharon, published in the "Daily Mail" where the child looks "very large and distrustful":

This picture stands instead of a wedding photograph in our story. Sharon is the one looking beyond the ending, nobody seems to know yet that it's the 1960s except perhaps for her. She's the real future, she tells the world that we broke the rules and got away with it, for better and for worse, we're part of the shape of things to come. (278)

The title *Bad Blood*, then, is in some measure a labelling of the sexual censoriousness of a particular time and place from the perspective of a much more emancipated time, a time when many of the boundaries are gone. It draws attention to the transitory and relative nature of all constructed views of the world, although at the time of experiencing them, they are entertained as absolutes.

As we have already explored in the life writing of Margiad Evans, there is truth in Mary G. Mason's declaration that

the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness [...]. This grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems [...] to enable women to write openly about themselves. (210)

A different sort of early relating to another consciousness is of crucial importance to both sexes. The most basic recognition which some psychoanalysts assert is that the essential route to self acceptance comes from the mirroring that mothers (or mother figures) give their infants. In their introduction to the work of D.W. Winnicott, *Boundary and Space*, Davis and Wallbridge neatly excerpt some of his key ideas on the mother's mirroring role (**Boundary** 118-9). The mother who is identified with her baby looks into the baby's eyes, "and what she looks like is related to what she sees there". Thus the baby looking into the mother's face "sees himself or herself" in the deepest sense. In this way, babies come to identify, own and understand their feelings. Winnicott suggests that there is a historical process (in the individual) which depends on being seen in this deep sense. He summarises the infant's process thus:

When I look, I am seen so I exist.

I can now afford to look and see.

I now look creatively and what I apperceive [see in myself] I also perceive [see in others or things]. (**Boundary** 118-9)

Adam Phillips in his lucid book, *Winnicott*, expands on this:

Being seen by the mother is being recognised for who one is, and what the infant is, is what he feels. The infant cannot risk looking, if looking draws a blank; he must get something of himself back from what he looks at. This makes the mother of infancy the arbiter of the infant's truth. Her responsive recognition [...] makes up his sense of himself. (Phillips 130)

As we have seen, Sage sees her mother as having been deeply damaged by her nurture, her own mother, Lorna's grandmother, locked within her own narcissistic needs and her father betraying her at a crucial stage in adolescence when the interest and support of a father can be of key importance. In infancy, Lorna seems to have perceived her mother, who should have been a key figure in her life, as a "wraith" (8) and even by the council house stage Sage is still commenting on "the absent and amorphous aspect of her daily self" (126). Sage herself owns to having found eye contact with anyone difficult and, most discerningly, relates her inability to tell the time until her mid teens to the discomfort she felt at looking people in the eye:

The involuntary sulk that I lived in included clocks: just as I couldn't meet people's eyes, I couldn't look a clock in the face. I squinted at them so hastily and at such a weird angle that they made no sense. (130)

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that these difficulties developed as a result of Sage's infant distress at having a mother characterised by "absence and brooding" (156), continually refusing the loving eye contact so necessary for a baby's developing sense of who s/he is. Whatever infant nurture Sage recalls seems to have come from her grandfather. From what we learn of Sage from her self depiction in *Bad Blood*, mirroring by significant adults seems to have been singularly lacking. Further, she failed to develop an Oedipal relationship with her father as he was away in the army; in late latency period, Sage's father seems to register only as an inflictor of punishments, never as a conferrer of approval. Sage's mother seems herself to have been unable successfully to move through the Oedipal stage.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, the recognition that Sage depicts from other consciousnesses is in the main censorious or casts her in the role of reprobate. She seems to be given a profoundly

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<sup>67</sup> Lorna Sage has left a clear track for the psychologically aware to follow. It is not clear whether this is coded information that she has knowingly given — presumably as a literary critic she would have been well versed in Lacanian theory, for example — or whether this is the result, in part, of intuitive self knowledge, in part of a very analytic temperament. It seems probable that someone of Sage's academic bent (with a schizophrenic father-in-law and mother-in-law who later became mentally ill) would have had a strong incentive to acquaint herself with psychoanalytic theory. In a telephone conversation with me (October 2000) she denied ever having been in any sort of therapy, implying that she would have seen that as cheating. The interpretations of self arrived at were entirely through her own efforts. I am not aware of any explicit allusion to psychoanalytic ideas in *Bad Blood*.

negative sense of what she is from her mother, who identifies in her daughter her grandfather's bad blood which has skipped a generation. An intensely painful "naming" by her mother takes place at the climactic chapter ending where it has just been disclosed that Sage, at 16, is pregnant. Her mother rants to the effect that

I've spoiled everything now, this house will be a shameful place like the vicarage. I've soiled and insulted her with my promiscuity, my sly, grubby lusts. (236)

Lorna's headmistress, too, is intensely disapproving of Lorna's perceived lapse which seems to eclipse, in her eyes, all Lorna's academic promise:

The headmistress had told my father that while a teacher training college, a truly Christian one (she was devout), just might accept a moral cripple like me, universities would not. (255)

In her early years in Whitchurch High, the only teacherly reaction to her described in detail is that of the gym mistress "who came to regard [her] with real distaste" (150), finds lice in Lorna's long hair and establishes in her own mind a sense that "I was an unhealthy child in the moral sense, a natural malingerer". Unsurprisingly, then, her description of herself in adolescence seems to suggest a classic Winnicotian hunger for mirroring:

I was in deadly earnest without [her friend Gail]. There was only the search for recognition, being reflected back (every eye was a crystal ball) so you could imagine who you were. But people frosted over the more anxiously I peered. (210)

When her interest in the opposite sex becomes urgent, it is "the mesmerising compulsion to get boys, almost any boys, to acknowledge my existence *to make me exist*" [her italics] that she records (217).

She finds herself taken up very briefly as a subversive role model by other pupils at her school at Speech Day, four months after the birth of her daughter. The speaker's chosen text was Kingsley's "Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever".

Listening to this sermon, I basked in my pariah status. but I wasn't prepared for what happened next. As I crossed the awful town hall stage, [...] the weary applause quickened and my fellow pupils cheered. It was my first and last moment of popularity in six years at Whitchurch Girls' High School. [...] I was setting a bad example. (272)

Autobiographical theorists are agreed that memories retained and recorded are those which fit in with the pattern the autobiographer has discerned in her life: there can be little doubt that an author who can entitle her memoir *Bad Blood* had low self-esteem in the period of life she explores. She just about survives. In her generally bleak landscape of punitive authority figures there is, however, one life-saving exception.

Although Miss Roberts, her Latin teacher, would seem to have a “bit part” in the autobiography from the number of words devoted to her, the modelling she provides for the possibilities in the world for the intellectual woman and, most importantly, her acceptance and approval of Lorna, made clear in giving her private lessons after she has had to leave school, give Sage hope and encouragement at a very difficult time:

She took the latest blot on my copybook coolly for granted. [...] I had always felt flattered by her approval and now I clung to her good opinion. [...] Her interest in us impressed my parents and helped make the prospect of university look real, for she lent authority to our amorphous conviction that you could live on your wits. But most of all, and most urgently, the grades she gave me for Latin prose helped me survive day by day. (258)

Certainly, Sage’s growing awareness of her own particular identity emerges from relationship to a series of significant others on whom she models or against whom she defines herself. She strenuously resists the negative female scripts offered by her mother and grandmother of being a perpetual daughter. In some of the means she chooses to explore what she is, we see the truth of Susanna Egan’s argument in *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography* that “everyone [...] takes his own habits of thought for granted and perceives his bias only by contrast” (22). As we have seen, she recognises the Rhondda would have valued her intellectual aptitudes, whereas in Whitchurch, “clever was always too clever by half” (256). Her own solitary habits at nine, straying, disappearing for hours, getting lost, and her own disorganised home are all measured against the sense of safety she absorbed from the orderly day and ways of the Edge household. However, Gail, her bosom friend throughout adolescence, — “I could never have thrown myself into the part [of being a teenager] with such conviction without her” (188) — proves to be the most useful yardstick for measuring her own idiosyncracies. As a small child:

[Gail] was simply better at inhabiting her own body than I was. [...] She made me feel like an unstrung puppet. (23)

Where Sage hungered for recognition by boys to feel that she existed, when Gail and she sit together in a first-floor café on a Saturday morning, Gail “was only really interested in looking, not being looked at” (217). Gail was much more her own person who “went her own way” and “never even played at team games, let alone played them” (209-10). Sage herself “couldn’t resist the longing to be liked and accepted, even though it was so transparent its very intensity undermined my efforts” (209), and to this end, even played in a hockey team. Sage’s wants were global: “I wanted to be wanted” (210), Gail’s were specific and only just out of reach: “to win

her service with four impeccable aces [...] or to meet Paul Anka in person” (210). Her close friendship with Gail, then, provides a striking route to self knowledge for someone of Sage’s analytic temperament.

Compellingly, too, another figure — Grandpa — casts his long shadow over this autobiographical search for self. Implicitly, Sage explores the teasing conundrum, as she sees it, and disparagement, as her mother delivers it: “You’re just like your grandfather”. He was bookish, literary, with a desire to prove himself as a journalist. His sexual incontinence brought disrepute and distress to his family. All this could equally be said of Sage. Genetic endowment there certainly was from her grandfather: what did it then make her? *Bad Blood* as a text is an attempted answer.

Grandpa was something of an orator and people flocked to hear his sermons. As an adult, Sage seems to have been fully in the line as a charismatic lecturer yet saw herself as alarmingly dumb as a child. Eakin in *Fictions* after a lengthy consideration of Derrida and his concept of *s’entendre parler*, of hearing and simultaneously understanding oneself speak, feels that the “self’s sense of itself as a self is liveliest and most immediate in the moment of speech” (224-5). Sage, however, feels a profound lack in that dimension: she regularly castigates herself for her perceived failure of facility and poise in speech, seeing herself handicapped to the point of being crippled by it. An early sense of insufficiency may well have been started by being co-opted into the church choir very young to make up numbers but, as she was reckoned to be tone deaf, she was instructed to mouth the words silently (16). In the main, however, she sees it as an infirmity exacerbated through the torments of school, where, at the primary stage, “fear came to predominate — I became a timid, clumsy, speechless child — agonisingly shy” (29). She has a great fellow feeling for Tarzan, one of her early literary heroes, who taught himself to read and write in the jungle, but “he can’t speak at all” (90). In the first year at High School, she never volunteers answers in class and suffers agonies when asked to read aloud (149). A formidable complete tooth brace fitted early in her time at her new school was an “outlandish deformity” (154) at a time when orthodontic intervention was most unusual. “I was truly tongue tied, locked in my scold’s bit” (154). Her conviction that spoken words trap and betray is confirmed when her first boyfriend drops her as

‘too serious’. [...] But perhaps [...] I had simply said something that let him see how bookish I was, how much I lived in my head on the quiet. [...] I was so unskilled in

small talk that I sometimes blurted big words [...] which jumped out of my mouth like the toads in the fairy tale before I knew it. (219)

Summoned for interview when being considered for a scholarship by the University of Durham, she found “answering in person for what I’d written was agonising. On paper I’d been confident, I’d been someone else” (274). The sense of self Sage reveals in speech is one of agonising self-doubt.

Indubitably, in Jungian terms, Sage is an introvert, revealed, as we have seen, in her urgent need for defended space of her own, her sense of being energised by inward reflection, and, as she reveals here, her considerable preference for writing, which allows deep reflection before committing oneself, over speech.<sup>68</sup> Yet her level of distress when required to perform orally suggests a near phobic reaction, perhaps the result of considerable family tensions where she expected, almost invariably, to be in the wrong over any utterance.

Disablingly shy, reckoning that she “got more and more clumsy in speech as I grew” (90). From the time Grandpa taught her to read at the age of four, Sage retreated into obsessive reading:

More and more I lived in books, they were my comfort, refuge, addiction, compensation for the humiliation that attended contact with the world outside. (29)

She gives a sense of the inner space created by reading being a sanctuary:

I knew how to hide in books. If need be, I could build a kind of nest out of any old scraps of print I found around. (90)

Her parents looked askance at this activity; although proud of her getting into grammar school a year early, “they were [...] convinced that my addiction to print was part of my general delinquency” (130). Part of Lorna Sage’s sense of outrage at her mother’s self-display in W.I. theatricals was for

the great offence involved in acting was that it turned words into so much breath and spittle, and made them mix in company, whereas I wanted to savour them in solitude. (176)

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68 We have already looked at the introvert/extravert classification, based on a development of Jung’s theories of psychological types, with regard to Margiad Evans. In Isabel Briggs Myers, *Introduction to Type: A description of the Theory and applications of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1980). (5) introversion is explained thus: “People who prefer introversion focus more on their own inner world. When you are introverting, you are energized by what goes on in your inner world, and this is where you tend to direct your own energy. Introverts tend to be more interested and comfortable when their work requires a good deal of their activity to take place quietly inside their heads. They like to understand the world before experiencing it, and so often think about what they are doing before acting”.

From the age of ten, Lorna Sage increasingly became aware of a sense of self to do with intellectual mastery: books, from being a refuge, further became a tool. At primary school, she declares that she had no perception of herself as particularly intelligent, as books hardly formed part of the curriculum: “I was a real dunce at the things I was supposed to learn — how to be neat, tidy, dexterous, obedient, punctual” (29). When she passed the scholarship at the age of ten, she “felt sure it was a mistake and someone was going to find me out” (30). She felt great pleasure — and triumph for her father had warned her they would not find her clever at the High school — when she comes top in nearly everything at the end of the first term, “for surely it meant that my private currency had value in the world outside” (149). The nature of her intellectual aptitude and mastery is exemplified by Latin, which she uses as a shorthand for her preferred intellectual process:

Latin, the great dead language that only existed in writing would compensate for my speechlessness, vindicate my sleepless nights and in general redeem my utter lack of social graces. Latin stood for higher education, still, in the early 1950s, a kind of litmus test for academic aptitude. (143)

Sage recounts how she became blissfully aware of the symbolic nature of all languages, and here one must feel the end-of-the-century university lecturer animating the remembered mental process of the child:

The words, maps, lists and diagrams in my textbooks were to me classic ciphers, empty and 0 shaped – obedient, open, waiting to be filled with meaning. I’d get light-headed over the simple, blissful fact of alphabetical abstraction; the thought that the smudgy marks I made shared the same powers as the ones printed in books was a continuous miracle. (148)

She describes her “mental geography” as “all cut up and collage, a mimic empire of signs” (148). The huge pleasure she is recalling is to do in part with this all being inward process, all within her control ; her interpreting mind is needed to animate “the mimic empire of signs” and “ciphers”. Surely, too, in her reconstruction of her remembered anguish over speech, retreat into reading and pleasure in control of a fixed-because-dead language is a sense of her profound alienation from the real world at that time. When she could have been basking in the self-esteem of being top of the class, this is how she recalls feeling about herself:

In my first high school year, I had no friends, I was mostly invisible as well as inaudible: small, grubby, uncouth, a swot and no good at sports. Then there were the bugs. We finally bought the lethal shampoo from Boots and applied it. [...] And worse, much worse – during that first winter I had braces fitted to my teeth, top and bottom. [...] Most people tried not to look at me nearly as hard as I tried not to look at them. (154)



In the last decade of the twentieth century, Lorna Sage, a critic, journalist and literary academic, engaged in tracing the remembered nature of her interior experience in the 40s, 50s and early 60s, exposing and analysing, too, models of identity, particularly for women, which belonged to that time. In writing in general terms of perceived “separate spheres” for males and females in the late 50s, she describes with incredulity how “our heroes, the Beats” (233) reinvented the same old world of male dominance, female biological destiny. Retrospectively angry, Sage comments:

It’s galling to realise that you were a creature of mythology: girls were the enemies of promise, a trap for boys, although with the wisdom of hindsight you can see that the opposite was the case. In those seductive yarns about freedom, girls’ wants are foreknown. Like Lucy, you are meant to stay put in one spot of time. (234)

The end-of-the-century woman who held the pen shapes our awareness in a way that makes us take in the constructed nature of the norms of that time with a sense of shock. She writes, too, in an engagingly frank way of the experience of being female and how it affects what one feels about oneself. Quoting Roger J. Porter, Eakin has observed that there has been a curious reluctance in autobiographers to focus psychologically on the body, to show the body’s contribution to the structure of consciousness (*Touching* 184). Perhaps this is a male standpoint: Sage, in common with others in the enlightenment of the feminist revolution, demonstrates what the hormonal contribution of adolescence, pregnancy and the menstrual cycle do to her sense of identity.

In some respects, the onset of the menarche improved life for Sage: starting menstruating at eleven was a real status enhancer and her father stopped beating her, retrospective interpretation suggesting that “my adolescent breasts and curves were beginning to give the whole performance a compromising sexual savour” (172). Confirmation is seen as a rite of passage merely because her new shoes necessitated proper stockings and thus a suspender belt:

The magic of the Church no longer impressed us. Our own bodies were more mysterious than the wine and the wafers. [...] I’d become wildly allergic to all sorts of new things. My body was over-reacting to every stimulus from inside or outside, my period came every three weeks in a heavy iron-smelling flood, along with backaches, headaches and cramps. Each time I’d swell, and then lose pounds in a couple of days off school, moping around the house, insulated with aspirin and groggy daydreams. The metabolic misery had its pleasurable side. [...] Bad blood, excited blood. My nose bled too.(197-8)

There was a sense that one’s very body was on loan:

But that we took for granted. The high school's best swimmer had to ask her parents and the headmistress for permission to use Tampax when her period clashed with a big competition, in case she demystified virginity. (204)

She is shocked to read the confession, thirty years after the event, of Joyce Johnson, lover of Jack Kerouac, revolutionary bard of the Beat generation, which was such a feature of Sage's growing up:

Could he ever include a woman in his journeys...? Whenever I tried to raise the question, he'd stop me by saying that what I really wanted were babies. That was what all women wanted and what I wanted too, even though I said I didn't. (234)

Describing this as "claptrap", Sage records in anguished detail how far short she falls of any such longing when she becomes pregnant:

I'd been caught out, I would have to pay. I was in trouble, I'd have no secrets any longer, I'd be exposed as a fraud, my fate wasn't my own. (236)

She continues at school for several months without disclosing her condition to anyone beyond her family. Of this period she writes:

It was hard work remembering who I was and staying myself, and probably I was a little crazy. (241)

She feels terror when she believes that she is about to be found out when, at school, a girl playfully puts her arm around her waist and observes she has put on weight:

In that moment the smell of the formaldehyde from the rats pinned out on boards in the lab, and the familiar claustrophobic feel of the closeness of other girls' bodies, inspired such fear and nausea that I was beside myself. I was an outsider, harbouring an alien, an alien myself. Having such a secret was like having cancer – a disease which couldn't be mentioned except in shamed whispers. (246)

Certainly, there is not the remotest sense of her accepting a longed-for natural state. She does not become reconciled to her situation nor ever even pay lip service to, let alone give real assent to the patriarchal thesis that "Biology is destiny". She does her "A" levels leaking breast milk. Refused contraceptive advice by her doctor, in spite of the certainty of their total abstinence she becomes obsessively terrified of a further pregnancy:

Behind it all was a visceral dread that easily defeated common sense. Every month I was convinced, despite our abstinence, that I was, by some bad miracle, pregnant, and I raged and despaired. Pre-menstrual tension wasn't yet something people took seriously, although many knew it from experience, but even if we'd been able to label my lunacy, I doubt if we'd have tamed it. (271)

Lorna Sage communicates vividly the struggle she had to realise what she perceives to be her deepest, intellectual identity — an identity in which she subsequently

distinguished herself — against sabotage by her own female metabolism and the construction of female role and identity at that time.

Facts of interior experience leave no verifiable trace: connoisseurs of autobiography have to depend on the instinct to trust that particular works encourage. Sage's fascinating autobiography is written with a novelist's eye for character and an engaging ability to draw attention to its highly constructed nature: she points out how neatly many of the loose ends are tied, for example (281). It is a most intelligently interpretative autobiography. Yet I would quarrel with one major conclusion she drew. Her reading of her mother's story was that a confident, outgoing girl was transformed into a timorous, inept and neurotic wraith by her father's betrayal of her when she was sixteen when he had a relationship with her friend, Marj. Certainly the diaries of 1933 and 34 suggest that her mother, Vanna, had been close to her father at that period, although Lorna had only ever known her expressing alienation and resistance to anything to do with him.

However, Sage's own childhood and what we can conclude from it of her earliest nurture, would seem to give the lie to any interpretation of a pre-existing psychological security in Vanna before the rupture caused by the Marj affair. Here is a mother whose preferred mode of being seems to be a "miles away" abstraction which would certainly have boded ill for any infant mirroring for her own children. Analytical literature explains that in the mother-baby diad, the nursing couple, the mother tunes in to recollections of her own experience for a sense of an appropriate way of how to be. Interestingly, Sage herself does not seem to notice that her own predilection revealed a marked similarity to her mother's habitual state: in her early unhappy years in the council house she attempted to blur the boundaries of self through plodding through the countryside:

Try as I might to lose myself in the landscape, however, I was still only an apprentice misfit. [...] And the truth was that often no amount of trudging would get me to the state of dreamy abstraction I craved. Then I was simply lonely. (105)

Sage communicates a continual sense in her narrative of being an outsider both in her family and her social group. The insecurity over boundaries and general unhappiness Sage seems to have suffered, particularly after the move to be under her mother's care at the council house, suggest a very insecure attachment to her, as Sage felt safer wandering the countryside than being at home under Vanna's abstracted and chaotic rule. In early adolescence, Sage seems happiest in the complete withdrawal of losing

herself in reading or ruling over “a mimic empire of signs” in inner pondering, as we have seen.

Sage’s mother is the only figure in her life continuously present throughout her growing up. In her early years, Sage’s recollection of her is of “a shy, slender wraith” (8); Grandpa is recalled far more vividly from that time. Bowlby’s fascinating late collection of essays *A Secure Base* (1988) contains a considerable body of research evidence on family circumstances which promote both secure and insecure attachment to a mother figure. Although Sage describes herself as Grandpa’s “hobble” (3) for her very early years, it seems highly improbable, given the sexist ethics of the times on child care, that he was actually involved in her management as a nappy-wearing infant; it is hard to see how Vanna could have avoided playing the central role in her early infancy.

Bowlby quotes at length Main’s longitudinal study over many years which identified the sort of infant/mother relationship which produces secure attachment. Of the three categories she describes — secure attachment, anxious attachment and avoidant attachment — Sage would seem to fall firmly into the third category. Main makes clear that models of parent /child interaction are established in infancy and:

tend to persist and are so taken for granted that they come to operate at an unconscious level. [...] For a relationship between any two individuals to proceed harmoniously, each must be aware of the other’s point of view, his goals, feelings and intentions and each must so adjust his own behaviour that some alignment of goals is negotiated. This requires that each should have reasonably accurate models of self and other which are regularly up-dated by free communication between them. (Secure 130-1)

We have already seen to what a degree Sage’s parents’ “couple myth” is divorced from any reality that Sage perceives in the material world. Further, one of the most distressing aspects of her autobiography is that, from her perception, virtually the only time she wins approval from her parents is in some public situation. Main’s research makes clear that, for the most part, parents with happy early childhoods themselves have a securely attached infant “and those who had an unhappy childhood, more or less cloaked by an inability to recall”, (134) have children who are insecurely attached. Interestingly and excitingly however, researchers discovered a category of mother who had indeed had an unhappy childhood yet had a securely attached child seemingly because her ability to reflect on that past had been strong, and she had thus come to terms with it in a positive way. Inability to ponder on, make sense of and

thus integrate past unhappiness by bringing it firmly into consciousness, tended to produce the poor outcome of insecurely attached children. Main concludes that “free access to, and the coherent organisation of information relevant [to their own childhood attachment] play a determining role in the development of a secure personality in adult life” (Secure 135).

It seems probable that Grandpa was Sage’s mother Vanna’s primary attachment figure in infancy and childhood (though, again, it would be implausible for even such a wife as his not to be driven into playing an active role in small baby management). It is highly unlikely, however, that this was a secure attachment. Sage herself recalls being left, as a three-year old, to play with some frightening urchins in the street outside a distant pub when Grandpa was “minding” her (15). Sage discerns in the diary evidence that, at Hanmer, Grandpa was in “the eternal triangle situation *again*” [my emphasis] (78) and, on questioning her father, (who had had the information from his late wife) discovers that there was talk of another woman, and possibly an illegitimate child, while Grandpa and his family lived in the Rhondda. “The old devil was never to be trusted” (79). It seems more than probable that vicious and violent quarrels were a feature of life before Grandpa and family moved to Hanmer. Had Sage’s mother been securely attached to her father, it seems improbable that she would have become permanently alienated from him through the affair with Marj when she was sixteen, in spite of its new element of personal betrayal of her.

In a very interpretative autobiography, Sage’s judgment of the root cause of her mother’s insecurity is the only major area where this reader has felt inclined to disbelieve, which says a great deal for the analytic self Sage has enacted. In conclusion, then, it may well be salutary to ponder on the human need which has seemed to impel the writing of this very revealing text. It is probable that Sage was aware that the confronting of ghosts was a means to laying them. Further, her “spell-binding, jaw-dropping frankness” (Rev. Times) in the telling of her story is a rejection of particular sorts of fantastical, crippling and defensive female scripts: that of her grandmother which cushioned her from the real world at high cost to all those around her, and that of her mother which allowed her to be a daughter in perpetuity, “a child dreaming of pretty things” (186).

If she guarded her threshold it was against prying eyes. Women neighbours were never allowed in, nor were their daughters, who were suspected of being fifth

columnists, housework spies who'd run home and tell their mothers we didn't clean behind the sofa. (119-20)

In her forthright account which lets the world in, Sage is daring to repudiate a matriarchal prohibition and is bringing a brutal clarity to the realm of her mother's evasions and fantasies. The start of Lorna's intimacy with Victor Sage came when, watching a tennis game, they "confide recklessly" in each other.

We boasted to each other about the awfulness of life in our respective council houses and stripped off the appearances with which our parents covered their privacy. (228)

In seeking out and publishing her harsher truth, Sage demonstrated an important facet of her self at the time of writing — her analytical, authorial power. She dared to expose what she believed herself to be and how she reckoned she came to be that way. From a family that she saw as bedevilled by impotent dreaming and a strong drive towards damage limitation through pretending nothing bad had happened, Lorna Sage chose to confront publicly a painful past, to achieve her own naming of self — a naming which belied the book's title. Mortally ill for much of the period of writing this book, she chose to use much of her final life energy to ponder on her growing up and to try to make sense of it. Indeed, *Bad Blood* came out to widespread critical acclaim and was shortlisted for the Whitbread Book of the Year Award in the final weeks of her life. Ironically, a work in which she confronted unconventional, even scandalous, elements in her own and her family's past and sought to shine light into the darkest recesses of self became the means whereby a deep and enduring need was answered: through *Bad Blood* Lorna Sage finally achieved affirmative mirroring in the world.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems important to return to a valuable precept for any literary study — that texts are written in circumstances for purposes. A reflection on the contexts and driving impulses from which the autobiographical acts we have considered seem to have been created brings this study to a close, in the full recognition that the past is recalled from the lived reality of the present, which both shapes and colours what is written. None of the authors considered here would have declared with the Olympian certitude of Horace: “Exegi monumentum aere perennium”,<sup>69</sup> yet a need to memorialise has been at least part of the impetus that made several of my subjects autobiographers.

Denise Levertov, loving the tales her mother told her of her growing up in Wales, asked Beatrice Levertoff to record them in writing before her death, so that precious “oral storybook” would be given permanent form. She has seemed to have a similar need, in her turn, to pass on to others what was given, by many, to her, to continue a strong link from the past to the future. In her final years, Levertov, implicitly commemorating her parents’ first meeting in Constantinople, constructs from words her own Byzantine cathedral of mosaics, fashioned from significant life experiences. Yeats wrote his “Sailing to Byzantium” in scorn of a failing body and emphasising a balancing relief at the durability of art. Levertov, in contrast, was calmly resigned to old age and approaching death, but nevertheless felt the need to leave behind a sense of the people and forces that had shaped her and the epiphanic moments from which particular characteristics blossomed, leading in old age to a recognition of God’s purpose and power in the world. Her own Byzantine mosaic, which traces the force of destiny and the conviction that the greatest realization of selfhood is in acts of praise to God, proclaims, as did the work of the Byzantine artificers, the sense of wonder and awe at the human capacity to be receptors to the numinous.

Berry’s drive in memorialising was to create a frail bulwark against the encroaching tide of annihilation, to celebrate the human qualities he had cherished in his life and to commemorate the passing of an entire purposeful way of life and relating that had been obliterated in his lifetime with the extinction of the coal industry in Wales. What he creates is both time capsule and memorial urn. He also seeks for meaning in

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69 “I have created a memorial more lasting than brass”.

the pattern he has discerned in his life. An element in Coombes's complex drive, and his professed motivation, was to reveal to an ignorant and indifferent world the human cost of coal and, in so doing, commemorate those whose lives had been blighted or lost in the struggle to wrest it from the earth.

Part of Margiad Evans's pain in facing an early death will have been the thought of leaving a small child motherless. In the final year of her life, she composes "The Immortal Hospital", where she relives a blissfully happy year of childhood when the substitute mothering she received from Aunt Fran was the most powerful element in her sense of wellbeing. As she reawakens the memory of that love, as succour and consolation in a time of grief, there may indeed be the hope that the world will provide the sort of nurture for her child that had proved such a source of strength for herself. *Ray of Darkness* is written not only in an attempt to master the distress of epilepsy but also to be of use to others. Similarly in "The Nightingale Silenced" she tries to wrest meaning from the anguish of a brain tumour by making doctors more aware of the inner world of the sufferers they treat. *The Wooden Doctor* was a means of trying to understand a particular life experience, a necessary catharsis and written in the hope of passing through and, perhaps, beyond, a painful life experience.

Probably suffering from emphysema for the seven years she took to write *Bad Blood*, Lorna Sage may well have deduced that she was unlikely to live into old age: certainly in the final years of its writing she knew herself to be dying. She seems to have been responding to a not uncommon need to make sense of one's life as one reaches the end of it. Ultimately, the literary critic and academic uses her formidable analytical skills to work out what she reckoned her early life had meant. She reclaims her own story from the pejorative construction put on it by others, as the title *Bad Blood* implies. In leaving so clear-sighted an analysis from her vantage point as a successful academic, someone who has won through, she offers, beyond her own death, the hope of a rich survival to others.

Gwyn Thomas seems to have written *A Few Selected Exits* because others wanted him to. At that time in the mid 1960s, *Punch* was a popular periodical and his regular stories and articles there were valued. In those stories he was often able to distance himself from the blacker thoughts his early upbringing engendered in him: it was quite allowable to embellish and fabricate, for no-one took his creations for direct reportage. Indeed, the retelling allowed him to handle the material in a cathartic way



as my analysis of "Arrayed Like One of These" has attempted to show. Further, he had become something of a household name through such programmes as *The Brains Trust* on television and *Any Questions* on radio. When both American and British publishers simultaneously showed an interest in an autobiography, it was hard to resist. As we have seen, the introspection involved proved to be a deeply painful and the result, at times, less than satisfying.

Rhys Davies's autobiography was published in 1969, the year after he had been awarded an OBE, something of an Establishment accolade. *Print of a Hare's Foot* positions him within the literary world of London and highlights his friendship with D.H.Lawrence. He presents himself as a debonair figure, a sophisticated litterateur, who has thoroughly moved beyond the crudities of Welsh flannel. In keeping with this image, he intends that the reader shall get from his work only what he has deliberately put into it. As an autobiographer he can be experienced as both controlling and manipulative. Yet he writes, as I have shown, from the vulnerability of a narcissist, in the clinical sense: for him, costly self-disclosure would have meant being perilously exposed.

Working on autobiography can give one the sense of moving deeply into other people's lives. All the subjects of this thesis are now dead. It has felt a privilege to come to know, to understand and even, in some cases, to love these writers who, through leaving a record of how they perceived their lives, have sent their stories forward into the future. To write searching autobiography, seeking to sound the depths of one's own complexities and re-enacting the joy, pain, wonder and struggle of one's human journey, is to bequeath a rich gift to posterity. Through tracing the meaning that others have discerned in their lives, readers of autobiography are offered the hope of ultimately making sense of their own.

## Bibliography

The following bibliography includes all manuscript/typescript materials, primary sources and secondary sources. These are organized by author. I have found an integrated form gives a useful time-based perspective on the stages of a particular author's work. The collections of unpublished work, holograph and typescript, are those at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, The South Wales Coalfield Archive at the University of Wales, Swansea, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin and the Gollancz Archive now at the Littlehampton Book Services Archive.

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