On Wednesday afternoon, 5 September 1929, the eighteen-year-old Elizabeth Bishop was writing to Frani Blough, whom she’d met at the Walnut Hill boarding school in Massachusetts: they became lifelong friends. Bishop was, she said, halfway through *Cymbeline*: ‘I had no idea it was so good—I never thought of Shakespeare except in terms of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, but don’t you like this?’ And she quoted:

> Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,  
> Nor the furious winter’s rages;  
> Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
> Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages:  
> Golden lads and girls all must,  
> As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.[1]

Don’t you like this? Yes, we do. We also like the passage in Hugh Kenner’s *The Pound Era*, discussing those
“Golden,” magical word, irradiates the stanza so that we barely think to ask how Shakespeare may have found it.” Kenner thinks to ask – or rather, puts to good use what a friend has passed on to him: ‘Yet a good guess at how he found it is feasible, for in the mid-20th century a visitor to Shakespeare’s Warwickshire met a countryman blowing the grey head off a dandelion: “We call these golden boys chimney-sweepers when they go to seed.”’[2]

But yes, ‘golden’, certainly a word magical enough to fascinate and gravitate to many title pages. Before Penelope Fitzgerald’s The Golden Child, David Garnett’s The Golden Echo or Carson McCullers’ Reflections in a Golden Eye, Kenneth Grahame wrote The Golden Age, a phrase that would later resound in Raymond Williams’ The Country and the City as he explored the ‘myth’ of the golden age, pointing out that, as early as Hesiod, ‘at the beginning of country literature, it is already far in the past.’ He sees the ‘escalator of golden ages’ always moving backwards in time, always receding.[3] Every generation, in fact, or a proportion of it, looks back to that supposed idyllic period.

![Frida Strindberg, née Uhl](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=17944741)

Then, as Ronald Blythe recalls, ‘One of the first night-clubs was opened in 1913 by Strindberg’s second wife, a beautiful ex-actress with a Viennese reputation. It was called the Cave of the Golden Calf and Epstein and Wyndham Lewis decorated its walls and columns. It was haunted by artists, the demi-monde, and guardsmen who went there, so they said, to listen to the accordions of Galician gypsies and hear Lilian Shelly singing “Popsie-wopsie”’. [4]

‘Popsie-wopsie’? It seems so, though I’ve seen it mentioned as ‘My Little Popsy-Wopsy’. She was born in Bristol and apparently posed for both Jacob Epstein and Augustus John.

Eric Gill carved a bas-relief of the golden calf – obviously the central motif – which was hung up beside the entrance (and reproduced on membership cards) ‘and finally carved in three dimensions in Hoptonwood stone and erected on a pedestal’. Madame Strindberg being unable to pay for it, Gill then lent it to Roger Fry for the second Post-Impressionist show at the Grafton Gallery.[5]

And then: The Golden Bowl by Mr Henry James. Writing to his aunt Laura from Alexandria in 1916, E. M. Forster wrote: ‘Work here is quieter again, which leaves me time for reading, and while you were at H. J.’s Portrait of a Lady I was tackling his latter and tougher end in the person of What Maisie Knew. I haven’t quite got through her yet, but I think I shall: she is my very limit—beyond her lies The Golden Bowl, The Ambassadors and similar impossibles. I don’t think James could have helped his later manner—is a
natural development, not a pose. All that one can understand of him seems so genuine, that what one can't understand is likely to be genuine also.'[6] A careful cloud of unknowing.

Three years later, in John Buchan's Mr Standfast, the chapter entitled "I take the Wings of a Dove" includes the phrase 'golden bowl'.[7] But my favourite recent reference is in Michael Ondaatje's fine novel Warlight ("The Moth" is a name conferred by the narrator and his sister): ‘One night when Rachel had been unable to sleep, he pulled a book called The Golden Bowl from my mother’s shelf and began reading to us. The manner of the paragraphs, as the sentences strolled a maze-like path towards evaporation was, to the two of us, similar to The Moth’s when he was being drunkenly magisterial. It was as if language had been separated from his body in a courteous way.’[8]

References


Following up

I’ve recently bought—but am not yet reading—the new book by Alan Garner, called Where Shall We Run To? – A Memoir. I’m not reading it yet because my epic revisiting of the Patrick White canon is only now nearing its close; then, too, some major deadlines are approaching for the first issue of the new Ford Madox Ford Journal; and in any case, I was just in time to glimpse the Librarian carrying the book away to some other part of the house. First dibs, as they say.

The publication of this new Garner recalled for me the previous one, Boneland, a novel which appeared in 2012. It’s short, powerful and cryptic, as much of Garner’s work tends to be, not through obfuscation but compression. Some of his readers are extraordinarily knowledgeable not only about Garner’s entire oeuvre but also the mythologies and belief systems that underlie so much of his writing; and I remember that the medieval text, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, was mentioned and cited several times in online comments about the book. So I followed up.
I’d certainly read Gawain at some stage over the years. I’d never taken the kind of course of study that included it, though the University of Bristol had the supreme good fortune to have on its staff John Burrow, a brilliant critic and editor of medieval literature (and one of the most delightful people I’ve ever come across). He published a classic study of the poem in 1965, and an edition of it for Penguin in 1982. Following up, though, the edition I read was the one at hand in the office, a modern English version with a critical introduction by John Gardner from the University of Chicago Press, reissued in 2011. Ninety pages of introduction and commentary allow for a fair bit of jousting with other critics and commentators, while demonstrating an impressive familiarity with the relevant secondary literature as well as the poem itself. The alliterative verse rollicks along at a pleasing lick:

Now comes the season of summer; soft are the winds;
The spirit of Zephyrus whispers to seeds and green shoots.
Joyful enough is that herb rising up out of earth,
When the dampening dew has dropped from all her leaves,
To bask in the blissful gaze of the bright sun.

John Champlin Gardner Jr. died nearly forty years ago in a motorcycle accident at the early age of 49. He’d published more than a dozen works of fiction, half a dozen critical works, children’s books, and translations of the Alliterative Morte d’Arthur and Other Middle English Poems as well as the complete works of the Gawain poet. He’s probably still best-known for his novel Grendel, a retelling of the Beowulf story from the monster’s point of view.
That phrase, ‘following up’, I always associate with an essay by Guy Davenport on the extraordinary photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard (in *The Geography of the Imagination*):

He was an unfailing follower-up, which is why I think of him as the best educated man I have ever known. As a professor I must work with people for whom indifference is both a creed and a defense of their fantastic narrowness of mind, but Gene knew nothing of this. When he met Louis and Celia Zukofsky at my house, he went away and read Zukofsky. Not that he was an enthusiast. He simply had a curiosity that went all the way, and a deep sense of courtesy whereby if a man were a writer he would read what he had written, if a man were a painter he would look at his paintings.

Davenport was himself a follower-up of impressive proportions. He remembered a walking trip in Italy and France with Christopher Middleton, the two of them armed only with a collected John Donne and Pound’s *Cantos*, ‘a rich, barely comprehensible poem’, Davenport commented. He continues: ‘My first response was to learn Italian and Provençal, and to paint in the quattrocento manner. All real education’, he adds, ‘is such unconscious seduction.’

That’s quite a response; quite a follow-up.

*August 14, 2018 / Literature / Alan Garner, Guy Davenport, John Gardner / Leave a comment*

**Gilbert White of Selborne**

(Skylark: [https://findingnature.co.uk/animal/skylark/](https://findingnature.co.uk/animal/skylark/))

In *Great Trade Route*, Ford Madox Ford, recalling a visit to a New Jersey truck farm in the company of William Carlos Williams, commented on the behaviour of a snipe which was distracting the men from the nest to protect its young, an example of what Gilbert White famously termed *storgé*, using the Greek word for familial or ‘natural’ affection, one of the four Greek terms for ‘love’, along with *philia*, *agape* and *eros*: all were discussed in C. S. Lewis’s book, *The Four Loves* (1960).[1]

'He said:
“Where do you get your absurd Latin nomenclature from? Isn’t it phalæna ...”

She had answered:
“From White . . . The Natural History of Selborne is the only natural history I ever read ....”

“He’s the last English writer that could write,” said Tietjens.
“He calls the downs ‘those majestic and amusing mountains,’” she said. “Where do you get your dreadful Latin pronunciation from? Phal ... i ... i ... na! To rhyme with Dinah!”

“It’s ‘sublime and amusing mountains,’ not ‘majestic and amusing,’” Tietjens said. “I got my Latin pronunciation, like all public schoolboys of to-day, from the German.”[2]

Later, in the third volume, A Man Could Stand Up—, Tietjens is in the trenches, where his Sergeant enthusiastically praises the skylark’s ‘Won’erful trust in yumanity! Won’erful hinstinck set in the fethered brest by the Halmighty!’

Tietjens says ‘mildly’ that he thinks the Sergeant has ‘got his natural history wrong. He must divide the males from the females. The females sat on the nest through obstinate attachment to their eggs; the males obstinately soared above the nests in order to pour out abuse at other male skylarks in the vicinity.’

“Gilbert White of Selbourne,” he said to the Sergeant, “called the behaviour of the female STORGE: a good word for it.” But, as for trust in humanity, the Sergeant might take it that larks never gave us a thought. We were part of the landscape and if what destroyed their nests whilst they sat on them was a bit of H[igh].E[xplosive]. shell or the coulter of a plough it was all one to them.’

The sergeant is highly sceptical of such sentiments:

“Ju ’eer what the orfcer said, Corporal,” the one said to the other. Wottever’ll ’e say next! Skylarks not trust ’uman beens in battles! Cor!”
The other grunted and, mournfully, the voices died out.’

Later in the same volume, Ford recurs to White in Valentine’s own reflections – Ford uses the image or allusion echoed in the thoughts of multiple characters to frequently brilliant effect:

‘Her mother was too cunning for them. With the cunning that makes the mother wild-duck tumble apparently broken-winged just under your feet to decoy you away from her little things. STORGE, Gilbert White calls it!’[3]
In *The Farther Shore: A Natural History of Perception, 1798-1984*, a superb, rich study of how technological developments since the eighteenth century have affected the ways in which we interpret the world, Don Gifford wrote of how, for Samuel Johnson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the ambition to be *generally* well read, that is, to have a reasonable grasp of all that was being published and made available, ‘was within reach’, and that a community of those sharing that distinction or at least that ambition was ‘at least imagined to be a given among educated men and women.’ His footnote mentions the assumption evident in Gilbert White’s letters that his correspondents shared his acquaintance with Dryden, Pope, Addison, Swift, Gray, Johnson, Hume, Gibbon, Sterne – as well as with the Bible, Virgil, Homer, Horace, the Koran, Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton. By the mid-80s (when he was writing this book), Gifford adds, ‘the idea of being well read and of belonging to such a community is a joke we have politely learned not to mention except with a shrug of self-deprecation.’

Of course, White’s acquaintance with Pope was not only with the man’s work: he was presented with a copy of Pope’s six-volume translation of the *Iliad* by the poet himself, when graduating with distinction from Oriel College, Oxford, in 1743.[4]

White’s fascinating and deceptively simple work has embedded itself in English culture in numerous contexts. His genius, as Ronald Blythe remarks, was ‘to revolutionise the study of natural history by noting what exactly lay outside his own back-door.’[5] In his first letter to the Honourable Daines Barrington in June 1769, White wrote, ‘I see you are a gentleman of great candour, and one that will make allowances; especially where the writer professes to be an *out-door naturalist*, one that takes his observations from the subject itself, and not from the writings of others’ (*Selborne* 104). He produced hundreds of pages, records of *looking* and *listening* and *remembering* and *wondering*. Birds, plants, insects, weather, animals, not least the human. ‘My musical friend, at whose house I am now visiting, has tried all the owls that are his near neighbours with a pitch-pipe set at concert-pitch, and finds they all hoot in B flat. He will examine the nightingales next spring’ (*Selborne* 127).
The local as the universal. A hundred and eighty years after White’s death, William Carlos Williams would note that the poet’s business was ‘to write particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, in the particular to discover the universal.’ He quoted the line of John Dewey’s that he had come upon by chance, ‘The local is the only universal, upon that all else builds’, commenting elsewhere that, ‘in proportion as a man has bestirred himself to become awake to his own locality he will perceive more and more of what is disclosed and find himself in a position to make the necessary translations.’[6] Williams in Rutherford; Thoreau in Concord; White in Selborne.

Don Gifford points out that, ‘In effect, White’s perspective differs radically from our own because he had no a priori basis for distinguishing between trivial and significant things.’ So, in addition to seeing with his own eyes, White ‘had to see cumulatively, a second order of seeing’. He tells the story of Henry Thoreau reducing Ellery Channing to tears when the two men went out into the woods together: Channing knew so little about what to record that he returned with an empty notebook, desperate and frustrated.[7]

White’s journals were published in 1931 and, Alexandra Harris comments, ‘his work was tirelessly reissued over the next decade.’ But then, in addition to being valued for his ‘timeless qualities’, White was ‘also being used as someone relevant to the present time precisely because the world he knew was disappearing.’[8]

When we read those writers detailing the current decline or disappearance of so much British wildlife, through environmental damage, farming practices and government policies, the parallels hardly need stressing.

On the matter of White’s journals, let your fingers do the running, to this superb resource:
http://naturalhistoryofselborne.com/

House and garden, café and shop?
http://www.gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk/

References


Cats, monkeys, parrots and a pelican

https://shakespeareillustration.org/2016/08/13/shylock-and-tubal/

‘Though I had to run to London several times’, Edward Fitzgerald wrote to Frederick Tennyson on 8 June 1852, ‘I generally ran back as fast as I could; much preferring the fresh air and the fields to the smoke and “the wilderness of monkeys” in London.’

That last phrase comes from The Merchant of Venice — by the dramatist of whom Fitzgerald wrote, ‘What
astonishes me is, Shakespeare: when I look into him, it is not a Book, but People talking all round me.

Tubal tells Shylock he has been shown a ring that one of Antonio’s creditors ‘had of your daughter for a monkey.’ Shylock is hugely upset by the news since the ring was a turquoise given to him by Leah, before she became his wife: ‘I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys’ (III.i).

My Arden edition, so wedded to extensive and detailed footnotes, has nothing to add here. But recurrences of the phrase, with embellishments, or near misses or oblique references, have offered other editors and annotators hours of fun.

‘Excuse these moans’, Ivor Gurney wrote to Mrs Voynich in April 1916. ‘But I am as a bottle in the smoke, a mouldy pelican in a howling wilderness of monkeys.’ A footnote here points to the Book of Common Prayer, Psalm cxix (bottle in the smoke) and the pelican ‘(not mouldy)’ in Psalm cii, while commenting on Gurney’s ‘also mixing in the “wilderness of monkeys” from Shylock’s valuing of his ring in The Merchant of Venice, III, i.’

Ten years later, C. E. Montague wrote in Rough Justice of his characters, ‘Molly and Auberon too, making no show among parrots and monkeys, but still somehow right’. Parrots and monkeys now? An Army phrase meaning goods and chattels, personal possessions, Eric Partridge tells us, citing a later catchphrase: ‘All right! Pick up your parrots and monkeys, and get mobile’.

Pelicans, parrots, monkeys. Something missing? Ah. In Some Do Not..., the first volume of Ford Madox Ford’s Parade’s End tetralogy, he has Christopher Tietjens remember ‘the words of some Russian: “Cats and monkeys. Monkeys and cats. All humanity is there.”’ ‘Some Russian’, forsooth! It was the New Yorker Henry James, as Ford’s editor, Max Saunders, documents in a footnote: ‘See Henry James, “The Madonna of the Future” (1873), which repeats the sentence: “Cats and monkeys, monkeys and cats; all human life is there!”: The Tales of Henry James, ed. Maqbool Aziz, vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 202–32 (226, 232).’ Fordian numerologists will savour the publication date of James’s story (the year of Ford’s birth).

Nor is this the volume’s only dealings with these furry constituents of ‘all humanity’. Less than fifty pages later, Mrs Wannop, writer and mother of Valentine, addresses Christopher Tietjens. “My dear boy,” she said. “Life’s a bitter thing. I’m an old novelist and know it. There you are working yourself to death to save the nation with a wilderness of cats and monkeys howling and squalling your personal reputation away...” This further twist engages the editor again: ‘While “cats and monkeys” echoes the
phrase noted on 100 above, the addition of “wilderness” here adds another echo, to *The Merchant of Venice*, III.i.112–14, when Shylock says to his friend: “Thou torturest me, Tubal: it was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.” Four more pages and the stalwart Mrs Wannop remarks, “Of course, I back my daughter against the cats and monkeys.”[6] As who would not?

(Adelaide Clemens as Valentine Wannop in the BBC/HBO series of *Parade’s End*)

A decade before *Some Do Not*. . . , Ford had devoted an entire book to Henry James, in the course of which he quoted that final sentence of ‘The Madonna of the Future’ twice, the second time while he was comparing aspects of James and another of Ford’s most admired confrères, Turgenev: ‘For the Russian could never have written *The Turn of the Screw*; and, if he could have given us *Daisy Miller*, he certainly could not have written “Cats and monkeys, monkeys and cats – all human life is there…”’[7]

Not that it’s all literary larks. Jaap Goudsmit’s 1997 study, *Viral Sex*, discussed the possible lines of descent of HIV and SIV (Simian immunodeficiency, a virus found in primates), mentioning that monkeys and cats ‘in the same household might sometimes become companions and groom each other.’ That they would also fight is shown in tomb paintings dating from the reigns of Amenhotep III and Horemheb, both fourteenth century BC. ‘So more than three thousand years ago, Egyptian domestic culture gave cat viruses the chance to infect monkeys.’[8]

Cats and monkeys. Monkeys and cats.

References


After last week, when the rain drenched and draggled so doggedly that I was reminded of Louis MacNeice’s comment on ‘those April showers which in Ireland persist for twelve months’, we are back to more settled unsettled weather, veering from sunshine to rain in the merest jiffy. We’re even promised a heat wave soon.

In a cool room, anyway, inching my eyes down the page, I encounter this:

‘Can vei la lauzeta mover  
De joi sas alas contral ray,  
Que s·oblida e·s layssa cazer  
Per la doussor qu·al cor li vai,  
O my!’

Hmm. Yet it seems faintly familiar. The next lines are: ‘Bird and she bird / Love and fall’. I recalled Guy Davenport outlining his initial version of Ezra Pound, ‘first of all a man who had written a rich, barely comprehensible poem, a man whose portrait bust had been chiselled by Gaudier. My first response was to learn Italian and Provençal, and to paint in the quattrocento manner. All real education is such unconscious seduction.’


I myself have signally failed to learn Provençal and must blunder along as best I can. Perhaps not Arnaut Daniel, and not Bertran de Born. I rummage in teetering piles. In *Anthology of Troubadour Lyric Poetry*, I find, ah yes, Bernard de Ventadour’s poem, translated there as prose: ‘When I see the lark beating with joy its wings against the ray of the sun until, oblivious, it swoons and drops for the sweetness which enters its heart’. [4] Ah, ‘Bird and she bird / Love and fall’ – so larks, like swifts, mate on the wing? Elsewhere, the poet W. D. Snodgrass offers rhymes:

‘Now when I see the skylark lift
His wings for joy in dawn’s first ray
Then let himself, oblivious, drift
For all his heart is glad and gay’. [5]

And, of course, the path snakes back to Pound: ‘When I see the lark a-moving / For joy his wings against the sunlight, / Who forgets himself and lets himself fall / For the sweetness which goes into his heart’. [6] That must be where I first saw it, thirty years back, probably more. So early in Pound’s career; but, very late in that career, in one of the last scraps of *Cantos*, the fragment ending ‘To be men not destroyers’, we find this:

“es laissa cader”
so high toward the sun and then falling,
“de joi sas alas”
to set here the roads of France.

In fact, the third line of Bernard’s verse has appeared in the first of the *Pisan Cantos*; the line about the roads of France, two cantos later. [7] And, apart from the sources of a Bible and an anthology of poetry, the *Pisan Cantos* are, of course, primarily memories—fragmentary, often imperfect, no doubt, adhering in odd patterns and permutations—mixed with observation of the day-to-day life of the camp. In retrospect, among Pound’s glimpses of paradise were life in pre-war London and his great ventures into Provence, in 1912, 1919 and 1924, but particularly the first. ‘Or, again, a man may walk the hill roads and river roads from Limoges and Charente to Dordogne and Narbonne and learn a little, or more than a little, of what the country meant to the wandering singers, he may learn, or think he learns, why so many canzos open with speech of the weather; or why such a man made war on such and such castles.’ [8]
Or a man might write ‘The Gypsy’ or ‘Provincia Deserta’—or ‘Near Perigord’:

Take the whole man and ravel out the story.
He loved this lady in castle Montaignac?
The castle flanked him—he had need of it.
You read to-day, how long the overlords of Perigord,
The Talleyrands, have held the place, it was no transient fiction.
And Maent failed him? Or saw through the scheme?[9]

The lark is, I gather, ‘one of the most popular birds in post-classical Europeans poetry.’ I am directed to Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Spenser, Wordsworth, Milton. Tennyson, Dante, Goethe, Shelley and Blake, among others.[10] It was George Meredith’s poem that gave Vaughan Williams the title of his ‘tone poem’, The Lark Ascending. It sometimes seems that this piece has been damned by its widespread popularity, though I don’t tire of it any more than I tire of, say, the several points on Somerset and Dorset roads where you breast a rise between trees and the world suddenly opens up, with great sweeps of country on either side and the clear sky fled endlessly away—or, in bookish vein, Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories or yes (I’ve just confirmed) Hergé’s adventures of Tintin. A sweetness entering the heart – more or less.

References


‘Feed the brutes’: Rupert Brooke

In Jane Gardam’s *A Long Way from Verona*, Jessica Vye tells Florence Bonne about one of the books given to her by Miss Philemon: it includes ‘some poems by a heavenly-looking man (there’s a photo) called Rupert Brooke, but he only seems to write about fish.’[1] ‘Heaven’ is certainly concerned with fish, as is—unsurprisingly—‘The Fish’ but Jessica probably suffered from the oddities of an anthologist’s choices. That ‘heavenly-looking man’, though, was attested to by many, certainly more than the famously smitten, such as Henry James and Sir Edward Marsh. ‘It was in 1913, I think, and I sitting in the Café Royal feeling amazingly grand, when a young man came in who had a great air of beauty and walked like a panther—and the person I was with said, There’s Rupert Brooke. The only time I set eyes on him. [. . .] It was a year when everything was happening [. . .] but nothing ever got between me and my impression of the young man walking like a panther.’[2]

On this date in 1915 (a popular anniversary: Shakespeare! Wordsworth! Prokofiev! Lee Miller!) Rupert Brooke died of septicaemia aboard a hospital ship in the Aegean, at the age of twenty-seven, and was buried on Skyros. His legacy often seems to have dwindled to a selection of brooding photographs, a few quotations from besotted admirers, occasional ‘iconoclastic’ versions of the life, pointing out that he
Three years ago, in the *Times Literary Supplement* (24 April, 2015, 13-15), William Wootten, wrote about Brooke’s afterlives, not least those envisaged by Brooke himself, though generally in terms of dust and scuffed earth rather than heavenly light or adoring readers. He traced a line connecting Brooke’s literary interests with those of T. S. Eliot a few years later. Brooke was deeply read in the work of John Webster (the subject of his dissertation) and other Jacobean dramatists, and recognised immediately the significance of Herbert Grierson’s landmark 1912 edition of Donne’s poems. ‘Had Brooke survived the war,’ Wootten commented, ‘he might well have made the gap between Georgian and Modernist seem far smaller than it has been made to appear.’ Of course, Brooke didn’t survive—but would, I suspect, not have made the case for such writers, often by practical demonstration in original poems, as Eliot did.

https://dmdujour.wordpress.com/2016/06/02/rupert-brooke-the-old-vicarage-grantchester/

In November 1912, Brooke went to Berlin to stay with his Cambridge friend Dudley Ward. A few days later, T. E. Hulme arrived and Brooke met him at the station. They had several conversations about aesthetics, sitting outside the Café des Westens, though the ten days they spent often together didn’t lead to a friendship. In the following year, Hulme was one of the members of the jury that chose Brooke’s ‘The Old Vicarage, Grantchester’ as the best poem to have appeared in *The Poetry Review* that year, netting Hulme £30.[3] Edward Thomas, though friendly with Brooke and also on the jury, voted for Wilfrid Gibson. [4] The implied place and date of composition—or conception—of the poem, given in parentheses after the title, is ‘Café des Westens, Berlin, May 1912: this was the second of his four trips to Germany that year.

‘[Edward] Marsh gave me a book of English poems [Georgian Poetry]’, Stanley Spencer wrote to his friends, Jacques and Gwen Raverat. ‘I like Rupert Brooke because he knows what teatime is’. [5] ‘Stands the church clock at ten to three? / And is there honey still for tea?’ These are not only two of the best-known lines in British poetry; they are two of the most deceptive, in that they’re often quoted as if comprising almost the entire poem. But that poem contains one hundred and forty lines; and eleven questions precede these two. There is also a lot more humour in the poem than is sometimes allowed for, ‘poor Brooke—he was Wittier than I thought’, as Elizabeth Bishop remarked.[6]

I only know that you may lie
Day-long and watch the Cambridge sky,
And, flower-lulled in sleepy grass,
Hear the cool lapse of hours pass,
Until the centuries blend and blur
In Grantchester, in Grantchester... .

Before the outbreak of war, Brooke would travel to North America and the Pacific (which produced some of his most interesting work). In 1913, he wrote to Edward Thomas to explain that he hadn’t been able to
get down to Hampshire to visit because ‘London gripped me too firmly by the ankle.’ Might Thomas be in the capital the following week? If so, he could charge Brooke with some message for the United States. ‘And I could leave the muses of England in your keeping—I do that anyhow. Feed the brutes. If I don’t see you, farewell.’[7]

(Stanley Spencer, Self-Portrait, 1914, Tate © Estate of Stanley Spencer)

On the last day of July 1914, Brooke wrote to Stanley Spencer (‘Dear Cookham’), ‘But this damned war business. . . . If fighting starts, I shall have to enlist, or go as a correspondent. I don’t know. It will be Hell to be in it: and Hell to be out of it.’[8] Brooke was not really a war poet: his five sonnets are essentially the total of his ‘war poetry’. But he saw the effects of war closely enough, in Antwerp, writing to Leonard Bacon on 11 November 1914, ‘That was like Hell, a Dantesque Hell, terrible. But there—and later—I saw what was a truer Hell. Hundreds of thousands of refugees, their goods on barrows and hand-carts and perambulators and wagons, moving with infinite slowness out into the night, two unending lines of them, the old men mostly weeping, the women with hard white drawn faces, the children playing or crying or sleeping.’ And, later in the same letter: ‘It’s a great life, fighting, while it lasts, The eyes grows clearer and the heart. But it’s a bloody thing, half the youth of Europe blown through pain to nothingness, in the incessant mechanical slaughter of these modern battles. I can only marvel at human endurance.’[9]

Brooke’s poetic reputation has often struggled to stay alive among ‘serious’ readers, the established image of him and the symbolic burdens he’s been made to bear tending to obscure his writing and the few good poems to be found there. That figure of the naively patriotic, sentimental pastoralist of Edwardian
England was not quite him. The narrator of Elizabeth Taylor’s novel writes of Hugo Macmillan, Vesey’s uncle: ‘He had gone on being Rupert Brooke all through the war – a tremendous achievement – and was only now, much later, finding his enthusiasms hardening into prejudices’. The ironic thrust of this (‘all through the war’) is that Brooke’s death was indispensable to his dazzling afterlife, that celebrity in turn often obscuring what was authentic in his work.

References


Novelist, autobiographer, journalist and short-story writer (and actress and dancer) Colette was born Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette on 28 January 1873, in Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye, a village in Burgundy. ‘To those who live in the country and use their eyes everything becomes alike miraculous and simple.’[2] She was allowed, she remembered, to go out at 3.30 in the morning, walking towards the kitchen-gardens. ‘I went alone, for there were no dangers in that free-thinking countryside. It was on that road and at that hour that I first became aware of my own self, experienced an inexpressible state of grace, and felt one with the first breath of air that stirred, the first bird, and the sun so newly born that it still looked not quite round.’[3] As a teenager, she wanted to be a doctor, ‘an ambition all the more extraordinary’ since there were only seven woman doctors in the whole of France at that time.[4]

Famously, Colette’s earliest books were credited to Henri Gauthier-Villars, ‘Willy’, whom she had married when she was 20 (he was fifteen years older): his part in them seems, rather, to have been that of editing, suggesting and prompting. Colette left him in 1906 and worked as a music-hall performer to earn a living. For many years, she was involved with the stage, with literary journals, with music.

‘The opening, last night, was epic. The orchestra conductor, as we saw too late, was not an orchestra conductor but a wine merchant. Musically, the evening was a disaster, for the other numbers as well as our own. Backstage everyone was howling, and the audience booed the conductor. It was stunning!’[5]

She published nearly eighty volumes, which is one point of affinity with another writer whose birth year she shared, Ford Madox Ford—there are perhaps two others: a deep love of France and a complex, mutable relationship between fiction and autobiography.

A wonderfully sensuous writer, she powerfully evokes her early years, her relationship with her mother, her schooldays, the smells, sights and sounds not only of her childhood and girlhood but also of the Paris and Provence of her adult life. She was a mass of contradictions but had a wonderful eye for detail, an ear
for tone and feeling, a fiercely intimate relationship with the physical world. ‘We do not look, we never look enough, never attentively enough, never excitedly enough.’[6]

Some of her remarks about the South ultimately conquering its conquerors recall similar statements from Ford and Joseph Roth: ‘The barbarians from the north parcel out the land, speculate and deforest, and that is certainly a great pity. But during the course of the centuries how many ravishers have not fallen in love with such a captive? They arrive plotting to ruin her, stop suddenly and listen to her breathing in her sleep, and then, turning silent and respectful, they softly shut the gate in the fence.’[7]

She wrote lyrically too about Brittany: ‘I wish you could see Rozven, with its cove of green sea, its complicated rocks, the little woods, the old and new trees, the warm terrace, the rosebushes, my yellow room, and the beach to which the tides bring treasures—mauve coral, polished shells, and sometimes casks of whale oil or benzine, from far-off shipwrecks. And I have a rocky perch, between the sky and the sea . . . ’[8]

Colette’s father, Le Capitaine (Jules-Joseph Colette), died in 1905. He was an ex-captain of the select Zouave infantry, born in Toulon and trained at Saint-Cyr, and had lost his left leg in Italy in 1859. She recalled the row of volumes well-bound in boards, covered in marble paper, on the highest shelves of the family library. The titles, handwritten in Gothic lettering, were, she remarked, not tempting: My Campaigns, The Lessons of ‘70, Elegant Algebra, Zouave Songs and others. After the Captain’s death, Colette’s brother went through those books. ‘The dozen volumes bound in boards revealed to us their secret, a secret so long disdained by us, accessible though it was. Two hundred, three hundred, one hundred and fifty pages to a volume: beautiful, cream-laid paper, or thick “foolscap” carefully trimmed, hundreds and hundreds of blank pages. Imaginary works, the mirage of a writer’s career.’[9]

She was divorced from Willy in 1910 and her beloved, maddening mother died two years later. Colette’s daughter Bel-Gazou was born in 1913. the year after her second marriage to Henry de Jouvenel. In the first winter of the war, she managed to get through the lines and join Henri at Verdun.[10] She wrote extensively about that war (and the next one): her reports for Le Matin were later collected as Les Heures Longues, sections of which are translated in Earthly Paradise.
Admired by Edith Wharton, Cocteau, André Gide, W. H. Auden, Somerset Maugham, she crops up constantly in the literary history of the first half of the twentieth-century. In 1921, she writes to Marcel Proust in response to his sending her an inscribed copy, ‘If I were to tell you that I burrow in its pages every night before going to sleep, you would think I was merely offering you a hollow compliment. But the fact is, Jouvenel gets into bed every night to find me, your book, and my glasses. “I am jealous but resigned,” he says.’[11] As editor, in the office of Le Matin, she advises Georges Simenon to ‘ Suppress all the literature and it will work’. [12] In November 1952, when François Mauriac wins the Nobel Prize for Literature, ‘one of the first things he did was to call on Colette, who should have had it, he felt, in his place.’[13]

Chéri and The Last of Chéri, Break of Day, The Vagabond, the other more frankly autobiographical volumes, the stories, the letters: there’s a great deal of pleasure to be had; with the added attraction that she often makes me laugh.

‘It’s curious that the hat which is too small creates an impression of lunacy much more than does the hat that is too large. A lunatic hardly ever puts on his head a hat which is too big. He readily covers himself with a bottle-top, an empty matchbox, a child’s boat turned upside-down, a jampot.’[14]

A jampot is tempting but I’m currently opting for the bottle-top.

References


THE VERY DEFINITION OF CHAOS

‘Complication without order or principle is the very definition of chaos.’—Herbert Read, *Contrary Experiences*


In ancient Greece, literature was divided into two main categories: tragedy and comedy. Nowadays, the list of possible types and genres of literature can seem endless. However, it is still possible to narrow down the vast amount of literature available into a few basic groups. The five genres of literature students should be familiar with are Poetry, Drama, Prose, Nonfiction, and Media—each of which is explained in more detail below.

Literature can be defined as written works, including non-written verbal arts that are considered to be very good and to have lasting importance. Examples of literature include: poems, plays, and novels. Literature is also defined as any printed and unprinted material that instructs, informs, educates and entertains people. A Litterateu is a person that’s interested in and knowledgeable about literature. A Literatus is used to refer to someone who is an authority in the field of literature.