

Fourteen years ago, I was infuriated by a review of one of my books. This is a regular occurrence, but on this occasion the pain was so sharp that I broke a rule and dispatched a protest to the offending journal.

It was a review of a book I'd written on the Merthyr Rising of 1831. The reviewer, who apparently intended to be kind, called me a *Welsh Edward Thompson*. This sent me into a prolonged bout of empathetic mourning for one of those old bottles of quite decent Rioja, which used to suffer the humiliation of being marketed under the implausible title of *Spanish Burgundy*. The wretch then went on to call the book 'a characteristic product of the New Left'. I pointed out with some asperity that I was not a member of the New Left, neither the Old New Left, the New New Left or the Instant New Left. I was not even a member of the Old Left. I was a member of the Antediluvian Left.

Even a modest historiographical monograph can make an answer to the question 'Which side is he on?' very difficult. But if controversy over commitment and meaning is a familiar feature of the historical landscape, it fades into oblivion once you dip a tentative toe into the acid pool next door – the practice of Literature Proper, or writing with a capital R. My most vivid memory of the large and active department of English at Cardiff was that hardly anybody in it was on speaking terms with anyone else – on doctrinal grounds. And this was even before the appearance of Post-Structuralists and Neo-Deconstructionists!

Writing and commitment

There is a school of thought which holds that all writing of whatever kind is in the last resort political or committed. Certainly, good and necessary work has been done on the political assumptions and commitment which lie hidden in many overtly non-political works – Jane Austen, for example. I've had fun myself trying to filter out what politics there are in the black novels of P. D. James. On the other hand, I was quite astonished to learn that Ruth Rendell is an active supporter of CND and a believer in community government at its most radical. Not something you'd gather from her books, I think. She'd probably be pleased to hear that.

One could, no doubt, analyse political commitment in the work of, say, Barbara Pym and Alice Thomas Ellis. But it would be a waste of time. Whatever political commitment there is would be so removed from text and content as to be irrelevant to the experience and assessment of such writing. Its only relevance would be to the set of attitudes which would make such writing possible in the first place. If you are of a radically

Writing on the line

GWYN A. WILLIAMS



Gwyn A. Williams



Channel 4 Television

opposed attitude, of course, you could deny the right of such writing even to exist. Many political regimes have taken this line, by no means only Communist regimes. We want no more of that. No, there are great tracts of some of the finest writing which cannot be put 'on the line'.

Far stronger has been the opposing dogmatism which asserts that political or any other commitment has no place whatever in literature, and therefore, I assume, in human life. The most vivid expression of this opinion came from the early 19th-century French writer Stendhal, a caustic, brilliant, acrid kind of writer whose works at one stage obsessed me. Reading them was like getting drunk on vinegar.

Stendhal was the closest approximation I know to the Nearly Man. He was very bright and *nearly* the best student in his class. He idolised Napoleon and was *nearly* a good diplomat in Italy. He longed to be a warrior, a profession for which he was singularly unsuited, and *nearly* saw the Battle of Waterloo. He said his books would not be read until 1940 and he was correct. One of

the longest chapters in his

book on the art of love is entitled 'The Fiasco'. At one stage he delivered himself of the ringing declaration that introducing politics into the novel was like firing a pistol shot in the middle of a concert.

The supreme irony, of course, is that Stendhal's two masterpieces are now considered deeply political. *The Charterhouse of Parma*¹ is a merciless exploration of Restoration Europe after 1815, the Europe of Metternich and the clericals. It carries the most vivid account in history or literature of that historic moment when Bonaparte, then a Jacobin general, led his army of sans-culottes into Italy in 1796, one of the few genuinely revolutionary campaigns in history, which went on echoing, not least in Beethoven. And *The Scarlet and the Black*¹ is actually a celebration and lament for the Napoleonic idea in a sordid and second-rate society. It has the best description of a battle, seen from the worm's eye view, I have ever read, better even than Tolstoy.

So where are we? Clearly, many people don't know they're writing politics even when they are! To quote C. E. M. Joad from the ancient *Brains Trust*, it all depends what you mean by 'politics' or 'commitment'. Or to cite an even more ancient wisdom: 'taint what you do, it's the way that you do it.

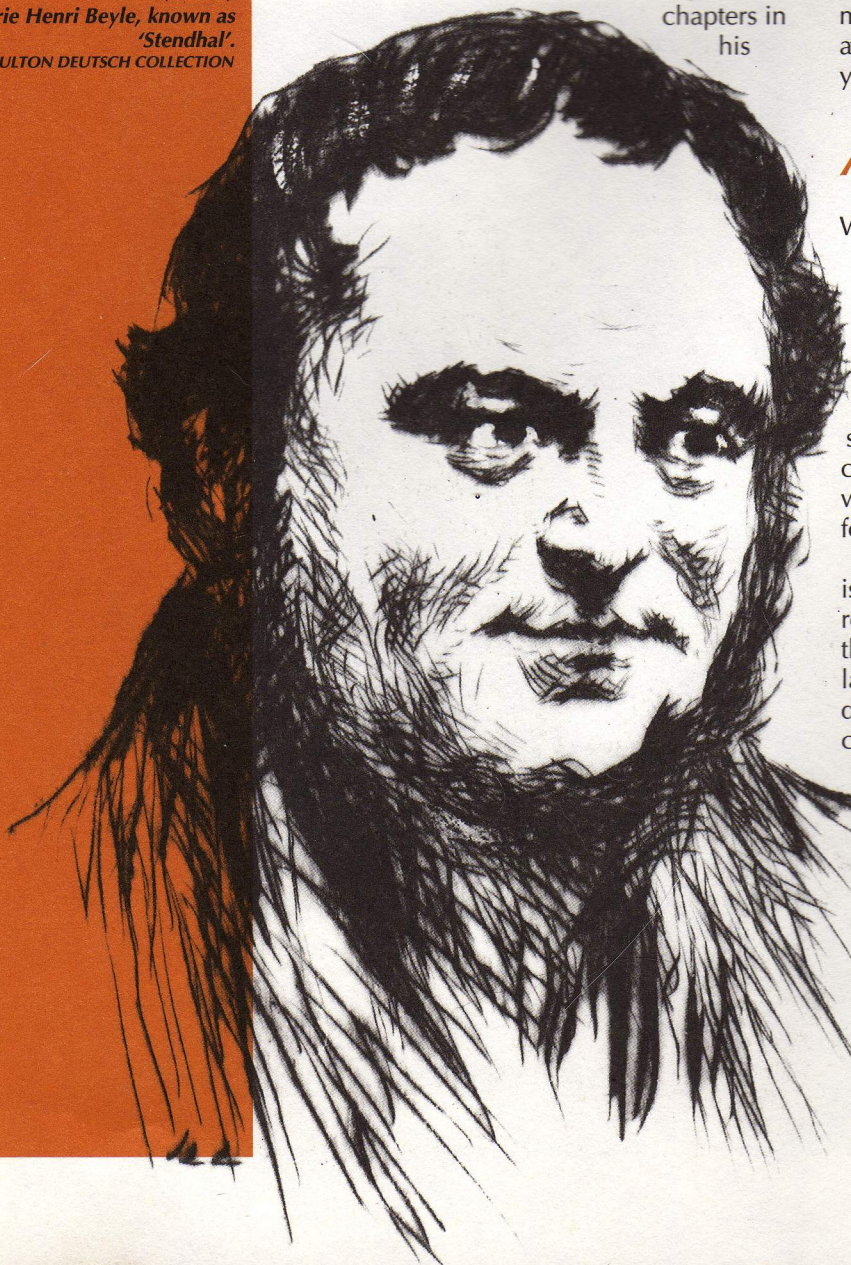
A type case?

We are all painfully familiar with what happens when the state politically directs writing. We are no less painfully familiar with the results when, without outside direction, driven writers people their pages with homilies, parables, individuals cut from cardboard and characters who are simply their mouthpieces. Ironically, such compulsions can sometimes produce good writing – in the style of George Bernard Shaw, for example.

The political thriller, spy story, *roman noir* is a characteristic genre of our time, for good reason. Some time ago, Pluto Press, declaring that all thrillers were written by right-wingers, launched a competition for a left-wing detective story! I'm not at all sure they were correct. I suppose they were thinking of people like Jeffrey Archer, Frederick Forsyth and fellow practitioners all the way back to Bulldog Drummond and other *bien pensants*. But, good Lord, even Biggles favoured the Spanish Republic, and while Agatha Christie could pick her way unerringly among the teacups, I'm not all sure the same is the case with her sisters and successors, and as for the Americans . . . !

The political thriller, often aspiring to the quality of literature, has been colonised by people of many political beliefs. No one

(Below)
Marie Henri Beyle, known as
'Stendhal'.
HULTON DEUTSCH COLLECTION



would call Eric Ambler, that master-craftsman, a right-winger, or Graham Greene or John le Carré. Pluto Press itself unearthed Manuel Vazquez Montalban of Pepe Carvalho fame, he of 'the gastronomic tendency', the half-Galician from Barcelona who was ex-Communist, ex-CIA, devoted to burning books and cooking meals. That author has managed to win both the 'Spanish Booker Prize and a French award for detective fiction'. In fact, the genre in Europe is peopled by disillusioned ex-Communists, a category of human beings which must by now numerically be approaching its rival, the communion of ex-Christians.

Recently I decided to turn two of these political thrillers into film scripts. The problem of *constriction* at the heart of writing by committed people struck me very forcibly. The two I chose were by two of the major political and socio-literary figures of our day, Raymond Williams's *The Volunteers*³ and Jorge Semprun's *The Second Death of Ramon Mercader*.

The Volunteers opens with an apparent attempt to assassinate the minister for Wales in the grounds of St Fagan's Folk Museum – as a redundant historian, I found this a deeply attractive proposition. Through the protagonist, a Sixties character turned creep for something which looks very like Sky Television, Raymond Williams dives through multiple levels of deception and self-deception to arrive at the final, unchosen forcible redemption of his protagonist in the face of a hidden menace all too familiar from our experience of our own hag-ridden security system.

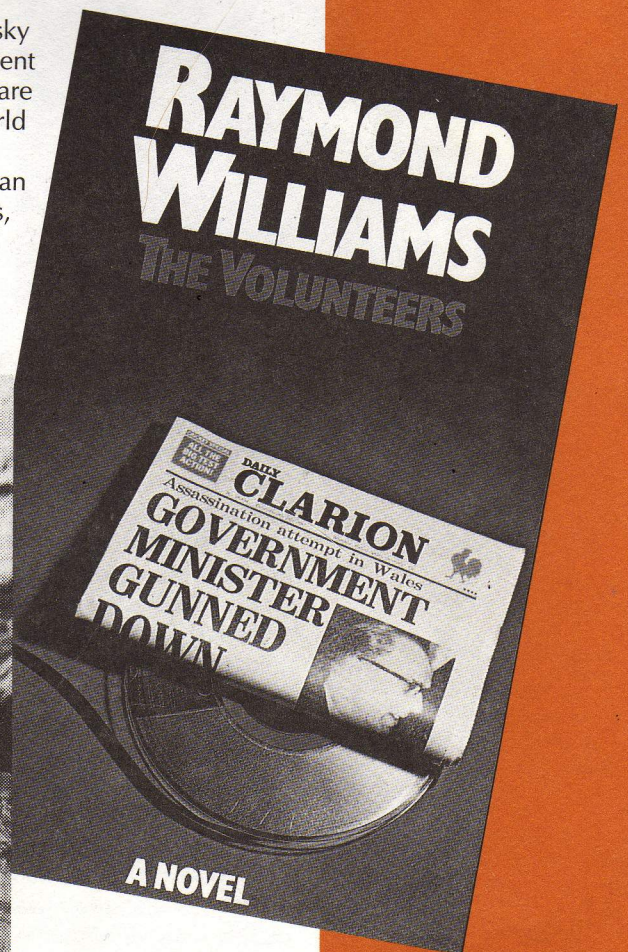
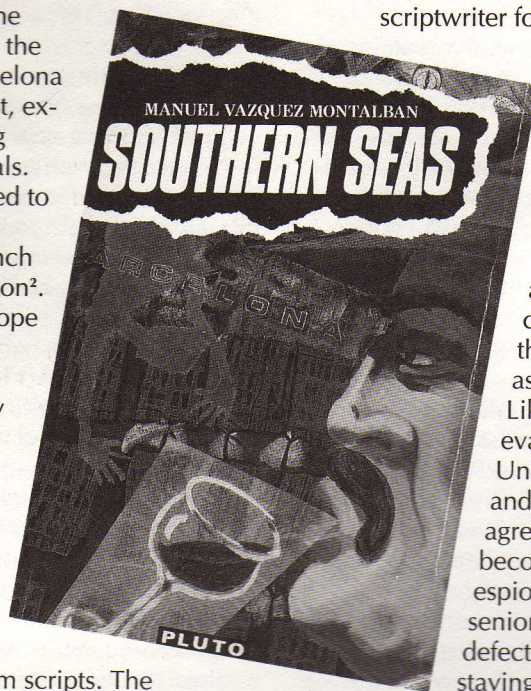
It's a good story but it fails. In his genuine awareness of complexity, contradiction and irony, Raymond Williams loads his characters with an endless debate which explores those contradictions and which leads to the argument reaching its climax before the action does – which in a political thriller just will not do.

The Second Death of Ramon Mercader was written by Jorge Semprun while he was Minister of Culture in the

Spanish Government. During the civil war, he was evacuated to the Soviet Union and educated there. He broke spectacularly with Communism in the 1960s. He was a scriptwriter for such Costa Gavras films as *Z* and the author of some cogent essays.

This is an extraordinary book – even more complex than Raymond Williams's. At its heart is an apparent Spaniard called Ramon Mercader – the same name as the assassin of Leon Trotsky. Like Semprun, he was evacuated to the Soviet Union during the civil war and returned under the agreement of 1956 to become head of the Soviet espionage system in Spain. A senior member of the KGB defects to the Americans while staying in position and betrays him to the CIA (though this is

not revealed until some time into the novel). Mercader becomes aware that he has been betrayed and goes to an emergency contact in Amsterdam enjoined upon him by his controller, an Old Bolshevik. The assassination of Trotsky runs as an undercurrent throughout, and we are plunged into the world of the Soviet, East German and American intelligence agencies, the Dutch Special Branch and an American filmmaker working on



(Left)
The thrillers of Manuel Vazquez Montalban are peopled by disillusioned ex-Communists, including gastronome and anti-heroic detective, Pepe Carvalho.

(Below)
Complexity, contradiction and irony in a thriller by Raymond Williams, better known for his political and sociological texts.

Trotsky's killing. All the Communists have been in Stalinist jails but, in a rather Catholic manner, remain Communist.

The author himself intervenes from time to time, in long disquisitions on the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, on the realities of popular usage, on the fact that the trouble

with truisms is that they are true, on the tremendous power generated by clichés. He introduces a French academic called Boutor. The point about Boutor is that he can't stand Marcel Proust – which for a French academic is sheer tragedy. There is a whole chapter on him which is very funny. But he's introduced solely to serve as the third-person witness to a killing by the hero – and the author spends some time justifying the inclusion. In the end, it is revealed that Mercader is not a Spaniard at all but a Russian Jew! But as a political thriller, it has long since been ruined by its own author.

This book is certainly an acquired taste which probably few will acquire. It is, like most of the best political writing of our time, an elegy for the Communism that might have been. I personally find it enthralling for a character called Aunt Adela who is the personification of Old Castilian Virtue. She is a good Republican essentially because her unremittingly Castilian family are. In the end, the complications of Jorge Semprun's plot compel this Old Castilian lady to act as a courier for the Communist International, in the cause of her beloved nephew Ramon Mercader, who bears the name of the man who assassinated Trotsky and who is in reality a Russian Jew!

The dominant mode of *The Second Death of Ramon Mercader* is tragic irony. In my opinion, tragic irony has to be the thematic quality in any political writing these days. If it

isn't ironic, don't trust it. If the author isn't ironic, he's a liar, above all to himself.

A way through

I suppose we must just muddle through somehow; those who never felt the compulsions of a qualified Utopianism in the first place may rest content with ordinary common-or-garden sensitivity. One way through this jungle was opened for me by Albie Sachs's paper delivered recently to a seminar of the African National Congress in Lusaka.

Here is this man, who preached for years that 'culture should be a weapon of national struggle' in South Africa. Now he calls for a total ban on that kind of talk for five years. This man, with all his bloody and desperate experience, calls for sensitive light essays on the joys and sorrows of township experience, for essays in celebration of nature, for explorations of all the multifarious aspects of South African life.

Sachs has totally changed his mind. He has realised that this kind of 'committed' thinking crippled literature and stifled genuine creativity. There is a limit to the number of clenched fists and heroic workers you can raise. He talks about the richness of human experience which is excluded from the dedicated art of militants, and explores the multi-national mosaic of culture which is South Africa. He puts in a moving plea for Afrikaans, asks militants not to regard the language itself as a political enemy and looks forward to the day when Afrikaans, as he puts it, will once more become the language of liberty.

One point he makes seems very interesting to me. He says South Africa has not yet produced an *And Quiet Flows the Don*. This was, of course, written by Mikhail Sholokhov, and is a novel by a revolutionary about a deeply anti-revolutionary people. It is how a committed writer handles 'the opposition' that makes or mars his books as literature. The opposition, of course, is always there, and they are not monsters. This opposition must seem fascinating, surely, if only because it must seem inexplicable. Even Stalin, who in his day could indulge the fancies of what Marx called an Oriental Despot, encouraged and protected a handful of quite reactionary writers in the Soviet Union, because he enjoyed them. It is said his favourite play was Bulgakov's *The White Guard*, which he saw 25 times, sometimes sitting alone in the theatre. The experience must have added a dimension to the cast's perception of the notion that a critic can axe a play!

Failure to take the opposition seriously, a tendency to diminish them and turn them into caricatures, of course, characterises the



(Above)
Albie Sachs explores the multinational mosaic of culture which is South Africa.
HULTON DEUTSCH COLLECTION

literatures of many peoples. It is certainly representative of Welsh writing. It diminishes, for example, some of Saunders Lewis's more explicitly political work. His plays *Cymerwch Chi Sigaret?* (*Have a Cigarette?*) and to some extent *Brad* (*Treason*) are in this respect seriously inadequate in comparison with his *Siwan* (*Joan*). Characteristically, Saunders Lewis is much stronger when he is affirming values rather than denying them and when the politics – and the enemy – are at one remove. But, on the whole, I have found this rare in Welsh and other writing in the smaller European languages. Perhaps we cannot afford the luxury of self-awareness.

In contrast, consider the astonishing sweep of the writing of Gabriel García Márquez⁴. What dominates much of his writing is the history of his own country, Colombia, in this century: the endless civil wars between Liberals and Conservatives, divided over the Church and clericalism essentially, the desperate pact to share power to avoid total disintegration, the new waves of dissident violence which ensued, climaxing now in the power of the drug barons. García Márquez is without doubt a committed man and the commitment shines through his books. But the political commitment operates at one remove and what seems to obsess him is the depiction of his own society in all its multiple and contradictory forces and their play on a myriad human beings.

The panorama of *A Hundred Years of Solitude* is breathtaking. And his qualities are no less apparent in his many miniatures, all interlocking – *No One Writes to the Colonel*, for example, about an old man on the losing side, waiting for a pension (promised by the pact) which never comes, and vesting his hopes in a clearly doomed fighting cock, in the end living on what, at the close of the story, he calls 'shit'.

When I reel out of García Márquez – out of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, for example – I tend to find myself asking, God in Heaven, how could anyone from a 'developed country' treat the experience of his homeland on this scale and in this depth? We are all too *knowing*. Much of our writing seems trapped in the minute exploration of human sensibilities. Is this the price of such progress as we have made? I am reminded by one

poet, Robert Minhinnick⁵, that most writers are odd, problematical, slightly damaged people who are only on their own side.

I take his point, but as far as I can see, committed writing works best when the writer is concerned less with politics, say, than with the play of politics on people, whether those people are themselves political or not. This often takes the form of a panoramic sweep. Think of Primo Levi's remarkable *If Not Now, When?*⁶, about Jewish partisans in the chaos of wartime eastern Europe. Are those people 'politically aware' or not? I do not know how Howard Spring's now ancient book, *Fame Is the Spur*, stands with critics, but it certainly bowled me over when I was young, so much so that I can still remember whole tracts of it. Technically, it is the life of a Labour politician who follows the trajectory of Ramsay MacDonald, but it is much richer than that. Outstanding in this field, I think, is Victor Serge's *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*⁷, which is the best exposition of Stalinism I know, particularly the piece entitled 'To Build Is to Destroy', peopled with a myriad individuals and families, all brilliantly stitched into a crowded canvas. These sweeps can operate within the exploration of a single, over-conscious life as in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*⁸, and they inform the context in the best miniatures in the style of *No One Writes to the Colonel* or *Siwan*.

What strikes me about works like these is that they operate at the point where hope and despair are in painful balance. Edward Thompson once made the same point about Wordsworth. He was at his best, Thompson thought, at the moment when he had lost faith in Jacobinism but had not yet slurped over into the populist cant of early 19th-century Toryism. Thompson called this the *Jacobinism of doubt*. I suppose, in our own

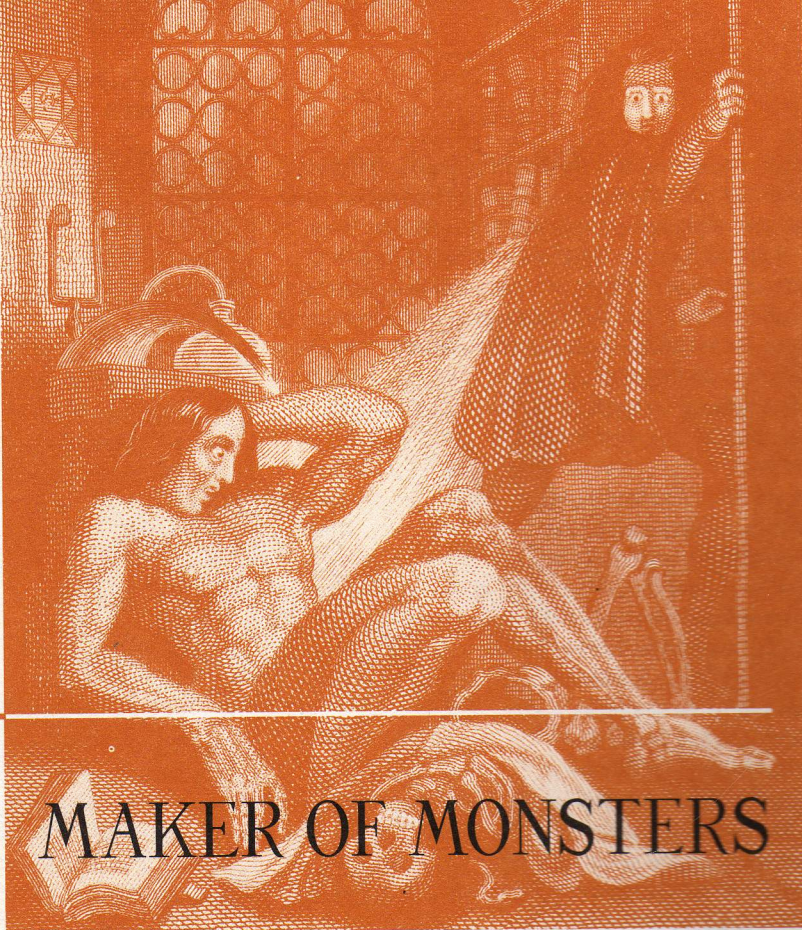
day, it signals the degradation and death of a once great movement of hope which embraced millions and whose cataclysm now engulfs much of the world's population.

It is precisely the same kind of movement which we have tried to trace at work in the life and careers of our four chosen writers, people caught up willy-nilly in some great movement of opinion, driven by necessity or choosing among the options remaining to them.



Notes

- (1) Both *The Charterhouse of Parma* and *The Scarlet and the Black* are widely available in paperback.
- (2) Four of Montalban's books have been translated into English: *Murder in the Central Committee* and *Southern Seas* (both originally published by Pluto Press 1984 and 1986, reprinted by Serpent's Tail); and *The Angst-Ridden Executive* and *An Olympic Death*, Serpent's Tail 1990 and 1991.
- (3) Raymond Williams is author of major works of social and literary criticism: *Culture and Society*, *The Long Revolution*, *The Country and the City* and many others. He also wrote a trilogy of novels, *Border Country*, *Second Generation* and *The Eight for Manod*. His political thrillers are less well known. *The Volunteers* is published by Eyre Methuen.
- (4) Among his many books are *No One Writes to the Colonel*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera* (Jonathan Cape, 1966, 1970 and 1988).
- (5) In a forward to the programme of a conference in Tenby, called *Which Side Are You On?*
- (6) *If Not Now, When?* by Primo Levi (Michael Joseph).
- (7) *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* by Victor Serge (Hamish Hamilton, 1951).
- (8) *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler (Penguin, 1940).



MAKER OF MONSTERS

(Above)
Frontispiece from the first
edition of *Frankenstein*,
1818.
BODLEIAN LIBRARY

With regard to the good cause, the advancement of freedom and knowledge, the rights of women etc, I am not a person of opinions. I respect those who are – my parents and Shelley – but I am not for violent extremes . . . I can by no means go as far as my friends would have me . . . I hang back . . .

Mary Shelley was perhaps unfortunate in her parents. Her father was William Godwin, author of *Political Justice*, an anarchist classic. He also wrote a number of didactic novels, notably a volume of pursuit and remorse, *Caleb Williams*: the very embodiment of English Enlightenment, a man of ruthless logic, who advocated a society structured on reason, mass education, shared property and minimal government. Distrusted by authority, Godwin was a mild, reclusive figure, suspicious of emotion.

Mary Shelley's mother was Mary Wollstonecraft, the first serious English feminist, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In a remarkable career of revolt, which included an 'illegitimate' baby and two suicide attempts, she spent the years of the Terror in the Paris of the French Revolution and retained much sympathy for it. After a notable tour of Scandinavia, she finally settled into a companionate marriage with Godwin and died giving birth to Mary –

to be denounced as a 'hyena in petticoats' by Hugh Walpole.

Mary inherited a radical, outsider role, which was perhaps not natural to her. Her warmth came from her mother, her caution from her father. The latter's remarriage to Mary Jane Clairmont, an efficient helpmeet but an irascible woman, isolated her. She found refuge at the grave of her idealised mother and in occasional holidays in Scotland. A beautiful, bookish girl, she was internally an exile and fell in love with the already married Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1814, running away with him and her step-sister Claire Clairmont.

Shelley was almost a power of nature. A brilliant poet and a powerful revolutionary thinker even more radical than Godwin, an atheist, a republican, a believer in free love, he had been expelled from Oxford for an atheist pamphlet and was disowned by his family. Marrying young to Harriet Westbrook, he spent some years striving to find forms of political action and revolutionary agitation in Ireland and Wales before deciding on a life as 'the trumpet of sedition' in which cause he wrote some of the finest poems in the English language.

Mary's elopement with Shelley was without doubt a release; she remained true to his memory for the rest of her life. They went careering about Europe and England for two years, as the long wars against Napoleon ended, living from hand to mouth, reading voraciously, until at the prompting of Claire Clairmont, who was besotted with and pregnant by Byron, they spent a wet, windy but happy summer at Lake Geneva in 1816. They were one of the most remarkable bunch of exiles and misfits England had been fortunate to own, or disown, and Mary's companions proved to be the stimulus for a novel which, at Shelley's prompting, she started to write in Geneva, to finish on their return to England.

They returned to suicides, Harriet's and her step-sister's, to a marriage which was refused custody of Shelley's children, to the financial importunity of a disapproving Godwin. In 1818 they fled again, this time to Italy, as her book was brought out by a slightly disreputable publisher.

That book, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, has captured the minds of millions and generated one of the most pervasive myths of our time. It has been reprinted in every generation since, and translated into a myriad languages, including Urdu, Arabic and Malaysian. Hard on the heels of the best-seller came a box-office success. Richard Peake brought out the first stage version in 1823, with a celebrated stage villain, Thomas Cooke, playing the monster. Cooke played the monster 365 times in seven years, and there was hardly a season in the

Mary Shelley (1797–1851)

1820s without a Frankenstein play or burlesque on stage in London, Edinburgh, Paris, Vienna and New York. And it had been written by a 19-year-old girl!

Not that you'd know that from the first edition of 1818, which was anonymous. People could not credit a young girl with such a work; they suspected Shelley himself was the author. Not until 1831, when she personally revised it, and made it marginally more respectable, in the edition which became canonical, did it carry her name.

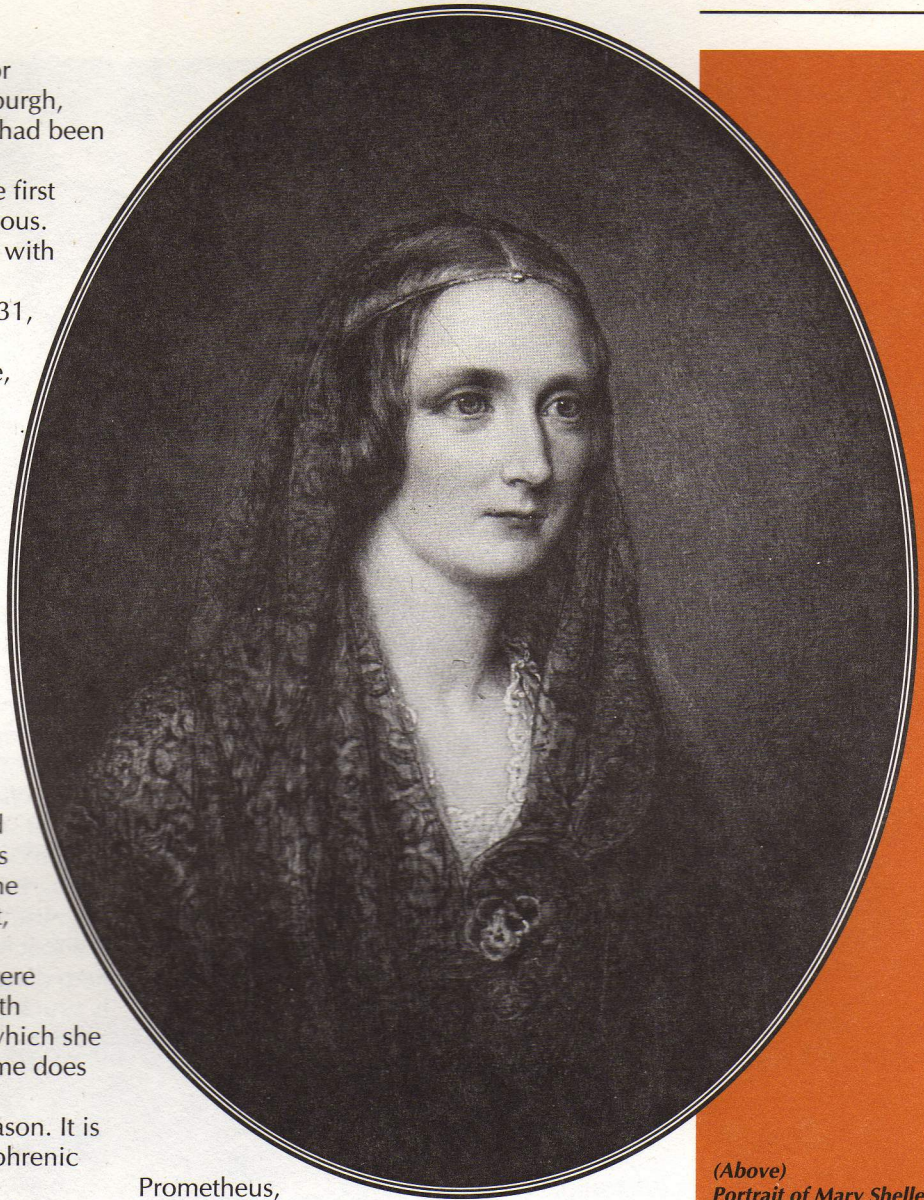
It is a striking book, notwithstanding its many implausibilities of plot and structure. It is not the Gothic horror tale to which the playwrights assimilated it; neither is it properly the 'first science fiction'. Nor is it a Christian morality – though there is some warrant for that characterisation in the second edition. It is essentially a speculative morality play, as this child of the Enlightenment – a 'Child of Light' Shelley called her – wrestles with the moral problems raised by the remorseless advance of science. In it, she voices her deep need for the ordinary, decent affections, which were denied simultaneously by her life with Shelley, and the life of the mind to which she had grown accustomed. For at no time does Mary Shelley ever renounce the Enlightenment with its sovereign Reason. It is therefore, I believe, a deeply schizophrenic book.

It is steeped in her experiences with Shelley, on the Mer de Glace under Mont Blanc, in Geneva. His spirit can be seen in her young Frankenstein, with his impossibly virtuous family; in his odyssey to the University of Ingolstadt, home of the radical Illuminati, who fascinated Shelley with their resurrection of the old Renaissance ideal of a magic science; in her dedication to

Prometheus, hero of every radical, who stole fire from the gods. It is in this spirit that Frankenstein sets about creating a man.

And her monster? What a pathetic creature he is! Abandoned by a Frankenstein horror-struck at his own creation, he painfully assimilates experience, driven into hiding by the brutality of man, there to learn to speak

and to read by eavesdropping. And what reading! The first book this motherless child of nature reads is *The Ruins of Empires* by Constantin de Volney – a classic of the French Revolution, published in 1791, which rakes all human religions and preaches an anarchist Utopia, and a classic text of radical and working-class movements for two generations, as was Shelley's *Queen*



(Above)
Portrait of Mary Shelley by Reginald Easton.
BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

(Below)
Detail from The Funeral of Shelley (1889), by Louis Edouard Paul Fournier.
BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY



Further reading

Mary Shelley is abundantly served; I can offer merely a selection.

Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus is the 1818 text with a correlation with the 1831 text, ed. James Rieger (Bobbs-Merrill, New York, 1974, and University of Chicago, 1982).

Collected Tales and Stories, ed. Charles E. Robinson (Johns Hopkins, Baltimore and London, 1976).

Mary Shelley's Journal and The Letters of Mary W. Shelley, both edited by Frederick L. Jones (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1947 and 1944), are now accompanied by *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-44*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (2 vols, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987) and *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett (2 vols, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore and London, 1980, 1988).

From a veritable cornucopia of interpretation, may I suggest: *Mary Shelley* by Muriel Spark (E. P. Dutton, New York, 1987); *Mary Shelley, her life, her fiction, her monsters* by Anne K. Moller (Routledge, London, 1989); *Making Monsters* by Frank Botting (Manchester University Press, 1991); *In Frankenstein's Shadow: myth, monstrosity and nineteenth-century writing* by Chris Baldick (Oxford, 1968); *In Search of Frankenstein* (New England Library, London, 1977); and *Shelley: the Pursuit* by Richard Holmes (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974 and Penguin, Elisabeth Sifton Books, 1987).

The bibliographical guidance in these should satisfy even the most voracious reader!

(Top)
The most popular image of Mary Shelley's monster is that portrayed by Boris Karloff in James Whale's 1931 movie.
BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE

(Right)
The image of Shelley's monster found its way into political comment. In this Punch cartoon of 1866, the 'Brummagen Frankenstein' represents popular suffrage frightening the Liberal politician John Bright.
MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY

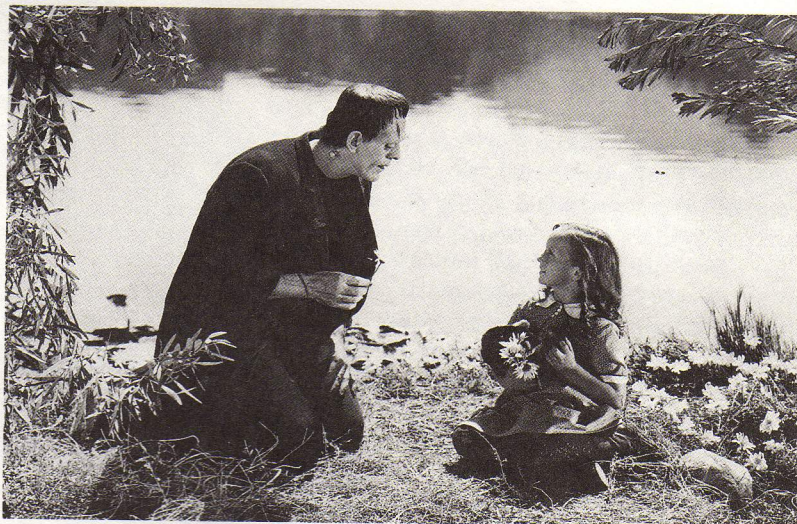
Mab. Next come Plutarch, Werther and, above all, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which gave Mary the motto for her book.

And on in dread inevitability – the attempt to make contact with humankind, the brutal rebuttal, the mad hunt for his maker, the murder of Frankenstein's little brother – on to the classic confrontation on the Mer de Glace and his demand for a mate. It is his maker's ultimate refusal to engender a 'race of monsters' which precipitates the final murder of Frankenstein's bride and the long hunt – scarcely two separate creatures any more, Frankenstein and his Other – through Russia into the Arctic to the final meeting with Walton in his ice-bound ship, where Frankenstein dies and his monster mounts his own funeral pyre.

Five years after Mary saw her monster off to his pyre, she stood wretched as her Shelley burned on his, his heart alone snatched from the flames. The last five years in Italy make the novel seem an uncanny forecast. Everywhere they went, the deaths of children accompanied them. Shelley's practice of free love pressed hard on her. The last wretched months at the Casa Magni climaxed in that final shipwreck, the most spectacular exit in our literary drama.

And then home, to a long, unremitting struggle in the face of his family's hostility to publish Shelley's poems and secure the inheritance of their surviving son, in both of which tasks she ultimately succeeded. She went on writing. Her travel books, her biographies and *The Last Man*, a grimly pessimistic anticipation of a world devastated by plague, have merit, but when Mary Shelley died, respectable, in 1851, she died ineluctably the author of *Frankenstein*.

But it is not the book which has burned itself into people's minds, it is the image. Mary created a Frankenstein monster of her own



which has broken free and gone careering across our screens, ever since he first appeared in Edison's Kinetoscope in 1910. From James Whale's classic Boris Karloff films in the Thirties, he has gone on and on, spawning brides, sons, teenagers, curses and resurrections without end; he can even be used to sell electricity shares; he never dies. But this is nothing like Mary's creature. In this world, Frankenstein shrinks to a mad scientist, the Monster rules. Sometimes there is a touch of pathos in him, but Mary's tragic hero disappears. For, above all, the Monster is struck dumb. He is silenced. He can never challenge us.

This reinforces the first, persistent interpretation, the political. The Monster is the brute people blundering into politics with the French Revolution, conjured by impious intellectuals . . . the Brummagem Frankenstein of Chartism, the Irish Frankenstein. Not until our century did people get to grips with the multiple complexities of Mary Shelley's prose. The relationship between Monster and maker can be read in terms of parent and child, ruler and ruled, master and servant. In our own day, the novel of Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter has been made the instrument of a powerful feminist critique of science itself.

We have tried to explore the process by which a girl, born to two radicals but innately conservative in her instincts, put her own life on the line when she was 19 and spent the rest of her life trying to escape the consequences.



*Until this day, a lady's love in Russian
never found expression, till now our
language – proud, God knows – has hardly
mastered postal prose . . .*

*(Eugene Onegin, translated by Charles
Johnston, Penguin, 1979)*

Alexander Pushkin put a stop to that!
Born in 1799 to the genteel poverty of
a gentry family in decline, farmed out
to a succession of inadequate tutors and to a
much-loved nanny, Arina Rodiovna, who
opened his mind to the sinewy Russian of the
people, educated at a special Tsarist school at
Tsarskoe Selo (today called Pushkin), he
virtually invented modern Russian literature.
There is scarcely a genre he did not play
with, chat through, transform. His writing
sparkles, they said, like champagne in
sunshine.

His family had been boyars of the middle
nobility, eclipsed by Peter the Great and his
successors, with their new service aristocracy.
One of them, his mother's grandfather
Ibrahim or Abraham Hannibal, was an
Ethiopian ransomed from the Turks to serve as
a general to Peter. To him, people attributed
the poet's 'African' appearance, passion –
and success with women! Pushkin was proud
of his ancestors and scorned the new nobility
of the Tsars.

'My grandfather did not trade in
pancakes, nor black the boots of
the Tsar, he did not sing with
choir-sextons, so am I to be
an aristocrat? Thank God
I am a townsman.'

Pushkin was
present at the birth of
that Tsarist
institution which
lent its name to
every language in
Europe – the
intelligentsia. As
Tsarist power grew
and empire thrust
east and west, it
mobilised the vast
masses of the Russian
people whom their
rulers called a 'dark
people', a people of serfs
with landlords owning
thousands of 'souls'. Drilling its
tiny professional classes into barrack-
room battalions, it thrust into Europe, and
Europe took its revenge by colonising the
minds of Russian intellectuals.

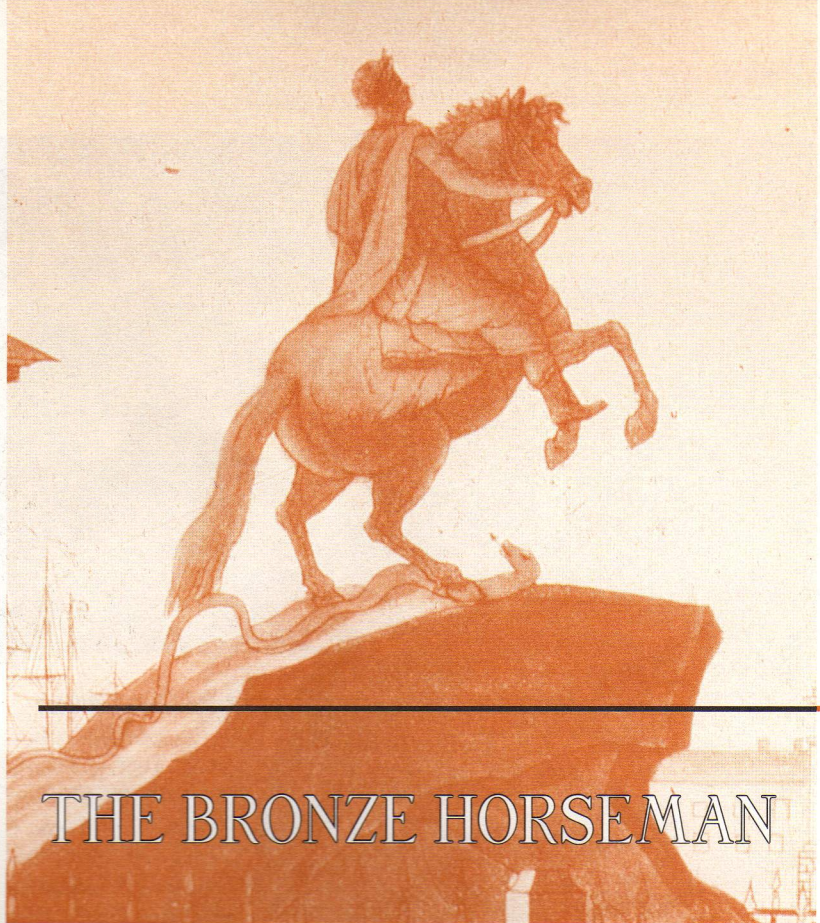
It was Peter the Great's own city, St
Petersburg, which he raised full-formed from
swamp and tempest on the corpses of
100,000 of his subjects, which became the
focus of life and the subject of one of
Pushkin's best-loved poems :



*I love you, Peter's own creation;
I love your stern, your stately air
Neva's majestic pulsation,
The granite that her quaysides wear.*

Words which every Russian
schoolchild knows by
heart, for this Pushkin is
the national poet of
Russia, better loved
and more widely
cherished by them
than is Shakespeare
among us.
Pushkin's own
Tsar, Alexander I,
set out, as did so
many, as a
liberator. He first
flirted with
Napoleon and then
fought him to the
death, driving him back
in the titanic war of
1812, to bestride Europe
like the Bronze Horseman
himself – that Falconet statue of
Peter the Great in St Petersburg which
Pushkin was to take as the very symbol of
Russian autocracy.

The schoolboy Pushkin in Tsarskoe Selo

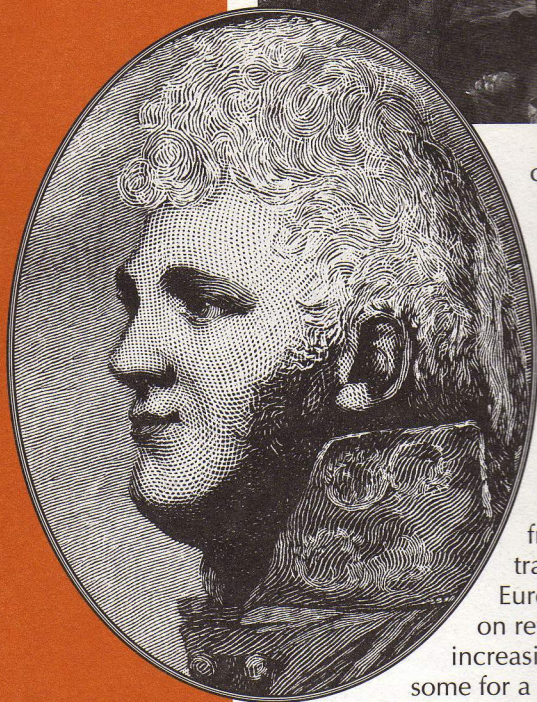


THE BRONZE HORSEMAN

(Above)
The statue of Peter the
Great, 'The Bronze
Horseman', in St
Petersburg, from an
anonymous engraving
(1815)
BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

(Left)
Tsar Peter I, 'Peter the
Great'.
MARY EVANS PICTURE
LIBRARY

Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837)



(Top)
Napoleon at The Battle of Austerlitz, from the painting by Gerard at the Château de Versailles.
BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

(Above)
Tsar Alexander I drove Napoleon from Russia and bestrode Europe like the Bronze Horseman himself.
MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY

(Right)
Tsar Nicholas I, 'Despotism Made Man'.
MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY

hovered around them. They were careful to exclude this prancing sprite from their conspiracies, but they loved his poetry. He poured out verse, subversive and patriotic squibs.

When he graduated in 1817 and moved into a bureaucratic sinecure in fashionable St Petersburg, life became a whirl of drinking, dancing, cards, plays, ballets, fights, poems and women, from princesses to prostitutes. Always broke, always in debt, he wore outlandish gear and grew his nails long – 'No one would be noticed unless he made a little noise!'

Nicknamed the Cricket, he

cheered the soldiers on. He had had poems published in the national press by the time his voice had broken, had fallen madly in love five times; no wonder Cherubino was his favourite opera character! When his officer friends came back, transformed, from Europe, they were bent on revolution against their increasingly autocratic Tsar, some for a republic, most for a constitutional monarchy. Pushkin

Eugene Onegin, wrote *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* and *The Gipsies*, and, bored stiff, composed his scurrilous and blasphemous (and very funny) poem *The Gavriliad*, which promptly got him banished again, this time to the decrepit family estate of Mikhailovskoe in the north.

He grew to love the place (particularly in his favourite season of autumn), his neighbours and his nanny. *Onegin* marched on and he turned to history in his play *Boris Godunov*. It was a natural progression. All the efforts of the radicals were in vain – 'the people remain silent' – and it is poetry which ploughs up time, as a late poet-martyr of his people, Mandelstam, was to say.

Suddenly Tsar Alexander died and the conspirators, many of them Pushkin's friends, seized the chance of a disputed succession.

On 14 December 1825, they staged an armed demonstration in St Petersburg. It was shot to pieces on the square and on the ice-bound River Neva.

Thousands were jailed, many interrogated in person by the new Tsar Nicholas I in an earlier version of Stalin's show-trials. Many young men of good family were shipped to Siberia and treated horribly and five of them were hanged

Pushkin was shattered. These were friends of his. He had set out to join them, but, a superstitious man, he turned back when a hare and a priest in black crossed his path. From then on, generations of Russian revolutionaries went up into the



Sparrow Hills near Moscow to take an oath to the Decembrists and Pushkin was their bard:

*Only I, the mysterious singer,
Cast ashore by the storm
Still sing my former hymns and dry my wet
Clothes in the sun, beneath a rock.*

On 3 September 1826 came the fateful knock on the door. Pushkin was summoned to face Tsar Nicholas I, Despotism Made Man.

This was a turning point in his life. The Tsar forgave Pushkin and became his personal censor. At first exulting in the sense that he was the most free man in Russia, he was soon disillusioned. Pushkin was also present at the birth of that other Tsarist institution which has since conquered the mind of civilised Europe – the creative secret police – in the person of General Benckendorff, head of the Third Section of the Imperial Chancellery, a frigidly polite Baltic German who strapped his brain into a corset and tried to perform the same operation on every creative brain in Russia.

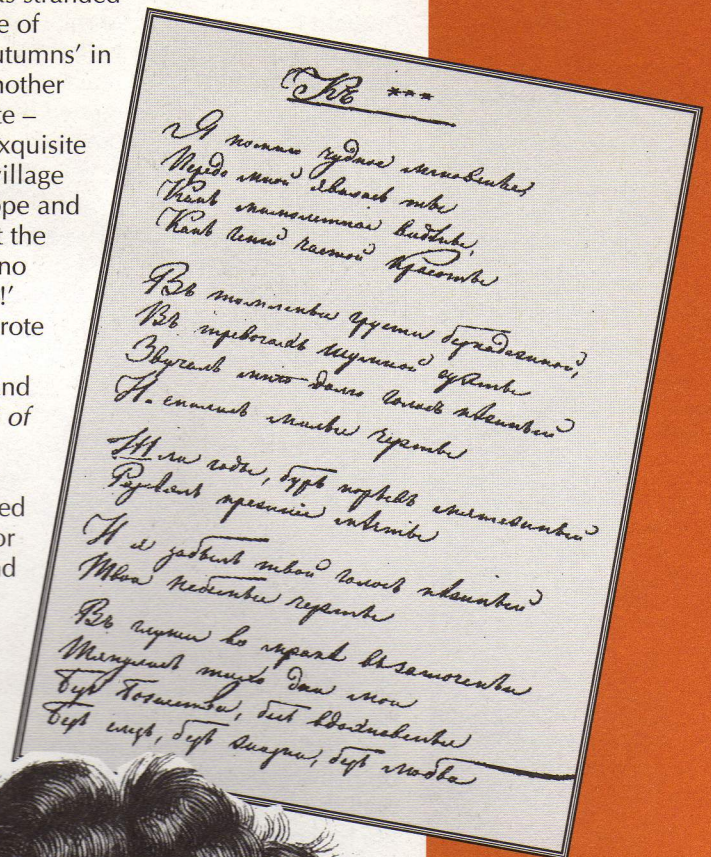
Pushkin spent the rest of his life explaining, apologising, expostulating to, pleading with these exquisitely polite guardians, behind whom lurked the ultimate deterrents: the lunatic asylum, Siberia and the gallows. His best work was written against this strain. In the end, Pushkin was to need Tsar Nicholas much as Shostakovich needed Stalin.

The rest is a story of increasingly desperate oscillation. First, a rally to Nicholas as the reincarnation of his hero, Peter the Great, alienating the young radicals. His work meeting scorn in polite circles, he elevated the isolated poet into a prophet and, about this time, met and befriended another. This was Adam Mickiewicz, poet-hero of the Polish people in exile. They stood hand-in-hand beneath the statue of the Bronze Horseman. Mickiewicz was a victim of the Tsarism which the Russian bard had just celebrated in his epic poem *Poltava*, and they became friends – an irony celebrated in Pushkin's poem *The Poison Tree*.

Pushkin ran away to the Caucasus, and returned to the usual shower of icy rebukes – and to a new search for normality, for a wife. Perhaps inevitably, he made the wrong choice – Natalya Goncharova, almost unbelievably beautiful, almost unbelievably ambitious, almost unbelievably simple.

She immediately became the target for admirers around the court to which he was tied. He was stranded for a couple of 'creative autumns' in Boldino, another family estate – 'What an exquisite place this village is! The steppe and nothing but the steppe . . . no neighbours!' There he wrote his *Little Tragedies* and *The Queen of Spades*.

The Tsar had conceived a passion for his wife, and it was as a kind of licensed pimp that he was



(Above)
A poem written in Pushkin's own
Hand.
HULTON DEUTSCH COLLECTION

(Left)
Alexander Pushkin, engraved
by Wright.
HULTON DEUTSCH COLLECTION



Further reading

There is a great deal available in variable translation.

Complete Prose Tales of A. S. Pushkin, translated by Gillon Aitken (Barrie & Rockliff, 1966 and Michael Russell, London, 1978) and its follow-up, *The Tales of Belkin*, translated and introduced by David Budgen (Angel Books, London, 1983-1990), may be supplemented by *The Queen of Spades and other stories*, translated and introduced by Rosemary Edmunds (Penguin, London, 1962).

From the poetry, an interesting collection is *The Bronze Horseman: selected poems by Alexander Pushkin*, translated by D. M. Thomas (Secker & Warburg, London, 1982).

For *The Bronze Horseman* itself, we used in the programme and here the brilliant translation by Charles Johnston, who also translated the no less brilliant *Eugene Onegin*, introduced by John Bayley (Penguin, London, 1977).

On *The Bronze Horseman*, see the exhaustive but invaluable study *Pushkin's Bronze Horseman: The story of a masterpiece* by W. Lednicki (University of California, Berkeley, 1955).

A vivid life is *Alexander Pushkin* by Henri Troyat, translated by N. Amphoux (Allen & Unwin, London, 1977).

From a host of critical studies, I single out Edmund Wilson's essay in *The Triple Thinkers* (Pelican, London, 1962); *Pushkin: a comparative commentary* by John Bayley (Cambridge, 1971); and, above all, for me, a brilliant, closely focused study *Alexander Pushkin: a critical study* by A. D. P. Briggs (Croom Helm, 1983 and Bristol Press, 1991). Professor Briggs says it's worth learning Russian simply to read Pushkin and you couldn't hope for a better guide.

(Top)

'Tatyana's Dream' (1883): a scene based on Pushkin's poem Eugene Onegin, drawn by I. Panov and engraved by Y. Baranovsky. HULTON DEUTSCH COLLECTION

(Right)

Pencil sketch in Pushkin's own hand. HULTON DEUTSCH COLLECTION

permitted to work in the archives on Peter the Great. Blow followed blow. The Polish revolt of 1831 brought him out as a passionate Russian patriot. He was hailed as Russia's Dante by every reactionary in Russia – which disconcerted him even more. And friends brought him news of Adam Mickiewicz and his latest work – an onslaught on St Petersburg as a citadel of tyranny and mediocrity, which conjured the great flood of 1824 as a herald of its destruction and which hammered at the statue of Peter the Great:

*From the West a wind will warm this land.
Will the cascade of tyranny then stand?*

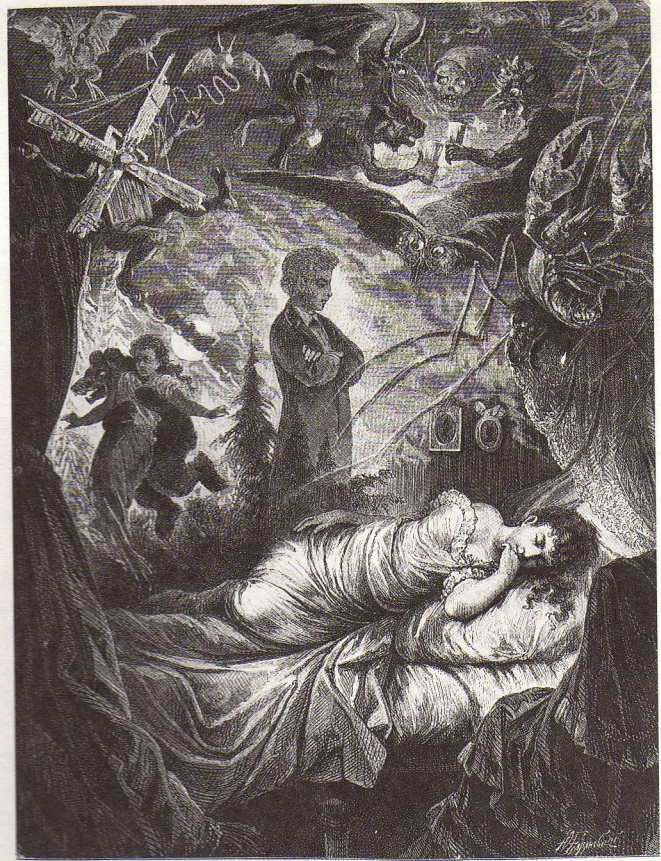
Shattered, Pushkin withdrew to Boldino. His life can stand as an example of a great writer, essentially unpolitical, trapped in his relations with authority in a peculiarly unremitting and obtrusive guise. His mind wrestling with the mess of contradictions that life had become, he wrote *The Bronze Horseman*, one of the finest poems in Russian or any other language.

This poem is the culmination of a process which represents the maturing of Pushkin's attitude towards despotism and all authority. Beginning with a eulogy of St Petersburg, it switches abruptly to Poor Yevgeny, a humble clerk, like Pushkin from a family once noble, who works in the boring old suburb of Kolumna and dreams of his sweetheart Parasha. Then comes the flood of 1824, very finely realised. Parasha's house, and his sweetheart with it, is swept away and Poor Yevgeny goes mad.

Then, once, this madman wandering St Petersburg at night confronts the statue of Peter the Great:

so he came to stand before the overpowering image, with teeth and fists again clenched as if some dark force possessed him . . .

'Take care', he whisperingly addressed him 'you marvel-working builder', when . . . He shivered with bitter fury, then took headlong flight . . .



Литературный альбомъ „Евгеній Онѣгинъ“. Поэма А. Пушкина. Сонъ Татьяны. Ориг. рис. П. Панова, грав. Ю. Барановскаго.

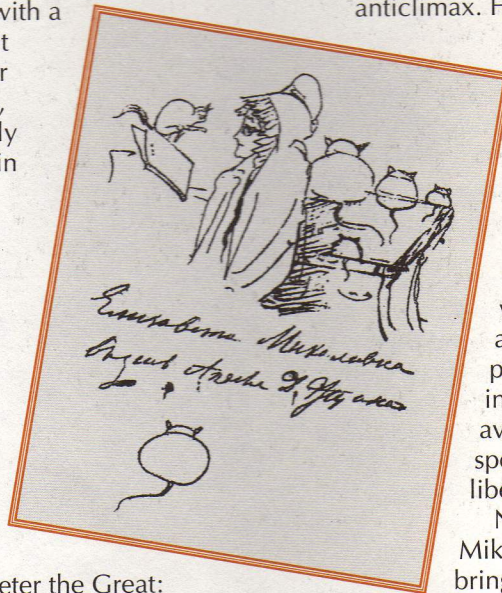
. . . as the Bronze Horseman comes to life, gets off his pedestal and chases him through the moonlit streets! It is an utterly overpowering poem.

The rest of Pushkin's life was a brief anticlimax. He clashed horribly with the Tsar over his poem and it was not published in his lifetime. Driven beyond endurance by admirers' pursuit of Natalya his wife, he plunged into a duel in 1837 and was killed. He was not yet 40. The Tsar and the authorities took pains to bury him at night in secret like a brigand to avoid 'a deplorable spectacle of triumph for the liberals'.

Now he lies there in Mikhailovskoe and people bring him flowers. For Pushkin is the poet of all the Poor

Yevgenys of the world, who only see clearly when they go mad and who, wherever they turn, forever confront that idol on his horse:

So all night long, demented strider wherever he might turn his head – everywhere gallops the Bronze Rider pursuing him with thunderous tread.

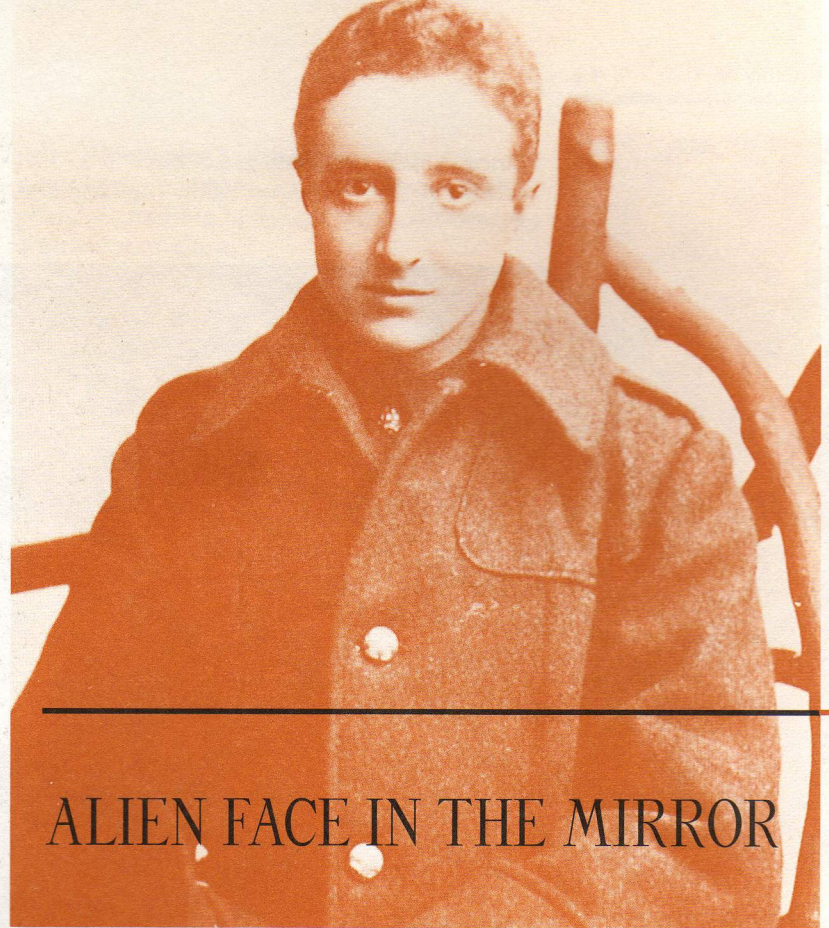


I'd never have said a word for the nation or the language if there had been any other way to keep alive a little Welsh aristocratic company to hold literature and art safe without giving a button for this common people of serfs, these servile masses. But since there are not enough of us, we must risk our art and live as best we can sous l'oeil des barbares, under the eye of the barbarians . . .

This remarkable and revealing statement, made in a letter to a friend in 1923, came from a man who was the finest dramatist and one of the finest writers in Welsh, who restored Wales to Europe and Europe to Wales, who was a founder and chief inspiration of the Welsh Nationalist Party, who became a national hero twice, but who in his time savagely divided the people of Wales.

Saunders Lewis began as an Outsider and in some respects remained an Outsider all his life. Born in 1893 in suburban Wallasey into the celebrated Liverpool-Welsh, whose main language then was Welsh, he was the son of a minister with the formidable Calvinistic Methodists with their creed of the Elect. There were remote ghosts of the decayed minor gentry in the family's history. Always committed to the ideal of an aristocracy of the spirit, he was to celebrate this ancestry in later plays and writings, but in his youth, it did not concern him much . . . 'All the Welsh I read when I was a schoolboy was the Bible and the hymn-book. All my reading throughout my time at school was in English.'

Educated at a minor public school and at Liverpool University, where he was a brilliant student, he was captivated by those little coteries of writers who conceived of themselves as an élite, far removed from the vulgar crowd, busy bequeathing 'great verse to a little clan'. And from Calvinist Elect, through a public school, he moved into the officer class of the British Army. He volunteered, became an officer with the South Wales Borderers and was wounded at the battle of Bourlon Wood. He thoroughly enjoyed his army service and cherished the military virtues throughout the rest of his life – which made him a most unusual leader for a party stiff with



ALIEN FACE IN THE MIRROR

Nonconformist ministers!

In France came the turning point. He steeped himself in French literature, the classics like Corneille and Molière, and, above all, in writers who were self-

consciously Catholic and dedicated to tradition. He was devoted to Maurice Barrès and his novel sequence *Le Culte du Moi*. 'From Barrès I learned that the only way to cultivate your own personality as an artist is to return to your roots . . . I think it was Barrès that turned me into a convinced Welsh nationalist.' He also admired Charles Maurras and his Action Française movement. To Maurras, the French Revolution with its democracy,

liberalism and socialism was the fatal breach in tradition. To Saunders Lewis, the union between a Protestant England and Wales in the 16th century was the fatal breach. As in

(Above)
The young Saunders Lewis, a member of the officer class in the British army during World War I.
NATIONAL LIBRARY OF WALES

(Left)
French author Maurice Barrès.
MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY

Saunders Lewis (1893–1985)

France, it was necessary to get back to a Catholic regime based on Faith, Tradition and Order.

in English is despised by every Englishman. We make ourselves contemptible serfs by making English compulsory in Wales . . . It is



bad, wholly bad, that English is spoken in Wales. It must be deleted from the land called Wales . . . His entry into politics was spectacular, replete with the language and uncompromising nationalism of European movements of the time. The Welsh Nationalist Party, founded in 1925, made him their leader and kept him as their leader for 15 years. He tried to resign nine times but they wouldn't have it.

This was the unfashionable mode of thinking that he brought with him after the war to the new University College of Swansea where he had been appointed a lecturer in Welsh. His drama criticism was already unlike anything being produced in Wales. An attempt to write in English foundered on what he considered the inadequacy of the language. Saunders Lewis grounded his life and work on Pascal, the 17th-century French thinker. Pascal made a wager on the existence of God, to give his life meaning. Saunders Lewis made two. He decided to write in Welsh – 'There was nothing I could do but write in Welsh. It was the logical thing to do. Didn't someone say that logic was the very devil?' And if he was to create great literature for a Welsh nation, he had first to create that nation.

He was truly an astonishing leader for a party which was little more than a Welsh language pressure group in a largely radical Wales. He was a Catholic, officially converted in 1932, who displayed that intemperate zeal of the convert (which

(Above)
Welsh Nationalist Party summer school, Llangollen, with the party's first leader, Saunders Lewis, fourth from right
NATIONAL LIBRARY OF WALES

(Right)
Cartoon from Welsh Nationalist Party pamphlet
NATIONAL LIBRARY OF WALES

GWRTHWYNEBWN YR YSGOL FOMIO

Resist the Bombing School



Gyda ddiolch i'r "Daily Herald."

"Peidiwch ag edliw'r gorfennol inni, 'rhen wraig,—os darfu inni ladd eich meibion yn 1916, efallai y rhown waith i'ch wyrion yn 1936."

"Let bygones be bygones, mother—we may have lost you your sons in 1916 but we may get your grandsons a job in 1936."

5/eb/36. Cyhoeddwyd yn Swyddfa'r Blaid, Caernarfon.

so disconcerts old believers) in a largely Nonconformist society. He was a committed royalist, an anti-pacifist British army officer and a man who preached nationalism as the ultimate conservatism. It was not independence he sought – ‘We want not independence but freedom. And the meaning of freedom is responsibility.’

What won over his followers was his utterly uncompromising integrity and dedication. And he brought to Welsh culture a tradition which gleamed and glittered like some Holy Grail. ‘The Welsh are the only people in Britain who were part of the Roman Empire . . . Wales can understand Europe because it is one of the family. Wales grew up with Europe, with the lands of the Creed . . .’ He buttressed this assertion with a myriad powerful articles, elaborating a vision of

this commitment to the Welsh language which gave this party and their leader, after years of grubbing in the political wilderness, a moment of glory.

In 1936 the RAF destroyed Pen-y-Berth, a minor gentry house in Llyn which had been a focus of Welsh poetry, to build a bombing school. They had been driven away from two similar beauty spots in England by public protest. Similar protests from Wales were overridden. Saunders Lewis put his life and career on the line.

With two friends, he set fire to some airfield buildings and publicly surrendered to the police. The trial was a sensation. The jury at Caernarfon could not reach a verdict. The case was transferred to the Old Bailey, the accused were forbidden to plead in their own language and they got nine months in Wormwood



Christendom fostering cultural diversity under the Pope, of late medieval Wales, under the English crown but nurturing its identity in its guild of aristocratic poets who were remembrancers to a nation.

As history, this interpretation was often bunk. But as a vision, it was compelling. It was also extremely limited. For he and his people did not seem able to see beyond the Welsh language. It was with extreme reluctance that they embraced English-speakers – a great majority – at all. But it was

Scrubs. In prison, they were permitted to listen to the broadcast of a sonorous patriotic play Saunders Lewis had written for St David's Day, which conjured up the earliest days of his European Wales. ‘A vineyard placed in my care is Wales, my country . . . To deliver unto my children and my children's children, intact, an eternal heritage. And behold, the swine rush on her to rend her . . .’ For a moment, he was a national hero.

But not for long. Swansea sacked him even before he was found guilty. When he

(Above)
Saunders Lewis with David
John Williams (right) and Rev.
Valentine (left), with whom he
stood trial for burning down a
building at an RAF station.
NATIONAL LIBRARY OF WALES

Further reading

Indispensable for the English reader is *Presenting Saunders Lewis*, edited by Alun R. Jones and Gwyn Thomas (University of Wales, Cardiff, 1973) with many translations and a variety of critical articles.

Many of Saunders Lewis's plays have been translated by Joseph Clancy in *The Plays of Saunders Lewis* (4 vols, Christopher Davies, Llandybie, 1985). Further translations of poems, essays, etc. are in *Saunders Lewis*, edited by H. Pritchard Jones (Templegate, Illinois, 1990).

The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales, edited by Meic Stephens (Oxford, 1986) has a good general article and many individual pieces on his works.

A good short booklet, with ample bibliographical guidance, is *Saunders Lewis* by Bruce Griffiths (University of Wales, Cardiff, 1989), and a recent study is *A Straitened Stage: a study of the theatre of J. Saunders Lewis*, by Ioan Williams (Poetry Wales Press, Seren, Bridgend, 1991).

There is very valuable material in *The Welsh Nationalist Party: a call to nationhood* by D. Hywel Davies (University of Wales, Cardiff, 1983).

For those with some Welsh, I can recommend the first and, unfortunately, only volume, as death intervened, of D. Tecwyn Lloyd's *J. Saunders Lewis* (Gwasg Gec, Dinbych, 1988), which taught me most about an uncongenial subject.

emerged, he and his circle, resolute to insulate themselves from everything English, moved off into political isolation. In a Wales some of whose sons were fighting and dying for the Spanish Republic, they preached the cause of General Franco. They were ambiguous about Hitler and Mussolini, ignored the fate of the Jews. Indeed his own writing for some time had shown traces of an anti-Semitism hitherto unknown in Welsh writing. And some of his verse about the English-speaking areas of Wales alienated me from the Welsh language for 30 years.

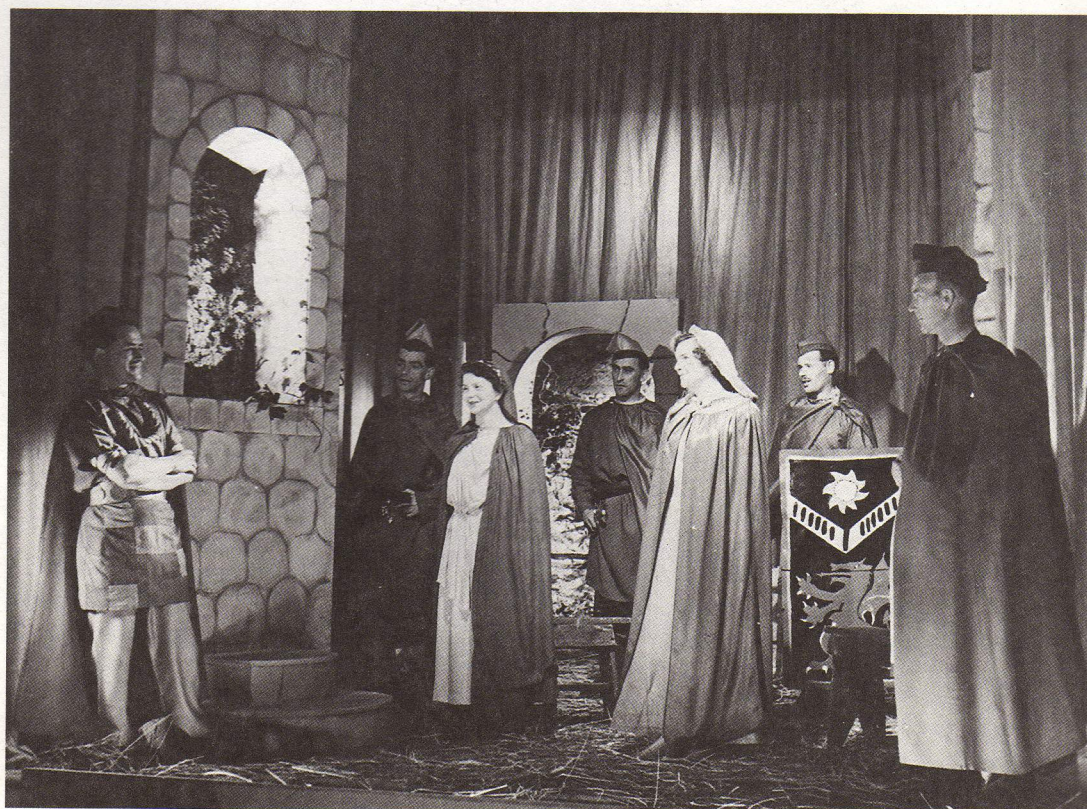
Opposing the war in 1939, he lost command of his party, which changed its name to the Party of Wales (Plaid Cymru), and withdrew, full of a sense of total defeat. Yet within 15 years, this maverick was in serious risk of becoming a national monument, a guru to the nation.

The root cause was his dramas, most of which were written in the Fifties and early Sixties. His great tragedies, centring on conflicts of will and love and loyalty – *Siwan*, about Joan, daughter of an English king and her marriage to Llywelyn, greatest of the Welsh princes; *Brad (Treason)* on the German officers' plot against Hitler which enshrined his own vision of Europe; *Cymerwch Chi Sigaret? (Have a Cigarette?)*, a Catholic drama which expresses Pascal's wager; and, the last of them, *Esther*, an ambiguous and bitter play about the Jewish people. Alongside these were dramas with a modern theme which he fired at Welsh society like shot from a scatter-gun. Whatever one's opinions of the message of these plays, they stand without equal in Welsh literature.

In 1962, nearly 70 and deeply disillusioned with Plaid Cymru, he re-entered politics with a radio broadcast which made history, *Tynged yr Iaith (The Fate of the Language)*: 'I predict that Welsh as a living language will cease to be . . . about the beginning of the twenty-first century . . . The language is more important than self-government.' This conjured into life the Welsh Language Movement and a crusade which, after 30 years, still thunders on and has achieved incredible success. Welsh is the only minority tongue to be subsidised by an alien state – a condition which is increasingly alienating the four-fifths of the population who speak only English and are being remorselessly robbed of their Welsh national identity.

Lewis's last years saw some kind of fulfilment. He was awarded the highest order the Papacy could confer on a layman (which he asked be kept secret) and the University of Wales made him an honorary Doctor of Letters, only 20 years too late. He died, full of years and honour, two years later, in 1985.

Yet his last thoughts, expressed in poetry, as his private thoughts often were, were black as night, as were his later plays. It is ironic that this maimed genius who revived Welsh culture and so divided the Welsh people found himself in the end in the position of his protagonist in a late play *In the Train*. It is even more ironic that I, who had bitterly opposed him in the past, found myself convinced both by his Pascal wager and by his Europeanism. We share a predicament as passengers in a train going nowhere in the Welsh night.



(Right)
First production of Saunders
Lewis' play *Blodeuwedd* at
Theatr Garthwin.
NATIONAL LIBRARY OF WALES

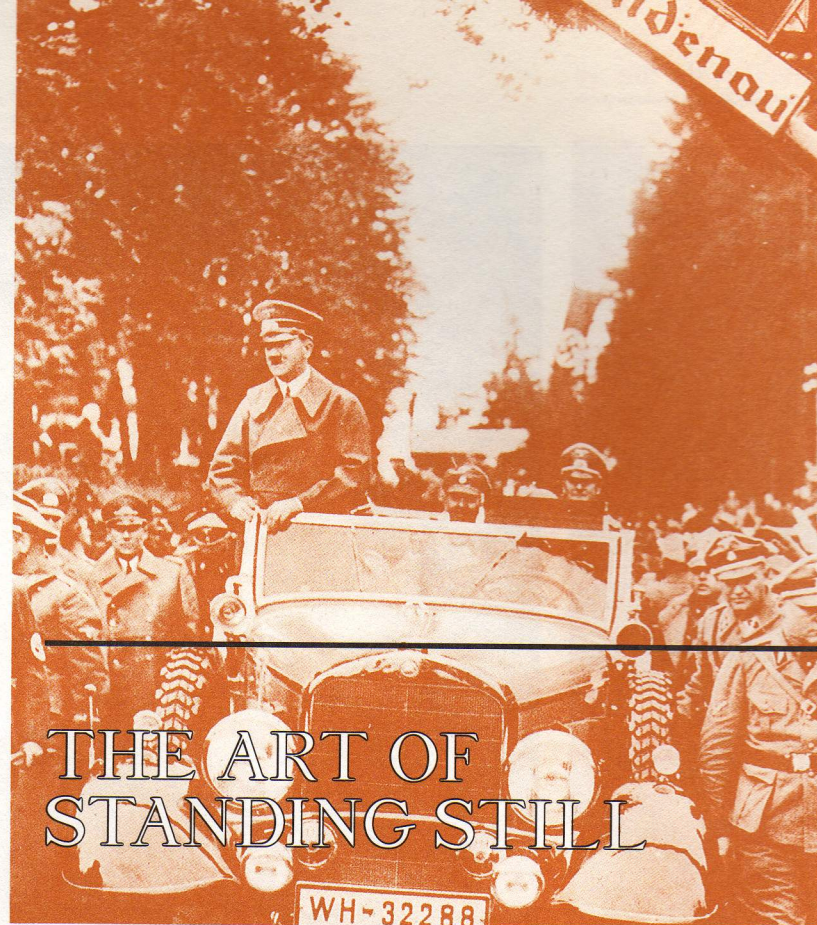
The funny thing about fear is that it won't let you stand still. When I stand still, it means that I am calmly anticipating the unknown. I'm prepared for it. For that, you have to be strong.

This was a remark addressed by Milena Jesenska in Ravensbruck concentration camp to her closest friend there, the German Margareta Buber-Neumann, wife of a German Communist who, under the Nazi-Soviet Pact, was torn from Stalin's Gulag and handed straight to Hitler's. To Greta Buber-Neumann and to everyone in the camp, Milena was astonishing, the very personification of freedom itself. Her manner quelled the guards; she did things other people would have been shot for. Her prison number was 4714; they called her 4711 after the famous eau de cologne. They called her The Empress – 'She was astonishing. An utterly unbroken spirit among the insulted and injured. Everything she did and every word she said, the way she held her head, the look in her eyes, the way she walked was a protest. With every gesture, she said, "I am a free woman."'

Who was she? She was a Czech woman whom most of us have scarcely heard of, save perhaps as 'Kafka's mistress'. Her youth was stormy and rebellious, positively bohemian, in a Czech community which was



breaking free from German domination in the Habsburg Empire to achieve independence. Her mother she cherished, but her father Jan Jesensky was something else. Professor of Medicine at Charles University, Prague and a brilliant oral surgeon, descendant of a famous Czech hero and himself a fervent Czech patriot; dandy, duellist and womaniser, he died at 75 and married his last mistress on his death-bed. He took his daughter skiing,



THE ART OF STANDING STILL

unheard of at the time, but at home he was a bigoted tyrant. He locked his daughter in a linen-closet, took violets from her bed-ridden mother and gave them to his mistress, refused a wet-nurse for her little brother and buried him in the family vault.

Milena rebelled. Head of the pack at the celebrated Minerva school for girls, where the Czech bourgeoisie educated their daughters, she stole her father's money for her friends, sampled his drugs, ran madcap through Prague and once dived fully dressed into the Vltava to keep a date. She sent bourgeois society

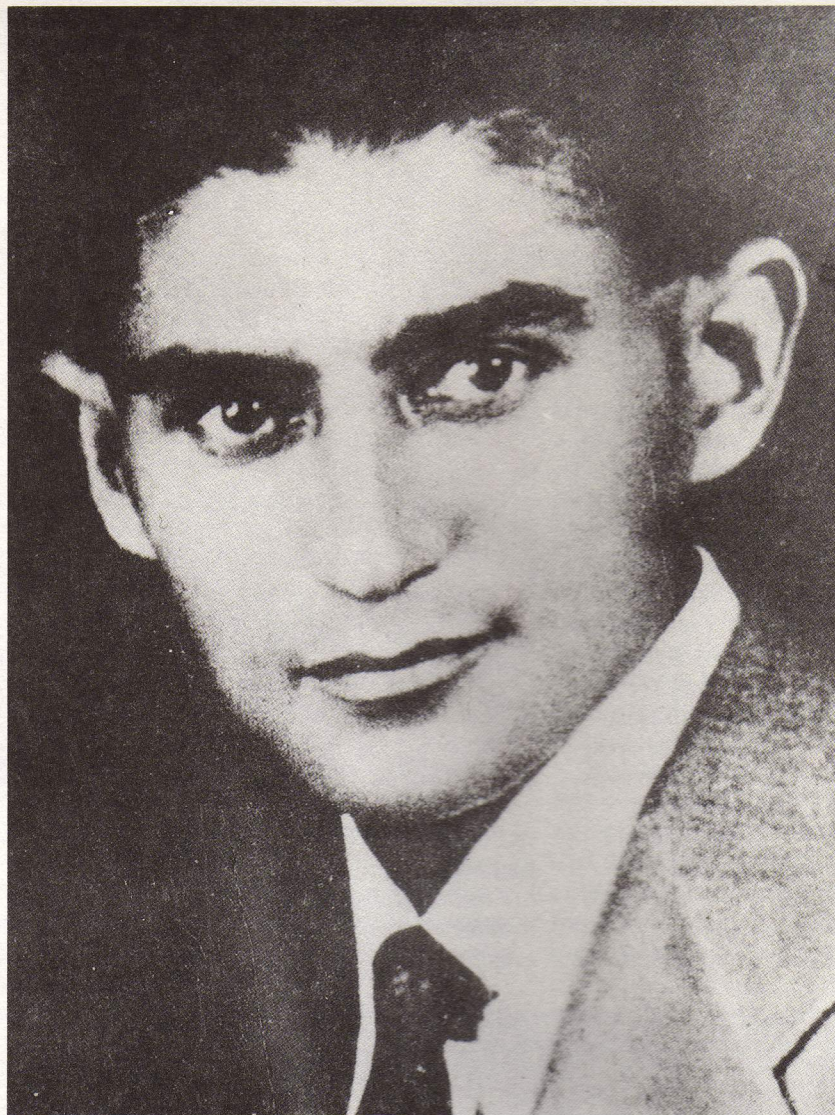
into a state of shock. Czech to their cotton socks, these girls crossed the shadow-line into the German-speaking Jewish intellectual heartland of the city. Their focus was the

(Above)
Hitler enters
Czechoslovakia after
the occupation of
Sudetenland, 1938.
ILLUSTRATED LONDON
NEWS

(Left)
In 1919, Thomas
Masaryk (seated on
the left), the newly
elected President,
entered Prague in
triumph at the birth
of the Czechoslovak
republic.
ILLUSTRATED LONDON
NEWS

Milena Jesenska (1896-1944)

(Right)
 Franz Kafka – bombarded
 with letters.
 MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY



haunted the frenetic café life. In this wretched state of misery and jealousy, Milena started to write – and proved brilliant. She wrote *fejetons*, short pointed essays, and Stasa Jilovska, a friend from Minerva days, published them in *Tribuna*, a Prague journal owned by liberal Jews. And Milena was the first to appreciate and translate Franz Kafka.

Her affair with Kafka, who has left his name as an adjective in every dictionary in Europe, was remarkable. The frail, fearful writer was bombarded with letters begging him to come to Vienna. He came, full of fear of the 'half-hour in bed that you once spoke of

Arco café, its habitués satirised by Karl Kraus in Vienna as the Arconauts.

There she met and fell for Ernst Polak, translator in a Prague bank. No great writer himself, he was a friend of many writers, cultivated and witty, shallow, fickle and selfish. Jan Jesensky was enraged; Milena defied him. There was an abortion, a morphine addiction, a forging of promissory notes, and in June 1917, her father shut her up in a lunatic asylum. But to a woman who in later years could curl concentration camp guards around her little finger, this was child's play. With an illicit key, she slipped away to Polak any time she pleased. Her father couldn't stand any more. He let her out, agreed to a marriage, gave her a trousseau and a small dowry and banished the pair of them to Vienna.

She missed a critical moment in the life of her people. On 28 October 1918, thanks to Tomáš Masaryk, Czechoslovakia became an independent state and exhilaration swept its capital. Milena, trapped in a Vienna of 20,000 starving children, worked as a railway porter, taught Czech, pawned her trousseau. Polak spent the money on his mistresses,

contemptuously as "men's business"'. Their love, and it was real, lived in their letters, where each of them could be what the other wanted. But in the end, Kafka broke it off – 'Don't write, make sure we don't meet, don't protest.' Milena was heartbroken – 'Jesus Christ, I could squeeze my temples into my brain.' Many of her increasingly popular articles were in fact letters to Kafka. She never forgot him. 'He is in every way the most remarkable person I have known.'

With her self-confidence restored, she stole jewellery from one of her pupils, pawned it, displayed herself in her new finery to a nonplussed Polak and gave herself up to the police. Her father dashed over to bail her out and brought her back to Prague in 1926 to a post with the great national daily of his party, *Narodni Listy*.

She divorced Polak and came back into an exuberant city, capital of modernism, in a return which was a triumph. She revelled in it. In a celebrated excursion of the Manes club of architects and designers, she met and soon married Jaromir Krecjar, a famous architect who designed the Czech pavilion for the Paris Exhibition of 1937; he built a flat

for her in Francouska Avenue – Milena's hanging gardens – and she lived through the happiest days of her life. She published a collection of her articles and two other books; she brought out a series of children's books. She invented the idea of a woman's page for *Narodni Listy*. She was the arbiter of taste and, of course, she got pregnant.

It was a disaster; 32 hours of agony before her daughter Honza was born. Her father rushed over to pump morphine into her. She came out a morphine addict with a crippled leg. Her marriage slumped. Both Jaromir and she had joined the Communist Party in 1931, as had millions of others, sensing a creed of hope. But the old, open party was giving way to the terrible Stalinist conformity. Jaromir went to Russia and divorced her by post. A new man Evzen Klinger moved in, a Slovakian Jew hounded by the party as a Trotskyist. Milena's flat became a haven for dissidents. The Purge trials of Old Bolsheviks were the end. She left the Party in 1936 and nursed a great fear of Communism for the rest of her life. For a year, she, Evzen and Honza lived through her worst hours.

She was rescued in 1937 when the great editor Ferdinand Peroutka signed her up as a staff writer for *Pritomnost*, one of the leading journals of central Europe. She found herself. She broke out of the prison of the woman's page and built herself into one of Central Europe's most distinguished and entertaining journalists, a sane, cool but compassionate chronicler of the human. She was still an addict, of the Dicodit cough mixture with its morphine, of foreign radio broadcasts, of the

cinema. But her dispatches from the dreadful days of 1938 and 1939 resonate in the memory.

She went into the tormented Sudetenland: 'I met a German who was not a Nazi. His children have become outcasts . . . It is we who have failed here . . . The man in the street is touchingly grateful when he hears a Czech speaking German. They melt . . . These people could have been carriers of democracy.' During the terrible agony of Munich she cherished the illusion that Britain and France would stand by the Czech army as it mobilised: 'One thing is not in the Nazis' power, just what they most fervently hope for, another Austria . . .' She was mistaken. Britain and France betrayed Czechoslovakia – a betrayal which burned itself into people's memories and helped determine the next 50 years.

In the dreadful twilight period which followed, of the disintegrating ruin of the Czech democratic state, Milena threw herself into the rescue of threatened Jews, penned a memorable obituary of Karl Capek on his death at Christmas 1938 and wrote a passionate plea for Czech nationality in response to a Nazi hate campaign:

We are a profoundly democratic people. We are told we are now part of a Greater German living space. We have never required much space. We are only a people of eight million souls, a people with its language, its customs, its songs . . . We shall teach our children the hymn of Saint Wenceslas. That and nothing else.

She sensed a time of sadness rising over



(Left)
German troops enter Czech territory
in 1938.

HULTON DEUTSCH COLLECTION

Further reading

Material in English is extremely limited. There are basically three works.

Milena by Margareta Buber-Neumann (Collins-Harvill, New York, 1990) is virtually a eulogy. A moving and sensitive work, it perhaps overstates Milena's anti-Communism.

The oddly titled *Kafka's Milena* by Jana Cerna (Souvenir Press, London, 1987) is a life by her daughter, whom she called Honza and who was destined to lead a marginal life: it has material not found elsewhere.

Finally, there is *Kafka: Letters to Milena*, edited by W. Haas, translated by T. and J. Stern (1953).

We know there is much material which is now being collected and perhaps can hope for translations.

her small country and went into yet another clinic for a cure at maximum speed. She came out cured, to walk straight into the death of her country.

Those last months after 15 March 1939, when the Germans marched in, were among her finest. She took over *Pritomnost* after the arrest of Peroutka – 'Thank God! A man at last!' said one journalist, to which she replied: 'If you think this is bad, just wait till the Russians get here!' She made the newspaper the last voice of Czech nationalism, battling endlessly with the censors. She openly defied the Gestapo. When they ordered Jews to wear a yellow star, Milena promptly wore one. After the great patriotic demonstration of 28 October 1939, they came for her. She was actually acquitted in a German civil trial in Dresden, but the

Gestapo simply transferred her to Pankrac prison, Prague, where she captivated everyone. They then shipped her to Ravensbruck.

There she made a name for herself as the very spirit of freedom. Ravensbruck had been a model camp. There was always hunger, cold, brutality, but there had been Red Cross parcels. They did not build a gas chamber until the winter of 1943/44. But from 1942 the Nazi horror had them by the throat. Milena discovered the SS doctor and his nurse were murdering pregnant women and drowning the babies in a bucket. She blackmailed the SS into punishing them and freeing her friend Greta Buber-Neumann from the punishment bunker.

But her days were numbered now. In January 1944 she collapsed with an infected kidney. The new SS doctor, whose mother was English and who had studied with Milena's father, cut it out and gave her a transfusion. Ten days later her other kidney was infected and she was given a transfusion from the same source – a fatal error. Everybody came to see her, not only Czechs, but Germañs, Poles, Yugoslavs, Dutch. Her last moments were spent looking at some old Morstadt views of Prague her father had sent her. She died, ironically in the arms of a Communist woman, on 17 May. Her father tried to kill himself.

Three weeks later, a crowd of Czech women gathered at the wire; they knew there were Czech men on the other side and they sang their national anthem. They had learned of the landings in Normandy by the Allied armies, myself among them.

I had scarcely heard of Milena Jesenska, but something about her life and spirit gripped me. Discounting the madcap early years, she seems to me to express something about the spirit of her people, who have survived for centuries as an island in an ocean of aggressive and ambitious Germans, overshadowed by the mighty tyranny of Russia. What has characterised them above all is the art of

survival. They cultivated Milena's 'art of standing still' . . . 'Don't let us, or those who come after us, perish.'

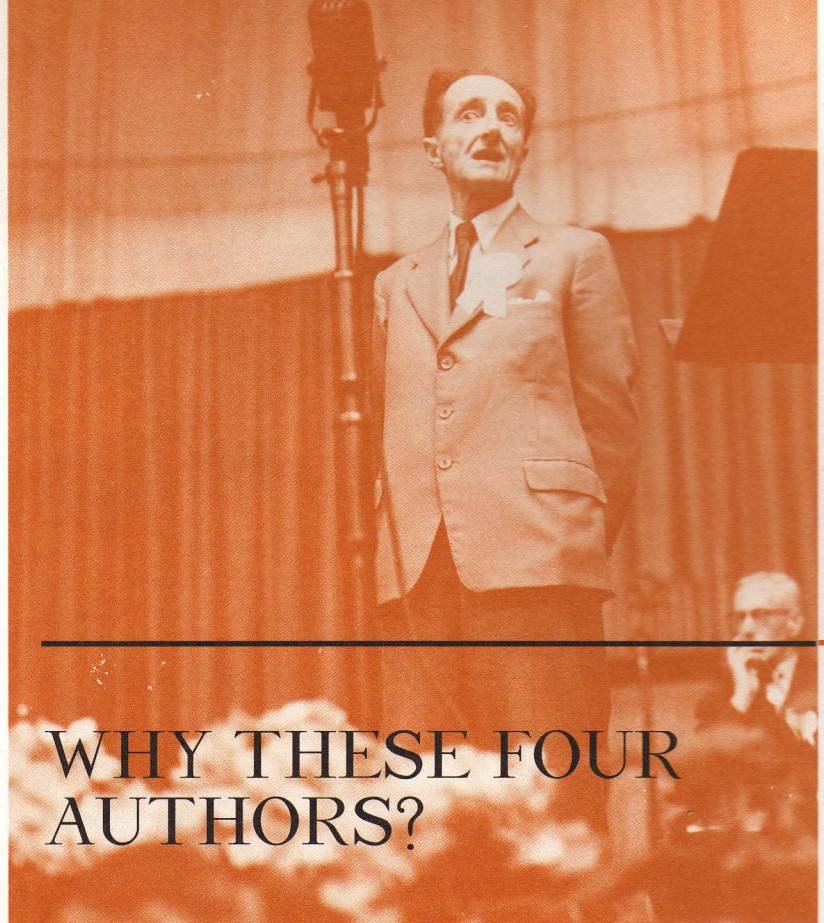


Of all the people we might have chosen, why these particular four? It was essentially a matter of personal taste, but do they, coming from such widely different backgrounds, really have anything in common? I think they do. They all started out under no compulsion save the urge to express themselves. None of them at first had any commitment to anything outside themselves.

This was certainly true of Milena Jesenska. What commitment engaged the mind of a young Czech girl flouting every convention in the book? She cheerfully robbed her father for her friends, defied him whenever she could, lapsed easily into drugs. Most striking was her defiance of the general trend of Czech opinion at the very time when it was achieving its cherished fulfilment. She witnessed the birth of her country as a state independent from Vienna, where she continued her involvement with German-speaking Jews. Even the affair with Kafka, when she started to write, follows the pattern. Kafka thought of himself as neither Jewish nor German nor Czech and it's clear that Milena, despite her deep affection for her native Prague, shared that universalist attitude.

It is true of Pushkin. The youthful passion with which he pursued women and verse, the zest in life, the obsession with self knew little of any political commitment. His early radicalism was, one feels, essentially fashionable in the circles in which he moved. His very genius as a Russian writer seemed to absolve him from the need to commit himself. He avoided the Decembrist rising, when his friends perished. That event certainly haunted him all his life, but he was immensely relieved, indeed overjoyed, to be forgiven by the Tsar and enrolled as a court remembrancer.

The same is true even of the most political of our writers, Saunders Lewis, though his period of non-involvement was relatively brief. At first, he never thought of writing in Welsh. Wholly absorbed in the particular style of an English 'aristocracy of talent', he threw himself wholeheartedly into the experience of World War I in much the same

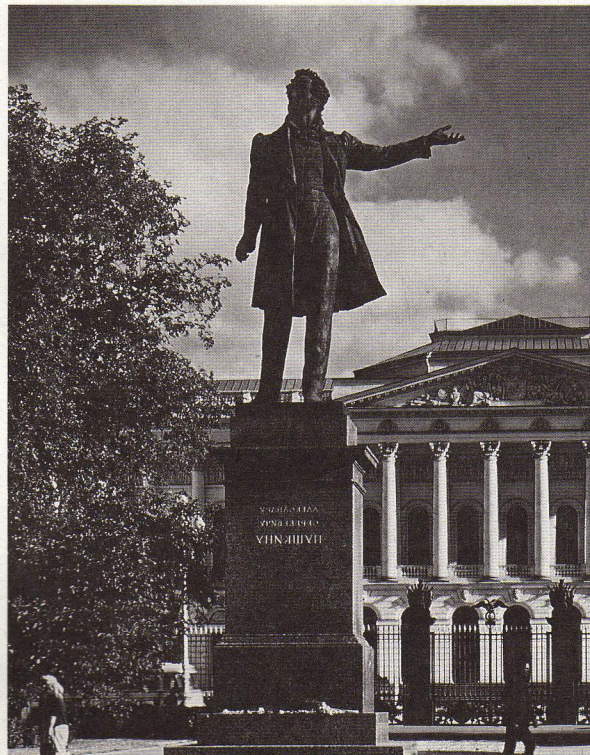


WHY THESE FOUR AUTHORS?

spirit as everyone else of the generation of Rupert Brooke. He never lost his taste for the military life or for the culture of France which made him a Welsh nationalist. It was the remarkable decision in 1923 to write only in Welsh, which marked him for life.

Perhaps Mary Shelley comes closest to being a 'committed' writer from the beginning, but I find something unreal about that commitment. She wrote her greatest book at the very start of her career and this makes her difficult to assess. No doubt, the daughter of William Godwin and Mary

Wollstonecraft may have been predestined to write as she did, but one can detect even in



(Above)
Saunders Lewis on stage at the National Eisteddfod.
GEOFF CHARLES

(Left)
Statue of Pushkin, St Petersburg.
BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

her rather miserable youth in a bohemian household a yearning for the ordinary, the decencies of everyday living. She conceived a passion for Shelley which lasted her life and informs every page of her book. He was her companion in every sense – though it is fascinating that he identified with her Monster! But after his death and through her long struggle to secure his reputation and her son's inheritance, it is her passion for respectability which 'ultimately registered, even in her revision of *Frankenstein* in 1831. In one sense, Mary had to live with a reputation she rejected. This is what makes her book such a schizophrenic exercise and it partly accounts for its permanent popularity. The further disjuncture between her text and the versions of stage and screen adds a whole new dimension – and makes Mary in truth 'a Child of Light and a Maker of Monsters'.

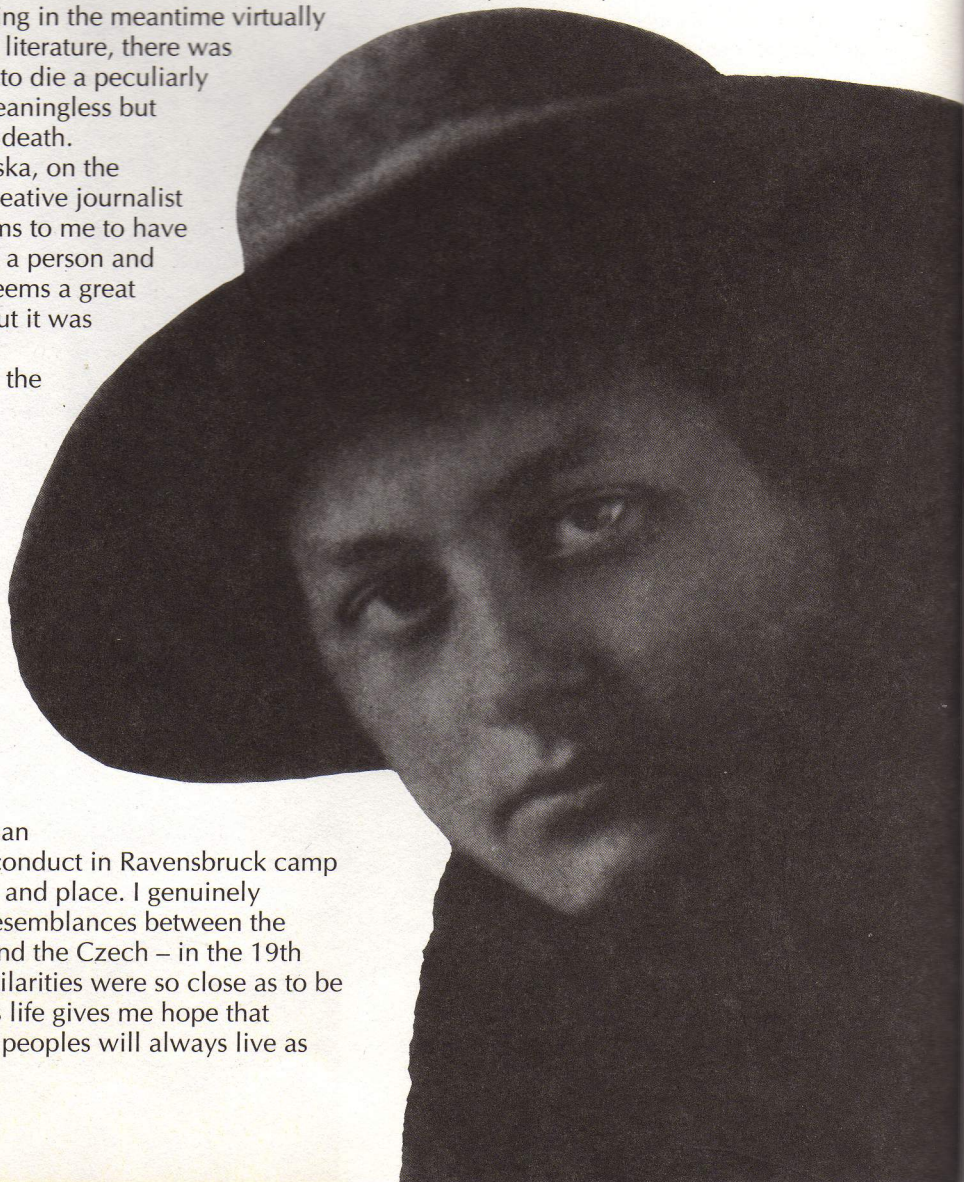
Pushkin fought his way through the agonies of the Third Section and of his marriage, through some violent fluctuations of fortune, to reach a kind of ambiguous equilibrium in his great poem *The Bronze Horseman*, which seems to me to stand without equal as a study of the relations between the humble individual and authority in its most despotic form. It is a poem which, with its emotional hinterland, leaves me breathless. Having in the meantime virtually created Russian literature, there was nothing left but to die a peculiarly wasteful and meaningless but understandable death.

Milena Jesenska, on the contrary, as a creative journalist from 1937, seems to me to have found herself as a person and as a patriot. It seems a great simplification but it was not. From the dispatches from the Sudetenland onwards and particularly through the desperate shadowland of Czech democracy in 1939, she registers on the mind as a Czech patriot of open, generous and immensely human spirit. And her conduct in Ravensbruck camp transcends time and place. I genuinely believe in the resemblances between the Welsh people and the Czech – in the 19th century, the similarities were so close as to be comic! Milena's life gives me hope that neither of these peoples will always live as

mere survivors.

And Saunders Lewis? There was no inevitability about the form his commitment took. Essentially aristocratic, monarchist, militarist and Catholic, in a Wales which was radical, democratic and Nonconformist, it escalated in the European civil war of the Thirties and Forties to a position close to that of pro-Fascist Vichy France. He utterly alienated me and many like me from the Welsh language for 40 years. It was the invitation from Channel 4 which compelled me to confront him and to absorb his dramas. I found I had a few things in common with this maimed genius of the Welsh. I had independently arrived at a Pascal wager on the existence of Wales in my own work as a historian. I had a vision of a Europe which was not his but which none the less marked us both out. I have tried to exorcise him. In the end, I felt we were both, albeit unwillingly, passengers on the same train going nowhere in the night.

The real challenge was to confront these four dead people and make them live, to work to present them as history-in-the-present *using only their own recorded and authentic words*, written or spoken. This series, *Writing on the Line*, was composed strictly according to a theory of history-as-television.



(Right)
Milena Jesenska, aged 21.

I first appeared as a presenter of history on television on Channel 4 in 1985 in a novel series on the history of Wales, *The Dragon Has Two Tongues*. A prominent Welsh historian promptly declared, in tones of shock, 'This is the end of history as we have known it!'

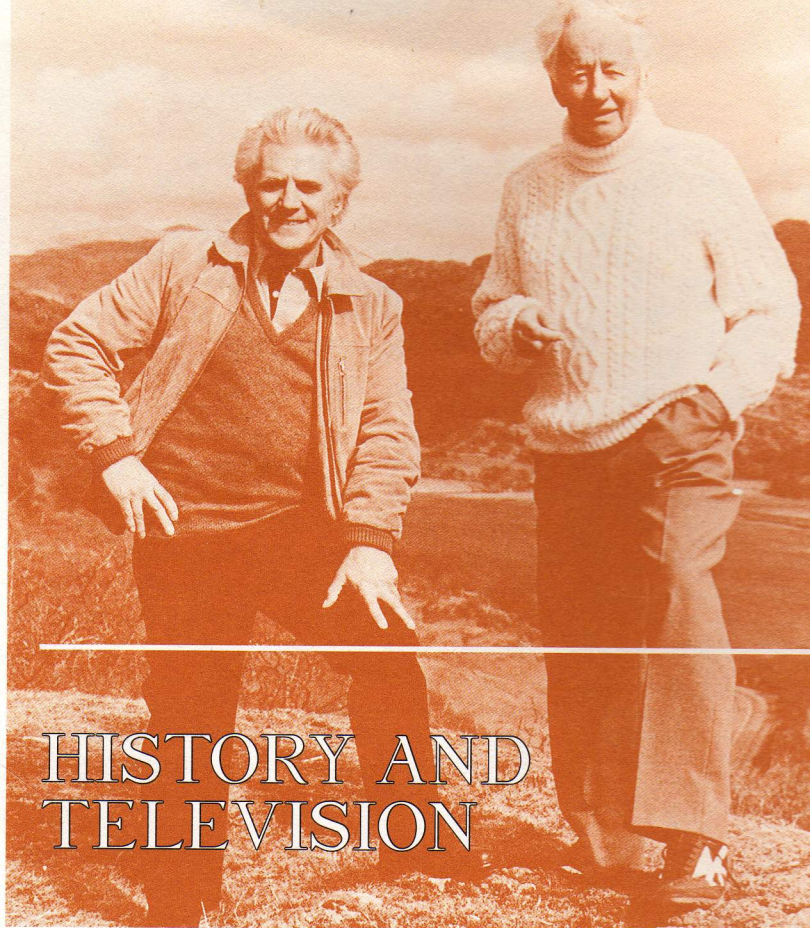
I had long been discontented with history as presented on television. It seemed to be either a reconstruction with something of the character of a costume drama or else it was delivered by a narrator who seemed omniscient and infallible. These two methods, whether they were compelling or not, seemed to me to miss the essential ingredient of history. The Greek word *historia* means both a story and an enquiry. It was the element of *search* that seemed absent. Much historical writing is, in fact, an argument and it was precisely the *processes* of history which disappeared from the screen.

So when I was invited to take part in *The Dragon Has Two Tongues*, I jumped at the chance to argue my way through 2000 years with Wynford Vaughan Thomas. We spent a whole summer arguing over the shape of the programme. As the series wore on, Wynford became alarmed that we were both being misrepresented. If there was a horse anywhere in Wales, he would be on it; if there was a hole, I'd be down it! Our viewpoints, often more similar than might appear, were nevertheless fundamentally opposed and they remained opposed to the bitter end, to some people's surprise.

Much history is like this. Every historian tries to adhere to some fundamentals of the craft, concerned with the provenance and interpretation of documents. All of us strive to use new sources, new materials. Governed by the unchanging rules of evidence, this process still leaves ample scope for debate and argument.

Every generation rewrites history. Every generation puts its own questions to history. You will not ask the same questions as your grandfather. A bank manager will ask different questions from a miner. History is flux. Long may it be so. *The Dragon* offered the first chance for historians actually to argue on screen in the living process of writing history itself. It was the vision of the director, Colin Thomas, which made this possible.

We were confronted with compressing the history of Wales into 13 half-hour programmes. We argued our way through to an agreement on essentials. Then, in the filming, each of us would plough our separate furrows, but every episode ended in a confrontation. That confrontation was not rehearsed (though the director might achieve his end by some strategic leaking!). The director ensured the series was imaginatively presented, and the whole was accompanied by four volumes of documentary material and the organisation of



HISTORY AND TELEVISION

literally scores of viewing groups.

The results, I will confess, proved rather sensational. Certainly in Wales, the programmes were very widely enjoyed. I and Colin Thomas are still engaged in argument in the street. Scores of groups were formed. But even in England, there was a major response. Some of the programmes to this day are used to introduce the practice of history in schools, and I have to report that even in France some schools are doing the same. In some ways, we have never since quite achieved the breakthrough which *The Dragon* effected. The prize-fight character of the series, of course, helped.

Further series were mooted. By this time, Colin Thomas and I were much exercised by this problem of historical presentation on television. We were evolving some basic principles which would apply to any future series, which would come to a focus on individuals. In the end, we evolved a few simple maxims whose application, however, was to prove difficult.

1 History is about the past, but is written in the present. Therefore, all the action must take place in the present. This has disconcerted some critics who talk of paradox. They have to face the fact that history is irretrievably located in the present, no matter how powerful the historian's

(Above)
Gwyn A. Williams (left) and
Wynford Vaughan-Thomas
in *The Dragon has Two
Tongues* (Channel 4, 1985).

(Overleaf, top)
Jack Shepherd as Goya in
Cracking Up (Channel 4).

(Overleaf, bottom)
Tim Roth as Gillray in
Cracking Up (Channel 4).

Gwyn A. Williams

Born in South Wales in 1925. After army service, he graduated from the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth with a BA (Hons in history) and an MA, and from University College London with a PhD.

He taught at Aberystwyth and at the universities of York and Cardiff. He was awarded the Alexander Prize of the Royal Historical Society, a Simon Research Fellowship at Manchester, an ACLS Fellowship in the US at Brown University and the University of Pennsylvania, and a Research Fellowship at St Antony's College, Oxford, and has taught at the universities of Turin and Madrid.

Among his books are *Medieval London* (Athlone Press, London, 1963), *Artisans and Sans-culottes* (Edward Arnold, 1968 and Libris, 1989, London); *Goya and the Impossible Revolution* (Allen Lane, 1976 and Peregrine Books, 1984, London); *The Merthyr Rising* (Croom Helm, London, 1978 and University of Wales, Cardiff, 1988); *Madoc: the making of a myth* (Eyre Methuen, London, 1979 and University of Oxford, 1987); and *When was Wales: a history of the Welsh* (Black Raven Press and Pelican, 1985 and Penguin, 1991, London).

Retired since 1985, he now writes and presents for television.

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CHANNEL FOUR TELEVISION

empathy with his period.

2 The historian, in this case myself, has to be present. History is modulated through the brain of the historian, governed as it is by the rules of the craft and, in all conscience, he or she ought to be present. It is more honest.

3 The individuals being examined, however, have their own autonomy. They must use only the authenticated words they actually spoke or wrote. We have stuck to this principle rigidly. In only one case did we depart from it. Iolo Morganwg never wrote anything in his own justification. I wrote it for him. But on screen I said explicitly that I had written it and it was made the vehicle of a dramatic conclusion. In every other case, we have adhered to the principle. Of course, the historian will select the words to be used, but this is true of every history book.

4 The character from the past will wear the clothes of the period and move through appropriate scenes in the present. This is to stress the presence of the past in the present and vice versa. We wanted to convey some sense of the contemporary relevance of the past. The past is never dead.

5 Finally, we would use every device possible to make the subject interesting. For example, we would try to see if there could be an element of confrontation between the subject and the historian. This point and the previous one caused most difficulty and provoked most argument.

With these principles, we tackled the next series for Channel 4, *Cracking Up*, on Goya, Gillray, Mary Wollstonecraft, Sylvia Pankhurst and two Welshmen, Iolo Morganwg and Niclas Glais. Once again, the series provoked a reaction. Many critics evidently found my style of presentation difficult to take, possibly because I am Welsh. However, in general, popular response was satisfactory, critical reaction mixed, but on the whole, critics warmed to the series as it progressed and the last programme on Sylvia Pankhurst was judged a success. It was the Gillray programme which provoked the greatest difficulty – precisely over this fusion of past and present. We wished to present Gillray's populist English



nationalism in the style of *the Sun* and of football patriotism, which we thought was apt. This proved controversial, possibly because the concept of an 'English nationalism' itself seemed alien (it comes easier to a Welshman!). Goya, on whom I have written and with whom I am somewhat obsessed, seemed to evoke a certain blankness! But on the whole, we were content.

Now we present this series, *Writing on the Line*. The audience will judge, but I like to feel we have reached a good balance in the programmes. I personally will be pleased to be judged by them.

Of course, we could go on doing this kind of history for ever. In fact, several people have approached us with enthusiasm, demanding series on the English Romantics, the pre-Raphaelites and so on! But television lives by novelty. Enough is enough; even of a proven method. There remain other fields of history to explore and I mean to go on, as long as I am permitted, exploring them in variant versions or developments of our current style.

I am moved by other considerations. Over the last 30 years or so, we have lived through a revolution in history which has made the study of the past central to the growth of people's critical self-understanding. It was my hope that the ten books I have written would serve that cause. I believe the human advance

which history has achieved is now irreversible.

We are today living through a Thermidor of the spirit in which people are trying to stop that advance, to return history to a prison and to impose an Authorised Version. They will fail. This is one battle which the powers of darkness are going to lose.

