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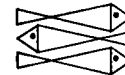
THE OLD LIÈ (1987)

ACKERLEY

A Life of J. R. Ackerley



Peter Parker



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For Christopher

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Ackerley

been rather amused and no doubt it was this reaction which saved Ackerley from being further disciplined.

Ackerley had briefly considered a job with the *Evening News*, but since it paid a great deal less than the £600 p.a. he was now getting from the Corporation, this was never really a serious option. Forster felt that Ackerley should only leave the BBC if Fielden also resigned, but in the event Fielden allowed himself to be persuaded to stay on and soon succumbed to shingles and 'a nervous breakdown of madhouse proportions'. Ackerley continued in the department until 1935, when Janet Adam Smith announced that she was getting married and would therefore be resigning from her post as literary editor of the BBC's magazine, *The Listener*.



Inside the machine

THE announcement in December 1928 that the BBC was to publish a new magazine had caused an unexpected outcry. The press release prepared by the editor-elect, R. S. Lambert, who had made his reputation in the Corporation's Adult Education Department, seemed innocuous enough:

The BBC will shortly commence publication of a new illustrated weekly journal, entitled *The Listener*, to be devoted to the extension and improvement of its Adult Educational work . . . It is intended that *The Listener* shall stand for much more than the mere reproduction of talks. The journal will be educational in the broad sense of the word: that is, it will take cognizance of all the serious interest[s] of the listening public in such a way as to provide a paper which the intelligent man or woman will wish to buy for its own sake for entertainment and information.

Some sections of the press, notably those who feared the competition, complained that the BBC were 'invading' the field of publishing. The principal objections were that the new magazine represented further empire-building on behalf of the Corporation ('an illegitimate stretching of official activity', as the *Financial News* put it); that its BBC backing would give *The Listener* an unfair advantage over similar magazines (the *New Statesman* was particularly vociferous about this 'thoroughly objectionable' project); and that, most importantly, in the scramble for advertising revenue 'the BBC was diverting trade from legitimate trade channels'. Representatives of these channels, a delegation of newspaper proprietors, were determined to halt publication

and sought an audience with the Postmaster-General, who oversaw the BBC on behalf of the government. The PMG refused to receive them, so they appealed direct to the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin. By this time Reith had returned from his Christmas holiday in Switzerland much invigorated by alpine air, and he got on to Baldwin immediately, suggesting that the proprietors should meet the BBC before trespassing upon the valuable time of the head of government. A meeting between the Governors and the proprietors was arranged which lasted a mere ten minutes and from which the BBC emerged triumphant. A few concessions were agreed upon, notably that only as much advertising as was 'strictly necessary' would be taken, since the magazine was not intended to be profit-making. Another concession, released to the press on 14 January 1929, was that:

The BBC states that it is not intended that 'The Listener' should contain more than 10% original contributed material not related to broadcasting. The rest of the paper will consist of talks which have been broadcast, and comments thereon, articles relating to broadcast programmes, and programme personalities, and news of broadcast service generally.

Lambert, whose true ambition was to produce a journal of general culture ('something on the lines of a twopenny *Spectator*'), later admitted in a confidential memo that:

To some extent the working out of this clause in practice has depended upon the interpretation of the phrase 'original contributed material not related to broadcasting'. Editorially, we have always reckoned that anything published in the paper which could be in any way related to broadcasting, or any part of the broadcast programmes, would not rank as part of the 10%.

To ensure that they got away with this Lambert decided early on to stop the practice of printing footnotes informing the reader when each talk had been broadcast. In this way the paper's rivals would be unable to work out what percentage of an issue was 'original contributed material not related to broadcasting' and so accuse the Corporation of violating the agreement.

Two days after this agreement had been published the first issue of

the magazine appeared, priced at threepence, half the cost of its nearest potential rivals, the *Nation* and *Spectator*. Its weekly net sales during the first year averaged 27,773 copies.

The Listener did not have a literary editor at first, this part of the magazine being handled by the deputy editor, Janet Adam Smith. As the paper moved closer to Lambert's ideal it was decided to create a separate post of literary editor and Adam Smith was appointed, gladly relinquishing the less interesting aspects of her previous job. It was she who created the magazine's high literary reputation, particularly with regard to the poetry which it regularly published from February 1931 onwards. An anthology of poems which had originally appeared in *The Listener* was edited by her and published a few months after she had left the staff to marry the poet and mountaineer Michael Roberts. Its title, *Poems of Tomorrow*, was intended to reflect the magazine's discernment in publishing the poetry of young writers whose names had subsequently become familiar. Indeed, the contents page is a distinguished roll-call of the period: W. H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, David Gascoyne, John Lehmann, George Barker, Roy Campbell, Gavin Ewart, Julian Bell, Charles Madge, William Plomer, Kathleen Raine, Herbert Read, Michael Roberts, Dylan Thomas, Edwin Muir, and so on. Her departure was a blow to the magazine and it was necessary to find a replacement who could capitalize upon and continue her excellent groundwork.

A BBC memo dated 17 January 1935 noted that there had been 'a long-standing promise' to Ackerley to consider him for any vacancy which arose at *The Listener*. Lambert apparently regarded the thirty-eight-year-old Ackerley as something of a catch, partly because he had a literary reputation of his own and also because of his wide circle of acquaintance, which had already proved useful in the Talks Department. It may also have been felt that an appointment from the Talks Department would help to heal the breach that had risen between it and the magazine. Talks tended to think that the main purpose of *The Listener* was to provide a verbatim record of the best of their output, and they objected when Lambert edited their material for reasons of space or because talks which broadcast well sometimes read awkwardly. Whatever the case, Ackerley's promise was honoured and he was appointed to begin work on 15 April. It was in many ways a brave appointment, since Ackerley's record in the Talks Department was far from spotless and he was the very opposite of a Corporation

Man as envisaged by Reith. Lambert frequently had occasion to wonder whether the appointment had been a wise one, as it soon became clear that Ackerley was not a man likely to mellow with age and experience.

Towards the end of his life Ackerley was to claim that he was entirely unsuited to the job. He would claim that he was insufficiently intellectual and had no breadth of interest. This was not true. When reviewing his relationship with his father, he had discovered the penalties of inattentiveness and self-obsession, and had mended his ways a little. Those who knew him in the 1930s remarked upon his lively curiosity in the lives and opinions of others. Friends were unable to make a casual judgement without being challenged: 'Why do you say that? What do you mean by that?' It is possible to see the influence of Forster here. Ackerley admitted that in spite of their long friendship he often felt uneasy in Forster's company: 'It is because he *listens*, he listens not only to what one is saying but to the motive behind.' If, in old age, Ackerley once more became inattentive, his face adopting a suitably engaged expression whilst his mind drifted elsewhere, at this period, and throughout his career, he had a genuinely enquiring mind. He once told Neville Braybrooke that curiosity was the key to being a successful literary editor: 'I read everything in sight – histories of the Ottoman Empire, instructions on patent medicines, bus-tickets, anything.' It was a quality regular contributors such as Geoffrey Grigson recognized and applauded:

He was unrelentingly curious. Literature wasn't everything. His book pages had to cover a width of interest . . . Little or nothing he found alien, this cultured man doing a journalist's job.

The post of literary editor was, more accurately, that of an arts or review editor. When he joined the magazine, Ackerley was responsible each issue for commissioning eight pages on the arts (excluding music). Usually there would be three pages of short, unsigned book reviews ('*The Listener's* Book Chronicle'); a full-page signed review of the latest novels every fortnight; the occasional longer, signed literary article or review of 'specially important, or controversial books'; and some two to three pages on art, including a page of photographs of works currently on show, chosen and captioned by a critic and entitled 'Round the Art Exhibitions'. Ackerley also chose one or more poems

for each issue and a short story 'whenever possible', this being circumscribed by lack of space and (according to Lambert) the lack of good stories available. 'With regard to the short stories,' Lambert reported to his superiors in October 1935, 'we have set ourselves the highest possible standard, that is, only to publish something which is definitely above the level of ordinary interest and merit.' In addition Ackerley had to prepare quarterly Book Numbers, which contained signed reviews, and the occasional extra supplement for travel books. In the early years priority was given to broadcast material supplied by the Talks Department, where suitable or possible (Desmond MacCarthy, for example, refused to sign a contract allowing his talks to be published). However, by early 1937 the department's Book Talks changed character when they abandoned reviewing current titles and began broadcasting general literary talks 'mainly of an elementary character, dealing with out-of-date publications'.

Any sense of security provided by the BBC was far outweighed by a lack of freedom in the job and Ackerley frequently felt oppressed by the weight of the Corporation. Many opinions, and even words, which passed without comment in comparable magazines were not permitted to sully the pages of *The Listener*. Every review, poem or story which Ackerley wanted to publish had to be passed by Lambert. When Ackerley first arrived *The Listener* was under the control of D (IP), the Director of Information and Publications, who was in turn answerable to C (P), the Controller of Programmes. The outlook of these men can be gathered from a private memo sent by D (IP) to C (P) concerning the choice of a new deputy editor when Janet Adam Smith had become literary editor. The candidate 'should be a man of distinctly conservative leanings in thought, both political and artistic'. The initial letter of 'conservative' was originally written in upper case. From 1935 to 1936 the structure of the Corporation underwent a change. The post of D (IP) was abolished and the new post of C (PR), Controller of Public Relations, was created, taking over responsibility for all BBC publications from C (P). In theory C (PR) was answerable to the Director General and the Board of Governors, but their role as far as *The Listener* was concerned was that of post-publication admonition rather than pre-publication interference. To avoid such Directorial raps across the knuckles, C (PR) maintained a wary eye upon the contents of the magazine, an eye that was to become wrier still once Ackerley took over the arts pages. The job of C (PR) was given to

Sir Stephen Tallents, late of the Empire Marketing Board, whose assistant, AC (PR), was the equally obstructive A. P. Ryan, late of the same organization. Both men were to occupy prominent places upon Ackerley's black list. After a distinguished career in assorted ministries (Munitions, Food and the Board of Trade), Tallents had cut his Public Relations teeth at the Post Office. Ackerley was to recall that Tallents' 'vigilance over and interference with' the magazine earned him the title of 'the highest paid proof-reader in the country'.

Lambert's first attempt to capitalize upon Ackerley's literary connections was unsuccessful. On his very first day in the office Ackerley was asked to write a 'personal' letter to Norman Douglas in an attempt to procure a contribution to the magazine's projected series of a modern version of the Grand Tour. Perhaps embarrassed by the task, Ackerley made little effort to recommend the commission to Douglas:

My dear Norman,
I expect this letter will be a surprise to you, and I wish that I could think that it would be a pleasant one. Its main object, however, is to try to persuade you to do an article for *The Listener*, which, as you probably don't know, is the British Broadcasting Corporation's journal.

After outlining the concept of the series, he ended by confessing:

The length of the article would not be less than 2,000 words; and then we come to the question of fee. I am afraid that you are likely to be far too expensive for us, but I have no knowledge at this point, and can only tell you that the fee we are thinking of offering all round is twelve guineas.

Unsurprisingly, Douglas declined to contribute. Others did, however, and the series was popular enough to be issued as a book later in the year. Ackerley was more successful with other friends, and a number of distinguished people agreed to review books for him in spite of his offering them no byline, little space and a meagre fee. People like Forster and Collier Abbott, who had helped him in the Talks Department, were joined by Jack Sprott and members of the Bloomsbury Group, notably Clive Bell, Maynard Keynes and Leonard and Virginia Woolf, and representatives of the younger generation such as W. H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, Christopher Isherwood and

Stephen Spender. Auden later recorded the indebtedness of his generation to Ackerley: 'Those of us . . . who were starting our literary careers at the time have very good cause to remember how much he did for us; *The Listener* was one of our main outlets.' Ackerley had already attempted to recruit Isherwood to cover the May Day celebrations in Berlin for the Talks Department in 1933, describing him to Siepmann as 'an intelligent and serious-minded young man'. This came to nothing, but Isherwood wrote a number of reviews for *The Listener* and Ackerley was to describe him as 'the most consistently brilliant' of the magazine's contributors in the 1930s period.

Many writers who had submitted poems or short stories were later asked to review books, but great pains were taken to ensure that books went to people who were specially qualified to offer an opinion on them. Indeed, books were often 'sent out to specialist reviewers, with a request that they judge whether the book be worth review at all'. Space was so tight and books so numerous that Ackerley preferred not to review indifferent books, 'unless some public interest is served, for example, by exposing the faults of a book which has gained a fictitious reputation by unskilful reviewing elsewhere'. Such policies, formulated in February 1937, were maintained throughout Ackerley's time at the magazine, with the result that *The Listener's* arts pages developed a very high reputation.

Ackerley valued controversy, since he believed it made the paper lively. Certainly, had it been left to the editors of the 1930s and 1940s *The Listener* would have been singularly inert. Ackerley always encouraged provocative views and would fight to keep them in despite considerable editorial faint-heartedness. 'Delighted with your bad-tempered, outspoken script,' begins one of his letters to Douglas Cooper. 'You will no doubt realize that Lambert is exceedingly unlikely to pass it as it stands.' Cooper had made some 'wounding' remarks about the Royal Academy and this, along with certain other institutions like public schools, the monarchy and J. B. Priestley, was regarded as a protected species. 'I won't have all this cocking snooks at the big wigs,' Tallents would complain. 'I don't want misunderstandings with the big wigs.' This remark was made after Ackerley had sent a book entitled *The Headmaster Speaks: A Symposium by twelve famous public school headmasters* to A. S. Neill, the radical educationalist and founder of Summerhill, with predictable results. The piece had been spiked.

Nonetheless, Ackerley continued to send out books to people who held strong views and had the knowledge and experience to back them up if challenged. For example, Colleer Abbott's vitriolic assault upon the Society of Jesus in the course of a review of John Pick's *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Priest and Poet* caused considerable alarm in the editorial offices. Abbott had dismissed Pick's defence of the Jesuits at the expense of Hopkins' friends as a 'monstrous lie', an expression considered unsuitable in a BBC publication. 'Gross misstatement' was suggested as a substitute, but after much wrangling 'monstrous lie' was allowed through because Ackerley's (anonymous) reviewer was a leading Hopkins scholar and therefore entirely qualified to make such a remark.

Whilst there is no doubt that Ackerley, a natural rebel, enjoyed cocking snooks for the sheer fun of it, much of the criticism he encouraged had a more serious purpose, opening up subjects for debate, and exposing dishonesty and hypocrisy. He insisted that his own standards, and those of his contributors, should, therefore, be beyond reproach, and he became renowned for conducting himself at *The Listener* without any regard to personal feelings. 'As for the *New Writing and Daylight*,' he told Roy Fuller, who was reviewing the latest venture of their mutual friend John Lehmann, 'please give it its due, without fear or favour. Personal relationships cannot enter into these matters.' Indeed, Fuller's review turned out to be a case in point. The issue of *New Writing and Daylight* in question contained a number of tributes to Demetrios Capetanakis, the Greek poet and critic who had recently died of leukemia aged only thirty-two. Ackerley was shocked and saddened by this death, for he had been very fond of 'little Demetrios', listing him four years later as one of the 'dear dead' whom he thought of when out walking. Even so, he permitted Fuller to write that the memorial contribution by Edith Sitwell was 'quite remarkable for its overstatement, and rather predisposes one against' the other tributes. This review deeply offended not only Sitwell, but also Lehmann, who refused to speak to Fuller for some months when the young man confessed to being the author of the anonymous piece.

Sitwell had already been extremely angry with Ackerley for publishing an unfavourable review of her latest volume of poems – a review, as it happened, also by Fuller, who claimed to have no particular animosity towards her, but happened to think she was

greatly overrated. In fact he had done his best to be generous towards her and the only really adverse comment was a reference to 'a lifetime's work which can hardly be said to be other than minor verse of a limited kind'. This was just the sort of judgement to enrage Sitwell, and she fired off a letter, characteristically *de haut en bas*, which might have alarmed most literary editors. The letter itself does not survive, but a draft (apparently written in high temper and in places illegible) gives some idea of the onslaught:

I expect to be treated with the respect that is due to my poetry, & to which (after many years of the insults to which all important artists are subjected at the beginning of their careers) I am now accustomed. You permitted an entirely disgusting and denigrating anonymous [?] attack to be made on my last book of poems in the *Listener*. I shall therefore allow no future [book?] of mine to be sent to . . . Although the attack was anonymous, [?] I am perfectly aware of the identity of the writer, and of the circumstances [of] the attack . . .

And so on and so forth. Never someone to deal in understatement, she now wrote to Lehmann to announce that: 'The dregs of the literary population have risen as one worm to insult me.' One need hardly add that some time later this breach was healed and it was 'Dear Joe' and 'Edith, dear' once again. Ackerley knew perfectly well how to handle such people ('There was a great deal of "Dear Edith . . ." and all that about Joe,' a friend recalled; 'it became a sort of literary curlicue'), and the letters he wrote when she once again offered poems for publication in *The Listener* were so buttery they would not have put the Maharajah of Chhatarpur to shame.

Whilst he valued candour, he believed that there was a difference between being frank in criticism and being cruel. When Hilary Corke, a regular reviewer of poetry and fiction, submitted a particularly savage review of Herbert Read's *Moon's Farm*, Ackerley rejected it, explaining:

The fact that H. is an old friend of mine does not place him beyond criticism, by any means, and he has often been taken to task in my paper on the Art side; but the tone of your review is not a tone I can use to him, or could wish to use. I expect the book is just as bad as you say, but he has written some much better poems in the past, many of which I have published, and that, I think, is the kind of

thing that should have been said when the present vol. was regretfully written off as a disappointment. I take pains always, as you know, not to be 'kind' to my friends, and go to trouble to obtain objective reviews of their works; but there is a step from being kind to being actually cruel which I cannot take. So I would prefer not to review the book at all. So sorry.

This letter is an excellent example of his ability to reject work firmly but politely, a quality which earned him considerable respect, as Geoffrey Grigson recalled:

Did I ever know a virtuous literary editor? Did I ever know one with an unfaltering conscience, a literary editor, a single literary editor, not given to compromise or betrayal? One. Joe Ackerley of *The Listener*, whom some of his elder colleagues in the BBC did their best now and again, to get rid of, in part, I imagine, because they knew him to be homosexual.¹ . . . If Joe was prejudiced, his prejudice was against the shoddy, the shoddy book or a shoddiness in his reviewer's account of it. If he was gentle, he was also unrelenting. If in some ways or to some degree he lived the often sad life of a lonely homosexual in days when you had to be on public and private guard in your homosexuality, what mattered to Joe was quality, irrespective of the sexual keeping of author or contributor.

Ackerley managed to combine tact with a fearless honesty, never discriminating between the wary novice and the old friend when work he considered substandard earned its author a severe but well-intentioned rap across the knuckles. As with short stories, his suggestions for alteration were often radical. He once suggested that Clive Bell should remove the first two paragraphs of an article about the

¹Grigson was not the only person to make this assertion, and others have spoken of an attempted purge of homosexual members of BBC staff in the 1950s. Indeed, Grigson goes on to claim that Ackerley was once 'saved only by E. M. Forster's direct intervention with the Director-General of the Corporation'. Evidence of this may of course exist in the Corporation's personal files, but nothing has emerged elsewhere. In the wake of the defection to the Soviet Union of Guy Burgess in 1951, there may well have been some panic at Broadcasting House. Burgess had worked as a BBC journalist in the 1930s and 1940s and certainly knew Ackerley, though how well is uncertain. Burgess's name appears in a list of addresses in a pocket diary, but nowhere else in any correspondence or notebooks.

National Gallery. If, however, Bell disagreed, then the paragraphs must remain.

Although he would often make suggestions for improvement, he always preferred a contributor to make his or her own alterations:

I think you had better have another look at this before it goes in [he told Roy Fuller in a letter accompanying a proof], for I have tinkered with a word or two, not because of your opinions I need hardly say, but because they did not seem to me expressed with your usual crystal clearness. I like the *exact* word always, and the exact meaning, but whether my changes are on or off the mark only you who know what was in your mind can say.

When a contribution *was* bad, he said so. Adriana Tyrkova Williams was left in no doubt as to Ackerley's view of her article on Pushkin, which, he wrote in a long letter:

seems to me to contain nothing except the few biographical facts about his life that I think anyone could have supplied; your general remarks about him, his place in literature, the Russian view of him and the general significance of his work, seem to me to have turned into little more than an uninformative and superlative eulogy which might equally well have been written about any great man. Moreover, I must say that the writing itself is not at all satisfactory and a good deal more work would need to be done on that alone. The effect of the whole is quite the opposite of what you intended. I feel that it will not interest readers in Pushkin in the least and, indeed, your opening pages and final paragraphs seem to be almost unreadable.

Mrs Williams meekly rewrote the article, which Ackerley then passed and published. In spite of editorial bluntness, remarkably few people took offence. Roy Fuller recalls that as a reviewer one was always on one's mettle with *The Listener*. Andrew Forge, who contributed to the art pages, concurred: 'He was the most marvellous editor, very appreciative. One felt one was writing *for Joe* and one's reviews were directed to him personally.' As the letter to Fuller shows, his suggestions were presented tentatively, and he never altered copy without consulting the contributor, as he was later to boast: 'In all my twenty-five years as Lit Ed. of *The Listener* . . . I never published a

signed article by anyone without sending a proof. I would have considered it the greatest impertinence to do otherwise.' His perfectionism and good manners sometimes went to extremes. Forge recalls one occasion when he had to clamber out of bed at midnight to answer the telephone. It was Ackerley, calling from the printers. 'I'm sorry to call so late, dear boy. Have you got your galley?' Stark naked, Forge went off in search of the proof. 'Second paragraph from the end, penultimate sentence,' Ackerley continued. 'I've been worrying about that comma. Could we drop it? Would that be all right?'

Since he was at such pains to treat his contributors, as contributors, dispassionately, any attempt to curry favour was frowned upon, as one distinguished writer found to his cost. Ackerley had very strong views about degrees in personal relations and although he gave some people an impression of immediate intimacy and warmth, he could be chillingly formal on occasion. He recalled that he had once inadvertently addressed Geoffrey Grigson, whom he did not at that stage know well, by his first name and had been gruffly corrected. He thought this entirely dignified and deplored the way people addressed total strangers as if they were close friends. Part of his objection was that in doing so some people were

often seeking some advantage from familiarity or hoping to disarm criticism; it is felt to be more difficult to be unkind to Billy Graham or Danny Kaye than to Dr William Graham or Mr Daniel Kaye.¹ Attempts were often made to get at me by such means when I was Literary Editor of *The Listener*. [—] affords a good example. He used to send me his poems, which generally I did not care for and returned. Then he wrote to ask whether we could drop formalities in our correspondence and, although I had never met the man, we became 'Dear Ackerley' and 'Dear [—]'. This was not enough; soon he was addressing me as 'Dear Joe Ackerley', to which I replied 'Dear [initials]' for I did not know what his given names were. I continued to reject his poems and at last he lost his temper and

¹In 1954 Ackerley accompanied Rose Macaulay to the greyhound stadium at Harringay where Billy Graham was holding one of his evangelical rallies. They went in a spirit of curiosity, Macaulay as a devout but troubled Anglo-Catholic, Ackerley as a convinced atheist. They were duly appalled by the vulgarity of the proceedings, though Macaulay thought Graham 'sincere'. Ackerley thought him a 'dreadful creature' and reported that the atmosphere of the rally was fascist.

attacked me in a furious letter in which he said I had no taste and therefore no right to be a Literary Editor.

At first Ackerley failed to match Janet Adam Smith's pioneering work in the poetry pages, a fact which may have commended itself to the BBC hierarchy. In a report on the first six months of Ackerley's incumbency, Lambert wrote:

I would point out that the poems which have been printed since Mr Ackerley took over will show that they are very much nearer the conventional and traditional idea of poetic form than those published previously. By this change I think we have lost something in the form of the inclusion of a few rather daring poetic experiments; on the other hand we have gained in stability and general coherence of style.

The attitude of the British Broadcasting Corporation to 'experimental' poetry might be compared with that of the British Board of Film Censors to 'experimental' film. In 1930 the BBFC had remarked of Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman*: 'This film is apparently meaningless, but if it has any meaning it is doubtless objectionable.' Reith had been disturbed by Adam Smith's bold 1933 poetry supplement, complaining that many poems struck him as 'odd', 'uncouth' and 'puzzling'. That they had been published in the first place was entirely due to Adam Smith's editorial sleight of hand. Knowing that Lambert was as likely as Reith to be suspicious of poems like Auden's 'The Witnesses', she waited until he had returned from a good lunch, then presented him with a sheet of poems, at the top of which was the most innocuous and easily understandable of the batch. As Lambert cast a woozy eye over the page, Adam Smith would engage him in conversation so that he rarely bothered to read the entire sheet before passing the poems for publication. What counted as 'objectionable' may be judged from a row which Ackerley had with his superiors over a poem by Henry Reed about sailors in Cape Town, which he was obliged to return because it contained the lines:

We watch the sea daily, finish our daily tasks
By ten in the morning, and with the day to waste,
Wander through the suburbs, with quiet thoughts of brothels.
And sometimes thoughts of churches.

A. P. Ryan suggested that if Ackerley wanted to publish the poem, he could ask the author to change 'brothels' to 'movies'. When Ackerley had pointed out that the word 'brothel' had appeared in *The Listener* on a previous occasion. Ryan replied that 'it had only been used in prose, a poem was different.' He asked Ackerley whether he would ever use the word in conversation with a lady at the luncheon-table.

Ackerley was insecure about his judgement of poetry, claiming to know nothing about the art, but this had the beneficial effect of making him extremely conscientious. He outlined the qualities he was looking for in poems submitted to the magazine in a letter to Herbert Read, who had recommended a poem by Rayner Heppenstall in November 1935:

Do you, or do you not, agree that a different kind of mind is brought to a weekly journal from that which is brought to a volume of poems, and that therefore certain qualifications are needed for the former? For want, perhaps, of better words I would call these qualifications clarity and edge – the poem should cut a little and pretty sharply, intellectually or emotionally, and it should be clear. Heppenstall's poem doesn't seem to me to have either of these qualifications. I hope I'm not being obtuse over this.

With experience, he revised these guidelines, admitting in 1939 that he did not believe that it was necessary for a poem to be instantly assimilable: 'if one gets something out of them that is interesting or agreeable, that is enough.' Unfortunately, as he explained to Roy Fuller, whose work he began publishing in the war, 'it is not enough for the Editor, so would you like to let me know briefly how to explain your poem to him if he should require me to do so.'¹ Frequently he would carry manuscripts about with him for days, delving into his pockets at odd moments to take another look and 'see whether familiarity puts me into any closer touch with it.' Consequently manuscripts sometimes went astray, and he was once obliged to confess to Fuller that he had mislaid an entire sheaf of poems.

I expect they will turn up [he wrote], for I am not a loser, but at the moment I can't put my hands on them . . . I suppose you will have

¹In this case Fuller's 'interesting letter of explanation' did not prove successful and the poem was rejected.

copies of the poems. The one I liked and wanted was that long one – was it called Night Piece? . . . Could you send me another copy of it – though I am sure I shall come upon the collection soon, probably in my flat.

He also showed contributions to poet friends, like Fuller and Spender, asking their opinion, or even for suggestions as to how the work might be improved. In fact, his own experience as a poet, however inglorious he might have thought it, had taught him a great deal and Walter Allen recalls being both impressed and delighted to have a poem returned much improved by Ackerley, who had altered just one word. A craftsman himself, he regarded such skills as important, as he explained to Richard Church when disagreeing about the merits of A. L. Rowse:

I have always regarded Rowse as *not* a poet, in the true sense of the term, whatever else he may be; and I confess to being slightly surprised that you, who have that admirable craftsmanship which was what C.D.L. [C. Day Lewis, who had criticized Rowse's poetry in *The Listener*] so particularly admired, should praise him so high. For craftsmanship, at any rate, is what Rowse has not got; though he may sometimes bring off a passably well-made piece, as in his Housmanish moments (and that phase soon became mechanical), he seems to me to know little or nothing about poetry-making, to disregard form altogether, and to have no feel for words or sounds. Yet, at the same time, I sometimes like the things he has to say, and accept them for that reason, while disapproving mostly of the way in which he says them – that is to say, as poems. But this, you may say, is just a question of a 'name', and yes that is all it is. Rowse may, indeed does, sometimes have poetic feelings, but does he express them in poetry? is he a poet? I agree with John Lehmann that he is not.

However, if he liked a poem or the poet, he was prepared to offer extremely detailed suggestions for improving work submitted to the magazine:

I do not care for 'The Ruins' [he wrote to Fuller], but 'Defending the Harbour' has the makings of a good poem, I think. The last 3 lines of verse 2 for instance almost persuade me to take it as it stands. But at

present it seems to me untidy; like your grey gun, and not altogether digested. It wants a little more time spent on it I feel sure, and then I should be very happy to renew its acquaintance if you cared to submit it again.

Having renewed its acquaintance, Ackerley did indeed publish the poem. James Kirkup, who had been recommended to Ackerley by William Plomer, was given similarly detailed advice, not only at the beginning of his career, but also when he was established, as Ackerley's suggestions for Kirkup's 'A Correct Compassion' in 1951 demonstrate. Ackerley believed that part of his job was to foster new talent, and in both Fuller and Kirkup he saw, and was determined to help realize, their potential. 'He had a kind of personal genius as editor of poetry,' Frances Bellerby recalled.

As with reviews, Ackerley favoured short poems, since there was never enough space. He was obliged to confer with the people who pasted-up the magazine's pages and often kept poems until there was part of a column to fill. He would set up several galleys of poems 'of all shapes and sizes, so that the ladies of *The Listener* can always be sure of having something handy to plug up every crack and cranny.' It was not only the poem itself which should be short, but also its individual lines, and he was often obliged to return poems which would not fit on to the page. He regretted that poems had to be treated like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle but knew that there was no way round this particular problem.

However, if poets were annoyed to have their work returned late and in less than pristine condition, they could at least be sure that it had been very thoroughly considered. Under his literary editorship *The Listener* retained its reputation as a forum for the best contemporary verse. As well as the work of Auden (including 'The Unknown Citizen', 'Matthew Arnold', 'Voltaire at Ferney', 'Song for the New Year' and 'Oxford'), Spender, Day Lewis and MacNeice, Ackerley published Larkin's 'Ultimatum' (the first of his poems to appear in print outside a school magazine), Betjeman's 'Cheltenham', and poems by Ruthven Todd, Clifford Dymont, Walter de la Mare, Kathleen Raine, H. B. Mallalieu, Michael Roberts, George Barker, Lilian Bowes Lyon, Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, Henry Reed, Laurence Whistler, Hal Summers, Frances Bellerby, Sidney Keyes, Edith Sitwell, Edwin Muir, William Plomer, C. P. Cavafy, Maureen

Duffy, Francis King, Vernon Watkins, R. S. Thomas, David Jones, Paul Dehn, Demetrios Capetanakis, John Lehmann, Laurie Lee, Dylan Thomas, Norman MacCaig, Elizabeth Jennings, D. J. Enright, Roy Fuller, Alan Ross, Robert Conquest, Alex Comfort, Herbert Read, Richard Church, James Kirkup, Ruth Pitter, C. C. Abbott, John Fuller, James Michie, Geoffrey Grigson, Stevie Smith, James Reeves, Anne Ridler, John Wain, Brian Hill, Charles Causley, Jocelyn Brooke, Michael Hamburger, E. J. Scovell, Robin Skelton, F. T. Prince, Patricia Beer and Marianne Moore.

Ackerley claimed to know even less about art than he did about poetry. Fortunately, *The Listener* had an excellent regular critic in Herbert Read, to whom Janet Adam Smith introduced Ackerley before she left. The two men took to each other at once and became lifelong friends. Read undertook to give Ackerley tuition in art history, conducted at the Corporation's expense over long lunches. After one such 'lesson', Lambert found Ackerley sneaking back into the office at half-past three. When Ackerley explained that he had been receiving instruction from Read, Lambert replied: 'Yes – but is it necessary to lunch him five times a week at the Café Royal?' 'It's not only modern art,' Ackerley retorted. 'It's Korean art, Chinese art, Japanese art and Red Indian art.'

If *The Listener* did not noticeably benefit from this particular course in ethnic art, Ackerley was soon in a position to commission entire series on modern painting and sculpture, the first of which, entitled 'Art and the Social Crisis', he proposed in April 1936. Ackerley also widened his knowledge about art by visiting exhibitions, always in BBC time. Once, when he should have been at his desk, he bumped into Reith in a gallery. He was not in the least embarrassed by this unfortunate encounter, nor by the fact that he had a cauliflower under his arm, but marched straight up to Reith and, before the DG had time to say anything, thrust the vegetable under the venerable nose and said: 'I've just bought this for my supper. Do you think it's fresh?'

Because the BBC's opinion of what made a good painting was very similar to its idea of what made a good poem, the arts pages were frequently the cause of rumblings from above. Within months of Ackerley's appointment, the Controller of Programmes was horrified to find reproductions of paintings by Rousseau and Klee disfiguring

the 'Round the Art Exhibitions' page. He wrote at once to Gladstone Murray, who as D (IP) was responsible for *The Listener* at this period:

I feel you must be distressed, and annoyed, as I am, by the selection of illustrations on Pages 1001 and 1002; in particular the ridiculous caricature of a portrait by Henri Rousseau on Page 1001, and the still more fantastic absurdity by Paul Klee on Page 1002. These are the kind of things which cannot fail to bring ridicule upon 'The Listener', and through it upon the Corporation. The paper is so good as a rule that it is a pity that it should damage its reputation by such absurd extravagances from time to time.

This was passed to Lambert, whose reply was conciliatory and duplicitous in a way Ackerley despised. He explained that the feature was merely intended to reflect, rather than recommend, what was currently on show at 'the most reputable art galleries'. He defended Rousseau, but contradicted his earlier statement that the feature was not committed to any judgement of the work reproduced by pretending that a point was being made by reproducing Klee's *Portrait with Foliage* next to Cranach's *Portrait of the Baroness von Schenck-Winterstein*:

I suggest that the majority of people will consider how contemptible Paul Klee's work is, as compared with that of an old master such as Cranach, when both are engaged on the same kind of subject. Actually you will see therefore that our purpose in putting in the Klee was to show it in its true light by comparison with an old master.

One wonders what Herbert Read would have made of this 'defence'.

The difference in attitude between Lambert and Ackerley may be seen by comparing the Klee upset with the first major controversy Ackerley experienced at *The Listener*. For once he and the BBC were fighting on the same side. The decorations which Cunard had commissioned for their new luxury liner, the *Queen Mary*, had aroused considerable interest, and Ackerley decided to commission an article about them. Kenneth Clark, who wrote regularly for the magazine, was approached, but declined on the grounds that he had been consulted as to which artists Cunard should employ and his advice had

been ignored. Clive Bell had no such qualms about impartiality and was indeed delighted to have an opportunity to puff the work of two of the artists involved, his wife Vanessa and friend Duncan Grant. However, when Cunard were asked for photographs of Grant's decorative panels to illustrate the projected article, they refused. The reason they gave was that they had been disappointed with Grant's work and did not want it to receive advance publicity in favour of work with which they were more satisfied. Ackerley was not to be fobbed off and suggested that pressure should be brought to bear by the BBC, pointing out to Cunard that they were extremely fortunate to be given the opportunity of free publicity. His instinct for a row also prompted him to begin compiling a file on the affair.

Cunard now said that they were not yet sure whether they would even use Grant's panels, and, understandably nervous, added a postscript asking to see Bell's article in proof before they co-operated. Lambert asked Tallents to reply, which he did in best BBC style, as one great organization to another, or rather, as one public relations man to another. In a letter to F. A. Derry, Cunard's publicity manager, Tallents suavely suggested that the postscript had been 'added under a misunderstanding': 'I cannot think that you yourself can have intended to suggest that either a distinguished critic like Mr Clive Bell, or a periodical of the standing of "The Listener" would consent to submit the text of an article on such a subject for approval to your Company.' Derry disingenuously replied that he merely wanted to ensure that the article avoided factual inaccuracies. Worried that the BBC might fall for this, Ackerley wrote a memo in which he hoped 'we shall remain absolutely steadfast in the line we have already adopted of not allowing the Cunard people to interfere in the slightest.' He suggested the letter should be ignored and that the article should go ahead without the shipbuilders' co-operation. He then wrote to Derry in order to arrange for Bell to visit the ship in dock in Glasgow. Derry agreed to this 'under the mistaken belief', Ackerley told Bell, 'that he will be allowed to see your script before we publish it.'

By this time Cunard had decided to reject Grant's panels, a decision that had already provoked letters to *The Times*. Bell was despatched to Glasgow where he found his worst fears confirmed. He wrote his article and Ackerley submitted it for approval, remarking that the Director of the National Gallery (i.e. Clark) had seen it and said that the 'expression of Bell's opinion is polite in comparison with what his

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own would have been.' For good measure he added that the *New Statesman* would take the piece if *The Listener* refused to print it.

In the event the highly critical article, ambiguously titled 'Inside the "Queen Mary" – A Business Man's Dream', was passed and published, much to the displeasure of Cunard, who attempted to claim that the magazine had not been granted permission to use the photographs. Thanks to Ackerley's decision to create a file, the letter in which permission had been given early in the proceedings had been kept. Tallents intended to offer Cunard space to reply, a prospect that Ackerley at first thought would provide 'some fun'. On reflection, however, he decided that this would be a mistake, and sent Tallents a stiff memo, which showed, amongst other things, how far he had benefited from Read's lunchtime tuition:

Do we really engage to publish, with the full dignity of an article, any criticism of Bell and appreciation of their ship, which they can quite easily procure some hireling second-rate critic to write – someone like Stanley Casson, who is known to have no taste in modern art, in which he constantly interferes; who thinks that Paul Manship, for instance, is a heaven-sent genius?¹

Ackerley suggested that the correspondence columns were open to Cunard, as they were to anyone, and that the shipbuilders would be welcome to use them. Tallents meekly accepted his advice and Cunard were not invited to reply.

This affair shows Ackerley shaping up for the furores ahead, in which it would be the BBC rather than a hapless outsider who would be the enemy. His tactics were those he was to use again and again in his battle against censorship and obstruction. He often solicited the endorsement of his views from acknowledged experts in order to bamboozle the BBC bureaucrats; he was prepared to be totally unscrupulous working behind the scenes but could be bravely confrontational if necessary; and in the last resort he would tell the

¹ Stanley Casson (1889–1944) was an archaeologist who also lectured in, and wrote books about, sculpture, including the reactionary *Some Modern Sculptors* (1928) and *Twentieth Century Sculpture* (1930). Paul Manship (1885–1966) was the award-winning American sculptor, winner of innumerable medals at International Fairs and Exhibitions.

Corporation that if *The Listener* was too timid to print something, there was always the *Spectator* or the *New Statesman*, which was now under the literary editorship of his friend Raymond Mortimer.

The pre-war BBC was just the sort of organization to bring out the best in Ackerley. Hand in hand, Prudery and Philistinism stalked the corridors of Broadcasting House, and there was a continual struggle between the desire to educate the Corporation's audience and a determination to protect it from the 'indecent' and the innovative, a form of censorship Sir John Reith dignified by the term 'moral responsibility'. In many ways Reith was an admirable man, but his strongest tastes, like those of Evelyn Waugh's Gilbert Pinfold, were negative, and like Pinfold, he reserved a particular detestation for Picasso and jazz:

Are you quite happy about *The Listener's* dealings with art matters [he asked Tallents in 1936], e.g. this week's article on Picasso? I think his style is quite dreadful, and as you know, there are many who have strong views about *The Listener's* art attitude and articles.

Herbert Read was a staunch ally in Ackerley's battles with such philistinism, often indeed the instigator of them. 'I think the Delvaux are lovely,' Read wrote, hoping to insinuate a reproduction of the Belgian Surrealist's nudes on to the 'Round the Art Exhibitions' page, 'but I suppose it would give the D.G. a fit.' When writing about Toulouse-Lautrec he felt obliged to ask whether the word 'prostitute' was permissible in a BBC publication. (It was.) In 1938 Read wrote a scathing account of the Royal Fine Art Commission, which Tallents vetoed. Ryan sent a curt note to Lambert: 'C (PR), who is absent on sick leave today, asked me on the telephone to let you have this article back. He feels that it should not be published.' Lambert handed this to Ackerley, who was infuriated by its high-handed manner and its lack of any explanation for the decision:

I do not understand this. This article was commissioned by us, and seems a reasonable criticism of a matter of public interest and importance, in general conformity with the directions we gave Mr Read. A paragraph which seemed to us too strongly worded has already been removed by him at our request.

I do not see how I can undertake to reject the manuscript without

a good reason. The fact that people are nevertheless paid for their work is by no means always considered by them as compensatory for such actions. If, as I understand it, the reason for the rejection of this script is that the Chairman of the Corporation is also a member of the Fine Arts Commission, I doubt if this will seem to Mr Read an adequate reason from a journal which lays claim to the virtue of impartiality.

Ackerley was not above stirring and there is little doubt that he was very well aware that the article would prove unacceptable. This is not to say that he did not genuinely believe that the RFAC was a matter of public interest which ought to be written about, nor that he did not commission the article in good faith. But one suspects that there was a certain amount of gleeful rubbing of the hands in his office when Read's copy was delivered. It must have been extremely satisfying to be able to catch out his high-minded masters. Such became Read's reputation that, asking him to review a book, Ackerley felt obliged to add: 'if you are able to do so without getting me the sack.'

Occasionally, in the 'summer holiday season', *The Listener* launched series of articles on art and these were to cause Ackerley a great deal of difficulty, largely because they were extremely ambitious. In April 1936 he proposed a topical series of six articles looking at art under different political regimes, which involved commissioning articles from foreign critics, who failed to answer letters, submitted texts in their own language and – in the case of the Italian and German contributors – used the series as a platform for political propaganda.

Undaunted by such problems, Ackerley was already proposing another logistically complex series whilst 'Art and the State' was still appearing in *The Listener*. In October 1936 he suggested that a number of leading artists should be asked to contribute to a series entitled 'The Artist Speaks', in which each could write a short essay and provide reproductions of his or her work and one original, unpublished and unexhibited illustration. He drew up a list of people who might be approached: Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Léger, Rouault, Dufy, André Masson, Marie Laurencin, Le Corbusier, Paul Nash, Walter Sickert, Jacob Epstein, Henry Moore, Winifred Nicholson, Edward Burra, Duncan Grant and Eric Kennington. Georges Duthuit, a close friend of Ackerley and former lover of Nancy, who was to

become *The Listener's* French connection, was enlisted to approach the French artists since, being married to Matisse's daughter, he was in a unique position to use personal influence. Douglas Cooper, the combative collector and promoter of Cubist art, and a regular contributor to *The Listener* ('the Queen of Art Historians' as Ackerley dubbed him), was also asked to help since he was in France. In England Ackerley consulted Kenneth Clark, Herbert Read, J. B. Manson (Director of the Tate Gallery), the secretary of the Royal Academy, and the art critic Roger Hinks.

There were only two problems. The first, soon resolved, was the fee, for, as Ackerley noted, 'I suppose we cannot expect well-known artists to do special illustrations for *The Listener* without adequate reward'. To his surprise a fee of ten guineas proved sufficient. The second difficulty, tentatively mentioned in Ackerley's submission, was rather more intractable:

People who paint cannot always write. My own view, however, is that if I can find some particular subject specially suited to each artist – some problem which occupies his mind and attention, about which he is enthusiastic, that it may be possible with a little persuasion to get more out of him than I should be likely to get if, for instance, I had a general formula for all.

He was to regret this latitude.

By the following March he confessed that he had 'failed to secure any of the real giants, for Sickert, Epstein, Picasso, Matisse and Braque have all either refused or neglected to reply to my letters.' He had, however, secured Georges Rouault, who had been asked to provide a feature on his work in stained glass. Unfortunately, the copy that arrived on Ackerley's desk hardly fulfilled this commission, as he explained to Lambert:

The script he has already sent, which is made up from a great collection he appears to have, of what he calls 'Soliloquies on Art, and so on' was so incomprehensible to me and, in parts, so remote from matters of art, that I have asked him to supply some more jottings for me to select from, and this he has consented to do; but he is a man in any case, I understand, who is famed for the obscurity of his writing, and he writes all the time that he is not painting; and

no references to such hopes in any of his letters at this period (although Forster urged him to push to be made the new deputy editor). He was not in any sense a Corporation Man and although the increased salary would have been welcome, it is unlikely that he would have wanted the responsibility that came with the job. In 1952 he would remark that the only advantage of being editor would be that he could publish what he wanted: 'otherwise I should hate the job, committees and all that, so boring'. Because of the 'impertinent' laws which governed England, his sexual life had to be one of subterfuge and risk-taking, and he regarded the unwritten laws which governed the BBC with similar disdain, to be flouted whenever possible in the cause of Truth and Freedom. He was by nature a *franc-tireur*, who was happiest when waging an inspiring undercover operation against the forces of 'decency' (which he saw as prudery) and 'restraint' (which he saw as repression). However, there were to be many occasions during Thomas's editorship when Ackerley would have liked to have wielded more power.

When Ackerley described Thomas as 'the best of Editors', he was being rather less gracious than at first appears, his opinion of editors not being of the highest. Later in life the two men came to like and respect each other, but their early years together were extremely acrimonious. 'Joe came yesterday, very gloomy,' Forster reported to the Buckinghamshams shortly after Thomas's appointment, '- trouble with the new editor and muddle with the new guardsman.' Over the years trouble with the editor was to occupy as much of Ackerley's time as muddles with guardsmen, and Thomas was to cause him as much irritation as his predecessor had done. Worse still, whereas Lambert often backed up his literary editor, Thomas was a Corporation lackey. Ackerley had no respect whatever for Thomas, whose persistent kow-towing to Tallents and Ryan was the cause of many disagreements. By January 1941 (in a letter to Edward Sackville-West) Ackerley could describe his relationship with his editor as:

one long series of [rows]. He is a *little* man, a person of no mental stature at all, and should never have been given the job. His appointment is a real tragedy. He is what is called 'nice' (which Lambert wasn't), but is quite lacking in taste, judgement, imagination, or courage. His friends are people like Robert and Sylvia

Lynd, the Farjeons, E. C. Bentley, Ivor Brown,¹ dull, second rate people like himself, and if he had his way the paper would be full of them. He is a funk and a prude, and thinks of nothing but his blue pencil and dreams of it at night. The result can be seen in the correspondence columns which used to be lively and have now fallen away to nothing. There is nothing now in the paper ever to write about.

As Thomas recalled in *The Times* after Ackerley's death:

The going, particularly in the early days of his literary editorship, was not invariably easy, mainly, I think, because in many respects Joe was in advance of his time. The 'climate of opinion' 30 years ago, both in the BBC and outside it, was very different from what it is in the 1960s.

If Ackerley was ahead of the times, Thomas appeared to be a symptom of them and relations between the two men rapidly deteriorated. Matters had not been helped by the appointment in the summer of 1938 of F. W. Ogilvie as the new DG. What Ackerley referred to with distaste as 'the Ogilvie-Tallents regime' was quite as repressive as that of Reith, 'the erstwhile Dictator of Broadcasting', as Ackerley called him. In the winter of 1940-41 matters reached a head and the ensuing row saw Ackerley defining and defending his position as literary editor. In December he was rebuked by Ogilvie for publishing Sidney Keyes' poem 'Remember Your Lovers'. The DG thought it indecent, largely because it contained the word 'lust'. Ackerley later admitted that he had not thought the poem particularly good, but - as in the case of Henry Reed's poem - he had decided to publish it in order to encourage a young writer, an attitude for which Keyes was very grateful. Ackerley complained about the rebuke to Herbert Read, who

¹ Robert Lynd was the long-serving literary editor of the *Daily News*, which became the *News Chronicle* in 1930. He was a regular contributor of whimsical essays in the *New Statesman* under the pen-name 'Y.Y.'. With his wife, Sylvia, a poet and novelist, he held a Hampstead salon for publishers, editors and authors. Herbert Farjeon was a theatrical manager and drama critic. He was *The Listener's* radio critic, 1943-45, and wrote and produced a number of revues. His sister, Eleanor, was a prolific and prize-winning author of children's books. Ivor Brown was an author and journalist, a drama critic and leader writer for the *Manchester Guardian*, and editor of the *Observer*.

sent a letter of protest at the DG's action and suggested that other poets might do the same. As a result of Ogilvie's rap across the editorial knuckles, Ackerley was also obliged to return a poem to Alex Comfort since it contained the words 'harlotry' and 'randy'.

Then Thomas objected to the use of the word 'homosexual' in a review by Eddy Sackville-West of Derrick Leons' *Introduction to Proust*, a book which failed to take account of the writer's sexuality. The BBC's refusal to countenance this stung Ackerley both professionally and personally. Three years earlier he had written to Richard Church about a review of Laurence Housman's *A.E.H.: Some Poems, Some Letters, and a Personal Memoir*, suggesting that reference should be made to the poet's long-standing attachment to a Venetian gondolier.

I don't want to 'claim' Housman unwarrantably for the homosexuals, but I don't, also, see why facts thought proper by his very correct brother to mention should not be alluded to in any review – even in our respectable 'Listener' . . . Will you not add this small item of information, without any remark, in its appropriate place? I very much dislike the idea that the 'Listener', more than any other paper, should suppress such matters . . .

Church inserted a reference to the gondolier, without comment, and the review was published. It was presumably Sackville-West's comments that caused the problem (the review has vanished both from the BBC archives and Sackville-West's own papers), and a violent argument ensued. 'I feel very angry and militant about this business', Ackerley told Sackville-West, 'and I want to pursue it – to Ogilvie if necessary.' He even declared that he would resign as soon as possible rather than work under such an editor.

The whole thing is disgraceful. Here is a book which purports to be a biographical sketch of the greatest novelist of our time and an examination of his novel. A published work which will be bought and read. It is based on a misconception – or a deliberate lie. How can any reputable journal that sets out to review it escape the duty of correcting that misconception or exposing that lie?

He then wrote an official letter to Sackville-West which (as he explained to Sackville-West in an *unofficial* letter) he made 'as wounding

and shaming to the editor as possible, for he will later be obliged to read the carbon of it'. The 'official' letter, accompanying the galley, ran as follows:

I am sorry, but the statements of fact in this review about Proust's homosexuality are too strong for the editor. He wishes to use the review as he has cut it on one of these galleys, on the pretext that the omitted statements are sufficiently implied in what remains and will be read between the lines by our perspicacious readers. I take it, however, that your reference to Proust's 'theory of love' has nothing to do with his homosexuality, and since the latter fundamental point still remains uncovered, and the book cannot, as the *Spectator* also realizes, be properly examined without reference to it, you may well wish to offer an alternative version.

It must, however, be less honestly worded. It is not our policy to call a spade a spade: I fear I do not know to what extent it may be called a shovel. The *Spectator*, I know, calls it an unmistakable shovel, and it was not long ago that cultivated people turned to our reviews before those of any other journal, because, as Professor Furness put it, they told the truth; but now we have a policy which appears to be that though we still like to be thought a cultural and educational paper, we are nevertheless more 'popular' than the *Spectator* (? i.e. we have a larger circulation), and the more popular one is the more obscurantist it is necessary to be. For the sophisticated know already, and the ignorant are better left in ignorance where knowledge is liable to shock or offend.

I make these observations so that you may try to word your revisions in such a way as to avoid any further puritanical blue pencilling.

Thomas was not at all pleased by this letter, but would have been wounded further had he seen the series of 'unofficial' letters his literary editor was writing to Sackville-West, in which he was described as 'a rabbit'. Ackerley asked Sackville-West to write Thomas

a *sensible* but firm letter – it may be taken up to the DG, but he is an even worse puritan – pointing out that it is a reviewer's duty to review a book adequately and that this book cannot be reviewed without a certain allusion to a discussion of the homosexual theme.

tow-path which ran along the embankment all the way to Hammer-smith and was a perfect place for strolling and for casual encounters. During his twenty-six-year tenancy Ackerley was to show little regard for clause (ix) of his lease: 'The Tenant hereby covenants with the Landlord not to permit the Flat to be used for any unlawful or improper purpose but on the contrary so far as is possible to contribute to the respectability of the building.'

Ackerley was very contented with his new home, but scarcely had he settled in than his mother was made homeless. In mid-September a land-mine exploded in Peldon Avenue, a cul-de-sac which ran off Sheen Road just by Netta's house. Bunny was away at the time, and Netta was sleeping with her maid, Robina, on mattresses on the ground floor. The house was cracked open and ceilings and windows fell in. Robina rushed into the streets to call for help, abandoning Netta, much to the latter's disgust. When Robina returned, she was scolded for being inconsiderate: she had not swept up the glass before departing and Netta might have cut her feet. In spite of the fact that Netta was seventy-seven and had been reported eighteen months before as being fit only for an institution, all she suffered was a ruptured blood-vessel in one eye. It was necessary to rehouse the two old ladies at once, even though this meant putting them in a flat next door to Nancy at Lichfield Court in Richmond. Their furniture was placed in a depository, which was shortly hit by an incendiary bomb.

Ackerley continued to receive letters from his nephew, who was longing for the war to end so that he could return to England. Nancy wrote to her son every week, but her letters, although entertaining and well-written, were not always very reassuring and Paul would write to his uncle asking for explanations:

I would like to tell you something I can't write to Mum about because she doesn't seem to have any sense left. I asked her if she would put my mind at rest on my going back to England at once after the war even if England lost it. Well she said that she wanted me back but that just because I have had to live with dad two years he has a right to keep me. Well I only came over here for a short time anyway. Before I came over here I asked her if I might have to stay over here a year and she nearly fainted. Now after being here *two years* she writes me that I should stay at school here and maybe come home for the summer. Well she writes as if the schools over here

were better than the ones are in England. Well the ones in England are so much better that it seems silly to go to school at all over here. She says the country will be poor. I don't care how poor it is. I would rather be in a German England than a free and rich America. As soon as this war ends I am coming back if I have to run away and live by myself when I get back. I hope Mum was having a touch of madness when she wrote that letter. She certainly couldn't have been sane not my *own mother?!!!*

Ackerley was only too aware of Nancy's inability to deal with her son and was now having to negotiate with Paul's stepmother, since Paul Snr had enlisted when America joined the war. Geographical distance and the war confused communications and Ackerley and Nancy were perhaps less worried than they might have been because they believed that Paul Jnr got on well with his stepmother. This was not the case and it is unsurprising that the boy was so homesick. The American education system thought as little of Paul as he did of it and his school reports complained of 'an extreme lack of co-operation'. That this was a result of desperate unhappiness seems not to have occurred to his teachers or his stepmother.

A further disaster had occurred just before Ackerley had been bombed out of Clifton Gardens. His loyal guardsman friend, Frank Harris, had re-enlisted when war broke out and had gone to France where he apparently shot down a bomber with a Bren-gun. He and Ackerley continued to correspond quite regularly. Frank survived the evacuation from Dunkirk, and was at Tunbridge Wells in October 1940, where Ackerley visited him. Six months after Dunkirk he was once more posted overseas to the Middle East as a driver. In April 1941, during the evacuation of troops from Greece, the transport ship he was on was bombed and set on fire in the Gulf of Nauplia. The troops were transferred on to two British destroyers, the *Wryneck* and the *Diamond*, but the following morning, 27 April, both ships were dive-bombed by the *Luftwaffe*, and sank. Of the 950 men on the two ships only fifty were saved. Frank was not among them.

In Star and Garter Mansions Ackerley began to write a long poem in memory of Frank. Entitled 'Destination D' (one of the official addresses of the British Expeditionary Force to the Middle East), it exists in several versions and is perhaps in both terms of quantity and quality his most substantial poem. Only two small extracts from it

have been published: the first 'December (To F.H.)' in the *Spectator* in 1942,¹ the second posthumously in *Micheldever & Other Poems* as 'After the blitz, 1941'. The poem was cast in the form of a letter to Frank, and opens with an account of the bombing of Clifton Gardens ('That house you called your second home'), followed by a description of Star and Garter Mansions. In the second section Ackerley recalls a letter Frank had sent him describing his 'perilous long journey' to unknown countries. The next section charts Ackerley's growing anxiety in the knowledge that Frank had been posted as missing. Once again the new house is described ('this conducted tour/Is specially for you'), and Ackerley, recalling the delightful letters he had received, muses upon the two sides to Frank's character: the dumb, obedient soldier and the childlike, mischievous young man. The former belonged to the Army and the war, which had swallowed up his individuality, reducing him first to a number, then to a casualty and finally to a statistic; the latter belonged to Ackerley. He recalls Frank's generosity of spirit when rejected at Hyde Park Corner for other men, 'other faces, other fancies, / The constant search for new romances . . .' Ackerley watches seagulls on the river from his flat and recalls hearing how at sea these birds hover above battles and swoop down to peck out the eyes of the drowning. The next section is set in November, when the letters Ackerley had written to Frank find their way back to him. Ackerley still does not know exactly how Frank died and imagines him in his lorry. In Housmanic mood, he wonders who will miss or recollect this young life so casually stubbed out by the war, a young life that left nothing behind. Ackerley tells Frank that his widow and child visit Star and Garter Mansions and talk about him. He recalls his past failures with Frank, how, because of the inequity of their backgrounds and education there had been 'blunders' over money, but how in the end they had reached an understanding. Ackerley concludes by dedicating the finished poem to 'my friend Frank'.

Ackerley found the poem very difficult to write partly because he was motivated by fondness for Frank rather than by any profounder emotion and partly because whilst he wrote it he was still unsure of Frank's fate (he had been posted as missing and official notification of his death did not reach England until August 1942). The poem had

¹ Published in a slightly different version, probably a later draft, as 'Missing' in *Micheldever & Other Poems*.

gone quite well until William Plomer suggested, on some unspecified inside information he had gained during his work in the Naval Intelligence Division, that Frank might well be still alive. However, Ackerley worked away at it for a whole year until it was complete, whereupon he had a very striking and disturbing dream about Frank:

He looked very ill, pale with yellow streaks in his face, and had an injury to his foot. He was dressed in a very nice new lounge suit of grey-blue worsted and when he pulled up his trouser leg to show me the place the cloth of the trouser had stuck to the wound and had to be pulled out of it. The wound itself was very curious, a deep neat round hole in his ankle bone, as though the centre of the bone had been cut out as one cuts a hole in an orange. It was about the size of an egg cup. It was a frighteningly nasty-looking wound, with a patch of gangrene at the bottom of it. The mood of the whole dream was anxiety, anxiety for his welfare, blood-poisoning, amputation. He seemed calm and unworried: I do not recollect that he smiled. He did look smart. The dream faded out in a muddle of doctors and medicine.

Ackerley was puzzled by the dream. It was clear that the new suit represented the poem he had just completed for Frank, but he was mystified by the location and the very vivid detail of the wound. He was wary of showing the poem to anyone since he saw it essentially as a private meditation rather than a public utterance; he described it as 'a poem of reclamation from the darkness'. He had tentatively offered a section of the poem to Roger Senhouse, who had written to him asking for permission to include 'The Portrait of a Mother' in an anthology of *Poems in Our Time, 1900-1942*, which Richard Church and M. M. Bozman were editing for the Everyman Library. Ackerley had long since disowned this poem as 'shameful': 'Excuse me, but it says that love is guilty,' he told Demetrios Capetenakis who had, for some reason, praised it: 'I am very sorry I ever published it.' Instead he offered Senhouse 'Ghosts' and six stanzas of 'Destination D': 'I doubt if you'll want it, or whether really I want you to want it,' he wrote. 'Since I haven't yet shown it to William [Plomer], or indeed anyone, and don't know if it's any good or putrid.' In the event, 'Ghosts' (in a slightly different version to the one Forster read) was selected for the anthology.

Ackerley

When official confirmation of Frank's death came through, Ackerley decided to offer another extract from 'Destination D' to Alan Thomas for the Christmas edition of *The Listener*. Both Forster and Henry Reed (who had become a friend and a regular contributor since the row over his sailor poem) had seen these lines and made suggestions, some of which Ackerley had incorporated. Thomas confirmed Ackerley's own view of the poem by rejecting the lines as 'too personal'. Whilst one might understand Ackerley's reservations, Thomas's are curious. How personal is personal? How impersonal were most of the poems published in the magazine? Perhaps he felt nervous about the elegy of a non-combatant for another man? However, the *Spectator* had no such qualms and published the poem in their Christmas 1942 issue. Ackerley copied out the whole of 'Destination D' and sent a copy in a ring-binder to William Plomer as a gift. However, by this time Ackerley had met another guardsman, a young man who was, in the eyes of many of Ackerley's friends, the agent of his doom.

13

A young man marred

FREDDIE Doyle was fairly typical of Ackerley's pick-ups, but his circumstances were rather more dangerous. He was in the Guards, but had deserted and was on the run in London, paying his way by prostitution and mixing in an outcasts' underworld of tarts and petty criminals. He saw Ackerley fairly frequently and what began as a commercial transaction soon blossomed into a more substantial relationship. Freddie was tall and fair and very vain, with naturally wavy hair which he insisted upon smarming into place, and puffing up into a quiff at the front. In spite of the milieu in which he moved, he was essentially a conventional and self-conscious young man, who would never go out in shirt-sleeves or be seen running in the street. Unfortunately he contracted gonorrhoea from a female prostitute. When he confessed to this infection, unbuttoning to display the gruesome symptoms, Ackerley regarded it as 'one of the highest compliments I had ever been paid'. It showed, of course, that Ackerley had become more to Freddie than just another twank. Had Freddie remained in the Army, such an infection would have been treated as a matter of course; finding a civilian doctor who would not ask awkward questions of his 'civilian' patient was rather trickier. Matters were not helped by Freddie's own reluctance to seek medical help. His understandable nervousness was compounded by constitutional fecklessness, and he failed to keep any of the appointments Ackerley made for him.

By now Ackerley had convinced himself that he had fallen deeply in love with Freddie, a state of affairs his friends both disbelieved and deplored. 'In the face of all the evidence,' Harry Daley recalled, 'Joe

order to sleep. Although still ill and unstable, she had become more confident and had even written (and destroyed) a novel. After three years the marriage came to an end, although the parting was amicable and she and Wilkinson continued to meet. However, she was obliged to return to her mother, where she was joined by her sisters and Muriel's stepson. Before long she and Elizabeth moved to a room in London, where Diana worked for a film company. Sally got a job as a governess in Hungary and Elizabeth went out to join her there. In 1939 Diana remarried. Her second husband was a young man called Edward Petre. Almost at once war broke out and her new husband marched out of her life and into the services. She spent the war living with her in-laws, but the marriage did not survive the enforced separation.

Elizabeth's life was similarly disrupted by the war. In Budapest she had met and become engaged to an extremely wealthy Hungarian. They planned to live in America, and Elizabeth went on ahead to France, leaving her fiancé to sort out his business affairs. War broke out before he could join her and they were not able to marry until it was over. Sally left Hungary for Cairo, where she met Gerald Grosvenor, a professional soldier who was rather remotely related to the Duke of Westminster (his father had been the sixth son of the first Duke). Gerald was badly wounded and was invalided out of the Army. He married Sally in 1945 and began a new life as a gentleman farmer.

Just after the end of the war, Louis Wilkinson was in a restaurant when someone pointed across the room and said: 'Do you know Joe Ackerley?' 'I feel I ought to,' Wilkinson replied; 'I was married to his half-sister.' Introductions were made, and when Wilkinson said that he would be seeing Diana the following weekend, Ackerley sent a message that she should telephone him. Diana was very excited: she had hero-worshipped her half-brother from afar, ever since she first bumped into him in the 1920s, attracted by his charm, his looks and now his literary *éclat*.

I couldn't wait to get out of the house, and I remember running down the street – *running!* – thinking: Where can I ring up? Where can I ring up? I got into a call-box, and he was in, he was there . . .

He invited her to lunch at a restaurant in Charlotte Street. She arrived 'shaking all over' and found that her hero lived up to all expectations:

'He was divine to me – absolutely lovely.' Ackerley appeared to be delighted with Diana and began taking her round London with him and introducing her to his literary friends. All this stopped when Nancy attempted suicide. Ackerley had not introduced Diana to Nancy, although he had talked about her a great deal, complaining about the problems she caused him.

Now that Nancy was living at Star and Garter Mansions and frequently complaining that she never saw anyone, Ackerley wondered whether he should invite Diana to meet her. His motives for this were not entirely honourable. On the one hand, he hoped that they would take to each other, since Nancy was always complaining that she had no friends of her own. But he would be almost equally pleased if they did not get on. He was fascinated to see how two women, both of whom, in their different ways, were devoted to him, would react when brought together. His experience as unwilling referee between his sister, aunt and mother had combined with his misogyny to convince him that no two women could ever be introduced without becoming critical and jealous of each other. He had given Nancy such a bad press that he assumed that Diana could only have one reason for wishing to meet her half-sister:

Of course Diana only wants to meet Nancy because she wants to see me, and fears she won't now Nancy is here unless she sees her too. And of course Nancy is jealous. I do feel mischievous, I must say, the two cats. They'll soon tear each other to pieces – and perhaps me too!

In the event, the two women seemed to like each other,

though God knows how long that will last. At any rate, I expect Diana will invite her out, and even without me, to please me if for no other reason, so something may evolve out of that.

Inevitably, however, it was not long before Nancy began to show signs of jealousy. 'Why don't you have Diana to live with you, since you obviously like her better than me?' she asked after one evening when she felt that she had been ignored. 'How natural that Diana should have been more interested in me than in her,' Ackerley remarked complacently in his diary. 'I am a man and a prominent and cultivated

one. Nancy has nothing to offer at all, she is uneducated and ignorant. Of course Diana, or any other cultivated guest, would turn to me more than to her.' This was only too true, for Nancy simply had no conversation at all, and had been very stand-offish all evening.

Maddening woman! What does she want? How is it possible to please her? I have given her roof, money, and much of my life. I have spent the last two months in entertaining and helping her. Through this kind of behaviour – fault-finding, jealousy, row-making – she has alienated everyone in her life until, entirely friendless and penniless, she had nothing left but the gas oven. I rescued her from that and have given her asylum, a new life. And such is my reward.

What Ackerley had not given Nancy, and what he never could give her, was love.

Love was entirely absorbed by Queenie, about whom Ackerley continued to make copious notes in the same journals in which he analysed his relationship with Nancy. He recalled that Gerald Heard had once said that love and curiosity were the two most important things in life, and these two qualities combined in Ackerley's relationship with his dog. They also illuminated what he wrote about her. He began extracting journal entries and adapting them into tentative sketches of Queenie. This was his usual method of composition, gradually and painstakingly working up an entire manuscript from brief notes jotted down in small pocket-books which he carried around with him. He would try out a chapter on loose-leaf paper, perhaps produce three or so pages, then start again. His surviving manuscript drafts have new sheets interleaved throughout, reworking a page, adding a paragraph, all in his immaculately neat, faintly dandyish, hand. He almost always wrote with a fountain pen, and rarely typed anything before he got to the final draft stage. He believed that there was a right word for everything and would not rest until he had found that word. Although he was often self-deprecating about his writing, he took it very seriously and complained when things were not going well. He once asked David Sylvester how the painter, Francis Bacon, worked:

I think writers (and it certainly applies to me) live often in a state of emotional overflow as they work, tears (perhaps maudlin), self-hugs of delight, grins of satisfied hatred: these pleasures are partly psychological, partly artistic – the exact right phrase or word, the inalterably perfect passage.

Any interruption was deeply resented, particularly if it came from Nancy asking some unnecessary question about how much meat she should buy at the butcher's or other queries she could answer herself. Ackerley thought his books, and not *The Listener*, were his real work, and their composition, one friend recalled, was accompanied by 'a kind of Flaubert-like noise'.

It was particularly important to get Queenie right, partly because he was aware that many people were bored by what he referred to as 'doggerly'. It would also be his first piece of serious writing since *Hindoo Holiday* and expectations would be high. He decided to try out one of his pieces about Queenie on Stephen Spender, who was now co-editor of *Encounter*. Henry Reed had pointed out that Queenie's name was something of a drawback and likely to arouse titters amongst the literati. Ackerley eventually decided upon the pseudonym 'Tulip', and called his essay 'The Two Tulips', referring to the different sides of her character as displayed during walks with her master and visits to the vet. Spender accepted the piece, but the title was changed, presumably to avoid an impression of horticulture, and appeared in the March 1954 issue as 'My Dog, Tulip'. Ackerley was delighted to receive £60 for it. It was an amusing and beautifully written account of human and canine eccentricities, in which Ackerley himself appears as the hapless victim of his wilful dog. It is full of characteristic Ackerley touches, notably a sly attack upon the military in the depiction of the tactics adopted by the least satisfactory vet, who is a colonel, some proselytism on behalf of the breed, and a few teasingly 'upsetting' details. Only Ackerley, one feels, would walk into a surgery and discover the vet 'busily engaged in extracting a tintack from the anus of a hen'. The essay received praise from a wide variety of readers, including Forster, Arthur Waley and Rose Macaulay, which encouraged Ackerley to return to the novel he had been engaged upon since 1948, which charted the shifting relationships between himself, Freddie and Queenie. Forster, who had thought that Ackerley would be concentrating upon his Queenie essays, was not pleased:

'Queenie could not bring a libel action, Freddie could, so I am not sure the change is for the better.'

Amongst those delighted to see Ackerley producing new work were his publishers, who had done very well with *Hindoo Holiday*, but had seen little of Ackerley except when they attempted to reissue the book in 1951. After its initial success, *Hindoo Holiday* had continued to sell on, and plans had been mooted to film it and to turn His Highness's playlets into a ballet for Constant Lambert and Robert Helpmann. Nothing came of either of these projects, but the book went into several Chatto and Windus editions, including their cheap pocket 'Phoenix Library' and their rather grand 'Golden Library'. The Penguin edition had come out in 1940 and sold over 47,000 copies within the first six months. Assorted foreign rights had been sold, and Viking acquired the book for America, where it sold out but was not reprinted, much to Ackerley's displeasure.

In spite, or because, of his comparative lack of funds, Ackerley could be an astute businessman, as his dealings with publishers and agents demonstrate. Viking asked whether Alexander Woollcott could include a condensed version of the book in one of his popular series of *Readers*, which they published. This would have involved the text's being cut by some twenty or twenty-five per cent, and Ackerley suspected that it was Viking's roundabout way of renewing their licence without actually reissuing the book intact. 'I am very much against cutting books,' he told his publishers, 'so if Woollcott does not care to include the whole of *Hindoo Holiday* in his Reader, he cannot have it at all . . . since [Viking] show so little interest in it, I don't see why they should have it any more . . . Well, if they still want it now they can buy it all over again; and this time it will be considerably more expensive.' Indeed, he was more concerned to restore passages removed from the original text than to mutilate the book further. He had hoped that the Penguin edition would be an opportunity to do this, since the Maharajah was now dead, but Penguin refused on the absurd grounds that their books were advertised as 'unabridged' and should therefore contain nothing more nor less than the regular publisher's editions.

However, in 1951 Chatto and Windus decided to reissue the book themselves and Ian Parsons, who was now Ackerley's editor there,

agreed to the restoration of all the material the company had been too faint-hearted to print in the original edition. Ackerley was delighted to restore not only the sections which might have shocked 'the James Douglasses of this world',¹ but also some observations of animals and a shocking recollection from the Great War in which his orderly kills a wounded German officer and takes several souvenirs. He also prepared a new preface. Then, in October, John Murray sent a copy of the memoirs of Sir Arthur Cunningham Lothian to *The Listener*. Lothian had been an Indian civil servant and so Ackerley was interested to read his account of the Native States. This interest turned to horror when he found a reference to himself in the second chapter: 'Another of the larger states was Chhatarpur, whose Ruler was subsequently the hero of that curious and somewhat cruel book, *Hindu* [sic] *Holiday*, by Ackerley.'

Ackerley had always believed that he had sufficiently 'faked' the book to avoid any danger of libel. He had been delighted when members of the Indian High Commissioner's entourage had assured him that everyone knew the real identity of 'Chhokrapur' and had then named another state altogether. Since the books were to be published the same week, Ackerley foresaw that they were likely to be reviewed together and that his cover would be very publicly blown. He even thought that one of his colleagues might offer *Hindoo Holiday* to Lothian for review. It was quite clear that part of the reason the 'brute' Lothian had blown the gaff was that he strongly disapproved of *Hindoo Holiday*. Chatto and Windus suggested that they might delay publication, but Ackerley was still concerned and wondered whether they ought to attempt to trace His Highness's son, who might consider himself libelled if it were suggested that his father was a barber rather than a king. 'One hopes that he is a moronic country squire in C. India, unable to read,' Ackerley told his publishers; 'but of course he may be round the corner in the Far Eastern department of the BBC.'

It was eventually decided to postpone publication to the following year and sample copies which had already been despatched to Bombay, Calcutta, Poona, Ceylon and Toronto were hastily recalled.

¹ Douglas was responsible for a hysterical *Sunday Express* article in 1928 in which he demanded that Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* be withdrawn from circulation. His assertion that he 'would rather put a phial of prussic acid in the hands of a healthy girl or boy than the book in question' earned him a notable place in the annals of British puritanism.

manuscript to a number of friends, including Forster, Roy Fuller, Stuart Hampshire, Hilary Corke and Stephen Spender. He was particularly interested to have the views of Fuller and Hampshire as representatives of a heterosexual readership and frequently consulted both men about his work. He was now very pleased with the book, as he told Spender:

I don't often have a feeling about what I write, but I believe in this. It has a kind of structural perfection, like an eighteenth-century cabinet, everything sliding nicely and full of secret drawers.

This was just the sort of structural perfection he had found lacking in his life, particularly in that part of his life upon which the book was based. But, in spite of his art, he insisted that the book was like life: the ending was anti-sentimental and not happy. He had worked extremely hard to write a book that would stand up to the closest scrutiny and be re-read with renewed pleasure. What particularly pleased him was that he had managed to conceal his art so as not to lose the naïve and embarrassing quality of the story, a quality he felt necessary for the book's impact. There was a further purpose in concealing the book's pattern from the casual reader: like Frank, the reader would plough blindly on until the final page, and only then realize that Frank's fate was predestined and quite clearly signalled. A second reading would reveal verbal and imagistic echoes which increase the central irony, which is that Megan and Evie are (in Ackerley's terms) essentially the same: jealous, possessive bitches. Frank is constantly bewailing the fate of Johnny at the hands of his wife, without realizing that his own fate at the paws of the dog is exactly the same.¹ This was ambitious and sophisticated, and Ackerley wrote letters to a number of friends drawing their attention to his ploys.

Since there seemed little prospect of the book's being published in full in England, he had allowed Spender to attempt to sell it in America, which he eventually did to another independent publisher,

¹ A clear verbal prefiguring of the book's last paragraph is found on pp. 13-14, and the jokey confusion between Megan and Evie during Frank and Johnny's conversation on p. 10 instantly establishes a parallel which becomes more obvious as the book progresses. Ackerley further amused himself by giving Megan and Evie the same 'costume', to Megan's distinct disadvantage: cf. p. 46 and p. 110. (All page references are to the first English edition.)

the Cummington Press in Iowa City. It was to be published in a de luxe limited edition of 300 copies, illustrated and retailing at \$15. However, the Press collapsed, quite literally, the machinery toppling over and smashing, swiftly followed by the company itself. Ackerley then sent the book to Maurice Girodias of the notorious Olympia Press, who returned it as 'not nearly dirty enough'. He now decided to try the 'purified' version on Warburg, who had been obliged to reject it in its original version on the advice of his lawyers. The Obscenity Act, 1959 had been rather more liberal and Warburg was optimistic. However, in May 1959 he once again rejected the novel, telling Ackerley that nobody thought that there was any chance of its achieving sufficient sales to justify publication. In fact, Warburg would have gone ahead had it not been for the implacable opposition of his partners, Roger Senhouse and David Farrer, who were 'absolutely adamant against our publishing it, more fools they'. Senhouse's opposition is surprising, since he had been a friend of the author and was also homosexual. Farrer's opposition was not, since he had greatly disliked *My Dog Tulip*, an opinion which poor sales appeared to have justified.

News of this latest setback reached Hamish Hamilton who asked to see the manuscript. Three people read it before it was regretfully returned. Hamilton quoted a reader's report in his accompanying letter:

Frank's pathos too soon turns to futility and one finds oneself sympathizing first with Johnny's relations for being bored by him and then with the unfortunate dog for being put on such a pedestal.

Ackerley marked this passage and scribbled in the margin:

Then 'one finds oneself' doing precisely what the book intended one to do. Frank is an unstable, maladjusted man, obsessed and frustrated, and the story is subtly contrived to turn completely over so that his 'persecutors' can be viewed in a sympathetic light. And why is Evie [the dog] 'unfortunate'? She (with [Megan] and Margaret [the Nancy character]) is the most formidable character in the book and gets her way in the end. She is Eve, the prototype, Shaw's tigress. The book is about the human predicament, and is meant to be amusing, in a wry sort of way. This duffer has missed all its points.

The duffer was not the only person to misunderstand the book, and if it has a flaw, it is that which frequently attends the unsympathetically intended first-person narrator. The reader is automatically, and sometimes inattentively, predisposed towards the person telling the story, particularly, as in this case, when the other characters remain resolutely unattractive. However, Ackerley's remarks also show what he frequently attempted to emphasize: although the book is autobiographically based, it is a *novel*. Indeed, part of the reason that he was surprised when the manuscript was criticized by Leonard Woolf and assorted lawyers was that he had become so bound up in the characters that he had almost forgotten that they were recognizable portraits of real people. Fortunately, another employee of Hamish Hamilton, Richard Brain, was interested enough in the novel to alert a friend at The Bodley Head, where it was declared to be a small masterpiece and eventually accepted by that publisher, subject to further alterations. These alterations were considerable and were to occupy much of Ackerley's time.

Exhausted by correspondence and disappointments, Ackerley decided to ask David Higham to be his literary agent. He also began soliciting anyone he knew about possible part-time employment, possibly as a publisher's reader (clearly feeling that such firms as Hamish Hamilton required new blood in that department). He applied to Chatto and Windus, Secker and Warburg, The Bodley Head, Methuen, *The Times*, John Lehmann and Stephen Spender, all without success. An anthology of poems from his years at *The Listener*, similar to Janet Adam Smith's *Poems of Today*, was suggested, but came to nothing. There were also some half-hearted schemes to take the whole BBC pension at once and invest it in property. He did not much relish the prospect of 'squatting in my flat all day with an aged dog, an aged aunt, and a numskull sister', and one alternative was to go to Japan. Francis King and James Kirkup lived there, in Kyoto and Sendai respectively, and had been urging him to join them, perhaps lecturing for the British Council, studying the country in order to produce a Japanese equivalent of *Hindoo Holiday*, or merely to recuperate after twenty-five years of literary editorship. The chief objection was financial. He had asked whether Fred Warburg would sponsor him in return for a book, but since the rejection of *We Think the World of You*, this seemed an unlikely prospect. When Ackerley had been having his row with Warburg, Forster, increasingly worried over his

friend's parlous financial state, had attempted to do something practical. As he explained to Plomer:

I am the only bugger of us all who has any money, and instantly wonder whether you could be persuaded to start a fund on his behalf. I see three objections (perhaps there are 4, 5, 6): (1) he might refuse, still I think he wouldn't if you did it: (2) the purchasing power of money is certain to decrease further: but who can stay that?: (3) gifts given within 5 years of one's death might be taxable—here £5 notes are an assistance, if not a final solution.

He offered to start the fund with £1000, 'just conveniently released by Cousin Dolly's decision, last month, to be certified'. Nothing ever came of this remarkable scheme, the necessity of which Forster regarded as a sign of the times.

If literary ability, scholarship and military nobility were adequately rewarded [he told Ackerley], neither you nor William nor Francis¹ nor Leo nor others I could think of would be scrabbling and worrying towards the end of their lives. It's part of the drift away from culture and integrity towards the worship of the Golden Calf—an animal never censured in these days, and why? Because Big Business including the newspapers have invested in him.

Ackerley's displeasure with the BBC was further increased when he discovered that there was a plan to give him a tea-party as a send-off, rather than drinks. Whilst there was time, he took as many people out to lunch as he could. 'Let us chew and swig away another chunk of the Corporation's wealth before they ditch me,' he wrote to Fuller. Similar invitations were issued to other contributors. He planned his final issue of *The Listener* to be 'a sweet end to my career', containing reviews and articles by Plomer, Spratt, Stuart Hampshire and, of

¹E. K. 'Francis' Bennett (1887–1958) had met Forster before the First War, when he had been a student at the Working Men's Club. He went to Cambridge on a scholarship and eventually became a Fellow of Caius College. He wrote a number of books under the *nom de plume* 'Francis Keppel'. He became a close friend of Forster and subsequently met Ackerley in the 1920s and grew fond of him. Simon Raven remembers him as a 'motherly old don' who held treasure hunts for his favourite undergraduates, hiding the prize in his pockets.

Ackerley

course, Forster. In the event, his farewell party was not a tea-party at all, but a rather grand affair of cocktails held on 29 October 1959 at the Langham Hotel, opposite Broadcasting House. There were a few disappointments and absences. Marjorie Redman was unable to attend, as were Edith Sitwell and Kenneth Clark ('sudden colds were alleged'). L. P. Hartley turned up on the wrong day and Forster, displeased with the way Ackerley had been treated by the Corporation, boycotted the occasion altogether. 'We missed you at the funeral party,' Ackerley wrote to David Sylvester:

but never mind, it was jollier than expected and went on until 8.30. The ebbing tide of distinguished guests had left behind them only a Corke and a Reed, and those I took off to dine. It was my last expenses sheet.

17

A passage to Japan

LIKE many prisoners emerging into the world after a long sentence, Ackerley was at something of a loss as to what to do with his freedom. 'I ought to be feeling some of the joys of uncontrolled enfranchisement,' he told Francis King, 'but I am not; I feel instead inert and depressed.' Nancy had been persuaded to take a morning job looking after a ninety-three-year-old woman, which earned enough money to cover her own rent. 'I am sitting on my bum at home and wondering what to do,' he told John Wickens, a young South African fan with whom he corresponded regularly.

The atmosphere at Star and Garter Mansions was scarcely inspiring. Its general dinginess was not much improved by Nancy's attempts at housekeeping. Myopic but vain, she refused to wear her spectacles and quite simply failed to see the gradually encroaching dirt, and the more fastidious guests were sometimes obliged to set to with a cloth. The bathroom, Bill Roerick recalled, was 'in a shocking condition. The paint (was it pea-green or ochre?) was peeling and the plaster under it bubbling and crumbling through. But the w.c. worked.' This was bad enough, but by now Aunt Bunny had become extremely frail. Her circulation was poor and her hands were always painfully cold. She still attempted to help with light household chores, but she had begun to fall over, fortunately without serious injury. She would be encountered in the hall passage, clinging to the walls as she made her slow way towards the kitchen. 'Here comes Rickety Kate!' she would call out gaily, and she remained remarkably cheerful.

However, she had also become incontinent. At first there was the occasional accident when she wet the bed. Determined not to cause

20

Welcoming the dear dark angel

A real chance to use his creative energies came in September 1965 when Ackerley was summoned back to *The Listener* for a month in the hiatus between the departure of Anthony Thwaite and the arrival of Derwent May. Since Thwaite had taken over from Ackerley's immediate successor, K. W. Gransden, the magazine had carried no reviews of animal books and no poems by James Kirkup. Ackerley was determined to remedy this deplorable state of affairs. He asked Kirkup to send poems immediately and sorted through the shelves of 'ruthlessly discarded' books on birds, beasts and reptiles. He was persuaded to return to his *Listener* vomit, as he put it, because his BBC Security Pay had dried up the previous year and he was now £380 a year worse off. To his surprise the Corporation was willing to pay him well for his month's work. He charged fifty guineas a week, guineas because he thought that more professional: it was how doctors calculated their fees. Roy Fuller was asked for a poem and fulfilled all the requirements by supplying one 'To a Wasp'. Ackerley also accepted Hugh Massingham's poem 'Cow' and two extracts from Kirkup's long 'Japan Marine' sequence, only one of which was eventually published. (The second was set up in proof but by that time Ackerley had departed and it was spiked.)

Old loyalties were honoured during his month in the literary editor's chair. A review of a biography of John Buchan by his old predecessor, Janet Adam Smith, was commissioned from C. V. Wedgwood (whose first reviews anywhere had been commissioned by Ackerley), and in the Autumn Book Supplement there were reviews of Gavin Maxwell's *The House of Elrig*, Desmond Morris's *The*

Welcoming the dear dark angel

Mammals and R. K. Murton's *The Wood-pigeon*, which Ackerley reviewed himself. ('Regarded now, since the suppression of the rabbit, as Public Pest No 1 among vertebrates (more and more pests will be added to the list, even dogs and cats, unless we can learn to control our own breeding), what hell the life of wood-pigeons seems to be.') John Lehmann wrote on Julian Maclaren-Ross and Hilary Corke delivered a characteristically ferocious attack upon the *Penguin English Dictionary*. William Trevor was called upon to review Charles Burkhart's account of one of Ackerley's favourite novelists, I. Compton-Burnett.¹ Fuller's poem, Kirkup's 'The Sea Within' and a review of Ian Niall's *The Gamekeeper* were published in subsequent issues. 'So I . . . hope the Fauna Preservation Society will be gratified and that James's persecution mania will take a turn for the better,' Ackerley commented.

He found the work quite hard after six years of enforced idleness. Apologizing to Fuller for not thanking him for sending some poems, he explained:

I have been so long in the dustbin from which I am now temporarily rag-picked that I find myself mouldy and stale and, with no help of any kind – not even a secretary – to cope with a Book Supplement, Anthony's muddle (so different from my own), and a variously changed scene, I have been at the end of such small wits, if any, that I still possess . . . I am left with an office-boy, aged 14–15, named Keith, a pleasant child, quite safe from me now, who brings me a cup of tea, price 4d, at 3.15 pm when one doesn't want a cup of tea, and adds a score of new books per day to the thousands already encumbering the small office. I fear the paper has gone to the dogs – no not the dear dogs – yes, why not the dear dogs? they piss on it – since Gransden's day. Did you know that contributors are now paid on publication, and there are twenty long book-reviews dating back to the winter of last year? I wonder people write for it any more, waiting a year for their money.

He complained that he could scarcely remember how to paste-up a page for the printers, but some problems were still the same: 'The

¹No doubt Compton-Burnett's brilliantly mannered accounts of illegitimacy, 'secret' families and sexual irregularity struck several chords with Ackerley, and it may be that she was equally struck by the 'plot' of *My Father and Myself*, which she read with interest, remarking that it should have been retitled *Myself and My Father*.

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