

THE ART AND CRAFT OF RICHARD JEFFERIES

John Savage

The transcript for the Richard Jefferies Society Birthday Lecture,
Saturday 21 October 2000.

When I agreed to give this lecture I had no illusions that it would be easy. But I looked forward to some enjoyable intellectual effort. I rediscovered Richard Jefferies; it was a labour of love and an intensely enjoyable experience, deeply satisfying intellectually and emotionally.

I decided that I would limit myself to *Wood Magic*, *Bevis* and *The Story of My Heart* and one essay, "My Old Village". I shall consider how Jefferies structures his writing, and how he creates a strong emotional response in the reader; and I shall focus largely on the mystical experiences that link the three books.

One morning a large wooden case was brought to the farmhouse, and Bevis, impatient to see what was in it, ran for the hard chisel and the hammer, and would not consent to put off the work of undoing it for a moment. It must be done directly. The case was very broad and nearly square, but only a few inches deep, and was formed of thin boards. They placed it for him upon the floor, and, kneeling down, he tapped the chisel, driving the edge in under the lid, and so starting the nails. Twice he hit his fingers in his haste, once so hard that he dropped the hammer, but he picked it up again and went on as before, till he had loosened the lid all round.

What an amazing start to a book! There is no hanging about, no introduction - just "the farmhouse" and "Bevis". What farmhouse? Who is this Bevis? There are no concessions to those who have to have everything spelt out for them. But by the end of the first sentence we have already learned an important fact about Bevis - his wilfulness.

He "would not consent to put off the work...", and single-mindedly he gets down to it, hitting his fingers in his haste, "once so hard that he dropped the hammer", and he soon opens the case.

You will remember that the case contained only a picture, which might look very well but was of no use to Bevis. Since it was "a fine engraving of 'An English Merrymaking in the Olden Time'", some of us might find it of no use, too. So Bevis perhaps has a rudimentary feeling for art: he knows what he likes, anyway. But I am being frivolous. The point is that Bevis claimed the wooden case and began to meditate what he could do with it. His first idea was to split the boards - "Deal splits so easily, it is a pleasure to feel the fibres part". But Bevis is wise: he forgoes the pleasure of splitting the wood and decides to use the case to make the roof for a hut; then he finds it too difficult to cut stakes for the four corners. So he goes and lies down by the stream: first an insect floats by, then a twig, then Bevis decides to make a toy boat, and for almost two pages the reader is treated to a description of Bevis's earlier unsuccessful attempts to design a canoe. Then Bevis suddenly thinks what a capital raft the packing-case will make - and the reader realises how skilfully Jefferies has been building up to this *denouement*.

I won't labour the point; I will just ask you to imagine the effect that this opening chapter made on a shy and sensitive only child - myself. *Bevis* was given to me by my father, and inside the front cover is the inscription "J.M.Savage. 1942". It was wartime, and it may have been the only suitable children's book in the bookshop. How fortunate if it was! I was eight or nine; I knew nothing of Arthur Ransome, and this was my first glimpse of a new-found land where children roamed free, like the child in Traherne's /[^]

Centuries of Meditation (which has been beautifully set to music by Gerald Finzi). Thomas Traherne lived in the middle of the 17th century; his was a sadly short life - even shorter than Richard Jefferies' life.

I was a stranger, which at my entrance into the world was saluted and surrounded by innumerable joys... Certainly, Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world than I. All appear'd new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful. All things were spotless and pure and glorious. The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reap'd nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The green trees, when I saw them first, transported and ravish'd me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things... I saw all things in the peace of Eden. Everything was at rest, free and immortal.

That deeply-moving passage could almost have come from *The Story of My Heart*. I have no evidence that Jefferies had read Traherne; but "The Child is father of the Man", as Wordsworth wrote, and the ecstasies of *The Story of My Heart* must surely have had their beginning in a similar childhood. The passage demonstrates a point that will emerge - that Jefferies, consciously or unconsciously, is part of a long tradition of English writing that celebrates the beauty of the world and man's place in it.

I shall start with *Wood Magic*, published in 1881. Like *Bevis*, the story starts directly, without introduction or explanation. "Little 'Sir' Bevis" is digging in the farmhouse garden, and he sees a daisy. He throws down his spade and starts to pick the daisy to pieces. We are presented with a series of strong sense-impressions - pink-tipped petals, dandelion juice, a bennet which Bevis chews until his teeth are green, Bevis's brown wrist and his still browner fingers playing with grass blades; "Lying at full length, he drummed the earth with his toes, while the tall grass blades tickled his cheeks." Some, at least, of the parameters have been established.

A humble-bee hovers nearby, and Bevis knows what he is saying. At first you think, How can a bee know all about a box-hedge, and a ha-ha, and a summer-house and iron railings? Then you remember that this is a children's book, and clever bees may not be considered unusual. In addition, the bee is not telling Bevis anything that he does not know: the bee reflects in his speech Bevis's love and understanding of nature and of his surroundings, and his identification with them. In fact, as we shall soon discover, Bevis's life with the many creatures with whom he converses is much more real than his home life: his parents are shadowy figures, and the grown-ups - as in *Bevis* - are most of the time merely "they" who do things in the background.

Throughout the first chapter we meet animals, birds, insects, even flowers who talk to Bevis. They tell him nothing that he would not have noticed - they tell him what Jefferies would like his young readers to notice - and one is tempted at first to assume that the farm is a miniature version of Isaiah's Peaceable Kingdom - except

that there "the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and they shall not hurt nor destroy"; more realistically, Jefferies does not play down the redness in tooth and claw: there is killing for food, and, because the various creatures speak and act like humans, there is also cruelty. In fact, the various creatures are so like humans that young readers, as with Aesop's "Fables", should learn moral lessons about human behaviour. Bevis himself is not above beating and bullying his dog Pan; and the swallow, quite rightly, does not trust Bevis since he stole her eggs last year. But the essential unity of nature on the farm is crystallised by a remark made by the squirrel, who looks at Bevis asleep under an oak tree and "knew exactly how Bevis felt - just like he himself did when he went to sleep."

As a result of wandering far and falling asleep, Bevis is missed at home, and farmworkers are sent to look for him. The incident is related casually, as if it is a nuisance rather than an anxiety, but it does give Jefferies the opportunity to make the point, through Bevis's papa, that Bevis may have gone to look at the signpost and the road to Southampton: "Bevis was full of the ships". So Bevis, who is, of course, an idealised Jefferies, is already feeling the call of the sea.

I would like to quote two simple examples of Jefferies' style as a reflection of the content. The chaffinch sings his war-song: notice the variety and the rhythm of the phrases. "I am lord of this tree; every bough is mine, and every leaf, and the wind that comes through it, and the sunshine that falls on it, and the grass underneath it - all this is mine." The last sentence of his song is more banal and less poetic - but it does have its own dynamic rhythm: "Be careful that none of you come inside the shadow of it, or I shall peck you with all my might." This will no doubt remind some of you of Ted Hughes' "Hawk Roosting" (1960):

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed...
The convenience of the high trees!...
My feet are locked upon the rough bark...
I kill where I please because it is all mine.

And listen to the sparrows a few paragraphs on; Jefferies catches exactly what Yeats calls "The brawling of the sparrows":

Immediately afterwards ten sparrows came from the house-top into the bushes, chattering and struggling all together, scratching, pecking, buffeting, and all talking at once.

The chapter ends with a paragraph that looks forward to *The Story of My Heart*:

He heard the bees say that there were such quantities of flowers on the hills, and such pleasant places, and that the sky was much more blue up there, and he thought if he could he would go to the hills soon.

Later on, Bevis meets a grasshopper, whose words are, again, close to *The Story of My Heart*, and also to what the wheat says in the essay "Saint Guido", from *The Open Air*, written three years later, in 1884:

Tell me, now, is there anything so beautiful as the sunshine and the blue sky, and the green grass, and the velvet and blue and spotted butterflies, and the trees which cast such a pleasant shadow

and talk so sweetly, and the brook which is always running? I should like to listen to it for a thousand years.

The grasshopper has no time for the ants, which are always - thriftily - laying up their store, while he has a quite different philosophy:

I do not lay up any store, because I know I shall die when the summer ends, and what is the use of wealth then? My store and my wealth are the sunshine, dear, and the blue sky, and the green grass, and the delicious brook who never ceases sing, sing, singing all day and night.

I do not intend to discuss the animal stories - they are not germane to my thesis; I will merely say that *Wood Magic* is not an earlier *Winnie the Pooh* 45 years before its time: it is an experiment in showing the oneness of nature, with all its beauty, its interdependence and its heartlessness.

But there is a sub-plot, as it were, of Hardy-esque coincidences and tragedies, of which the story of the flint is a good example, and the sad story of the locket in the tree is the climax. It is an extraordinary book, and I cannot agree with the critic from *The Spectator*, who called it "startlingly beautiful" - it has many beauties, but it is too tough, too distressing, to be that. But he does also say, "this is not a book for the woolly ones".

Jefferies has a preoccupation with the four elements. Bevis is sharp enough to notice that one element has not yet been mentioned by the squirrel who has told him warning tales:

'But', said Bevis, who had been listening very carefully, 'you have...told me about the earth, and the water, and the fire, but you have not said anything about the wind.'

The squirrel agrees, but he does not tell Bevis the whole truth:

'You need never be afraid of the wind, for he blows so sweetly...and fills you with life, and joy, and happiness.'

He admits that the wind can blow trees down; but he blames the trees for this, because, if they do fall, it must be because they are "malice-minded and rotten at the heart." This passage is clearly a preparation for the beautiful ending of the book. A similar passage occurs later about the brook, who speaks to Bevis in long, delicate sentences that convey the sense of everlasting flowing:

'Sometimes I sing to the wind, who loves me most dearly, and will come to me everywhere, in places where the sun cannot get.'

You are not surprised to find that the brook also sings to the sun and to the earth, so all four elements are again involved. The brook flows and sings endlessly:

'I remember, I have seen you before; it was so many, many thousands of years ago.'

'I do not believe it; you are babbling, Brook.'

'There is no such thing as time, Bevis my love; there never was any time, and there never will be; the sun laughs at it, even when he marks it on the sundial. Yesterday was just a second ago, and so was ten thousand years since, and there is nothing between you and then.'

This theme recurs later in the book.

I do not intend to say much more about *Wood Magic*, but before I move on to *Bevis* I should like to say something about the different styles of the two books. Compared with the open, graphic style of *Bevis*, *Wood Magic* is rather formal, with the slightly remote quality of a fairy tale; the syntax is fairly complex - rather too much so for a young child, possibly - and it contains some difficult vocabulary. In addition, the stories themselves seem strangely sad and tragic for a children's book.

But its overall effect is moving and thought-provoking. The last chapter contains Bevis's dialogue with the wind, which is tenderly beautiful. There is only time for a flavour of it.

'In the morning, dear, get up as quick as you can, and drink me as I come down from the hill. In the day go up on the hill, dear, and drink me again, and stay there if you can till the stars shine out, and drink still more of me.

'And by and by you will understand all about the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and the earth which is so beautiful, Bevis... Come up to me upon the hills, and your heart will never be heavy, but your eyes will be bright, and your step quick, and you will sing and shout...'

'So I will,' said Bevis, 'I will shout. Holloa!' and he ran on to the top of the little round hill...and danced about on it as wild as could be.

'Dance away, dear,' said the wind, much delighted. 'Everybody dances who drinks me.'

Just before the end of the book, Bevis - the little Sir Bevis, aged about six - has a mystical experience just like those recorded in *The Story of My Heart*. He sits down on the wild thyme, and the wind sings to him, and "he felt with his soul out to the far-distant sun just as easily as he could feel with his hand to the bunch of grass beside him." A similar experience occurs to the older Bevis in the book *Bevis*, and it is described in very similar language.

The book ends with Bevis and the wind promising to meet again on the hilltop - and Jefferies kept that promise later in his life.

Wood Magic is not a novel in the normally accepted sense. Traditionally, novels and similar literary forms are generally accepted to have a beginning, a middle and an end; *Wood Magic* is all middle - though with huge variety within it. The last chapter has a valedictory quality, and the book ends with Bevis going down the hill to join his father, but that is only a rounding-off device.

Bevis has exactly the same lack of structure. As we have seen, it begins - or, rather, starts - with no introduction, and Chapter 1 could just as well be Chapter 2 or Chapter 3. It is a slice of life from May to January; Bevis learns a lot, but, apart from becoming more self-reliant and, apparently, more grown-up during the camp on the island, there is no character development, and there has been no moral crux or crisis. I put this forward as a fact and not a criticism. Events occur just as they do in life, and, except that the book ends in winter, it seems like an endless summer holiday in which the sun shines virtually all the time. School is never mentioned, and everyone seems to be free all day. That is part of the wondrous appeal of the book. But I do not know how a modern child would react to it: perhaps, like Molesworth, he would regard Bevis as a weedy wet, always saying, "Hallo, trees, Hallo, sky."

Bevis is a perfectly natural child, rushing about, switching activities enthusiastically, getting tired; but he has been given sound advice by his "Governor", and it has been firmly implanted in him that "these things, you know, ought to be done quite properly." He is also amazingly well-read: just consider the books that he

takes with him to the island - "The Odyssey", "Don Quixote", ballads, "Faust" and the poems of Shakespeare. He also loves the stars and knows all the constellations, and he knows about the satellites of Jupiter; he cleverly uses the Pole Star to mark noon on his sundial. Mark is not much more than a foil to Bevis - a nice enough boy, but someone against whom Bevis can continually test himself. But there is a selfless quality about each:

All his heart was full of Bevis, it was not his own success, it was Bevis's victory that he rejoiced in. All he wished was that Mark was with him to share the pleasure.

But Bevis can be bossy:

"Who are we then, if we are Greeks?"

"I am Alexander the Great."

"And who am I?"

"Oh, you - you are anybody."

But I must be somebody," said Mark, "else it will not do."

"Well, you are: let me see - Pisistratus."

"Who was Pisistratus?"

"I don't know," said Bevis. "It doesn't matter in the least. Now dig."

Pisistratus dug till he came to another root, which Alexander the Great chopped off for him with the hatchet.

A wonderful end to a brilliant bit of dialogue. Finally:

"Greeks are not very good," said Mark. "I don't like Greeks. Don't let's be Greeks any longer. The Mississippi was very much best."

"So it was," said Bevis. "The Mississippi is the nicest. I am not Alexander, and you are not Pisistratus. This is the Mississippi."

So who are they? One very much wants Bevis to say, "I am Huck Finn, and you are Jim." But "Huckleberry Finn" was published in 1884, two years after *Bevis*.

One of the best features of the book is the attention to detail, both of the boys' activity and of the natural world. For example, how to sail, learning to swim (a brilliant and gripping description), making the gun (vivid and graphic); but the most interesting, if not astonishing feature is the way the narrative is interspersed with observations of nature. If one extracts the actual story - the daily activity, the raft, the exploration, the shooting, the sailing, the battle, the camping on the island, the scare over the "thing" that visits the island in the night, the discovery and naming of new places round the lake, and the final winter sailing through the ice, there is enough to make a good story for boys. But it would be only a shadow of the book as we have it. I haven't counted the relative number of paragraphs, but so much of the book is about the world around the two boys that it could be said that the natural world is as much a part of the narrative as Bevis and Mark: the natural world as hero, with what Laurie Lee marvellously called "Season and landscape's liturgy" as the book's main structure. It could be argued that everything that happens is an organic event springing from the landscape and the local weather; even the making of the gun is salient to the life of the farm, since most shooting was for a practical reason (though the section on American snap-shooting jars for me, because it shifts the scene to London and breaks the idyll).

The beauty of nature and Bevis's deep response to it recreate the atmosphere of the Garden of Eden, a paradisaical view of the world like that of

Traherne, whom I quoted at the beginning. But there are three lines in the Traherne piece that I did not quote, which give a harsher view of the world:

I knew not that there were sins or complaints or laws. I dream'd not of poverties or contentions or vices. All tears and quarrels were hid from mine eyes.

Omar Khayyám makes the same point:

O Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make
And who with Eden didst devise the Snake;
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give - and take!
[from The Rubáiyat of Omar Khayyám (trans. Edward Fitzgerald)]

It is a flawed Eden, and Jefferies does not hesitate to show Bevis and Mark as savages "hurried on by the thirst of the chase...they hungered to repeat the wild excitement when the game was struck and hunted down"; but they are noble savages, sensitive, well educated, and compassionate towards human suffering: when Bevis learns of Loo's family's hunger caused by their father's drinking, "His face became quite white; he was thoroughly upset. It was his first glance at the hard roadside of life."

But, as the well-known piece "Desiderata", discovered in an American church, says:

You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars: you have a right to be here...
With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.

Jefferies strove to reproduce that beauty, and, as with all good literature, his writing is a balance of content and style, of message and medium. At his best - and towards the end of his life he was almost always at his best - his writing is among the finest in English literature. He uses the resources of our beautiful language to recreate the beauties of nature, in prose that is often near to poetry and sometimes has the rhythms of the King James Bible. There are so many felicities of expression that I can quote only a few of the score that I have specially noted.

The first is from the chapter evocatively titled "Morning in the Tropics". Note how Jefferies uses variety of length in the phrases, how the lengths of the vowel sounds convey lingering slowness or rapidity of movement or of thought; note also how skilfully Jefferies can manipulate lists of things, so that they take on a poetry and a rhythm of their own -particularly the frequent effective repetition of 'light' in the first paragraph. We can, I think, infer from the references to Archimedes and the Sybil that the well-read Bevis knew about them, and made the connections himself; I don't think they are mere authorial decoration.

Southwards, looking seawards, instead of the long path of gold which wavelets strew before him, the sun beamed in the water, throwing a stream of light in their faces, not to be looked at any more than the fire which Archimedes cast from his mirrors, melting the ships. All the light of summer fell on the water, from the glowing sky, from the clear air, from the sun. The island floated in light, they stood in light, light was in the shadow of the trees, and under the thick brambles; light was deep down in the water, light surrounded them as a mist might; they could see far up into the illumined sky as down into the water.

The leaves with light under them as well as above became films of transparent green... every atom of sand upon the shore was sought out by the beams, and given an individual existence amid the inconceivable multitude which the Sybil alone counted. Nothing was lost, not a grain of sand, not the least needle of fir. The light touched all things, and gave them to be.

To see a World in a grain of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.
["Auguries of Innocence", William Blake]

My second quotation comes from "Bevis's Zodiac". The much-loved constellations (in this case Orion), when they appear above the horizon, mark the passage of the seasons. Note how the sound of the words and of the phrases conveys the grandeur and the brightness of the sky, or the strength of the thought:

When the few leaves left on this young oak were brown, and rustled in the frosty night, the massy shoulder of Orion came heaving up through it - first one bright star, then another; then the gleaming girdle, and the less definite scabbard; then the great constellation stretched across the east. At the first sight of Orion's shoulder Bevis always felt suddenly stronger, as if a breath of the mighty hunter had come down and entered into him.

As the constellation rose, so presently new vigour entered into the trees, the sap moved, the buds thrust forth, the new leaf came, and the nightingale travelling up from the south sang in the musical April nights. But this was when Orion was south, and Sirius flared like a night-sun over the great oak at the top of the Home Field.

My third quotation comes near the end of their stay on the island. It is the end of summer, when there is a sense of fulfilment; signs of autumn are beginning to appear, but it is a happy time, and this passage is without the underlying message of sadness that autumn brings with it. It has all the luxuriance of Keats' "Ode to Autumn", without the sense of mortality that tolls through the last verse of that wonderful poem. It may be heresy to say so, but I think this passage is every bit as fine and as moving as the Keats; the language is rich and emotive and it is a joy to read aloud:

Lying at full length inside the shadow of the oak, Bevis gazed up at the clouds, which were at an immense height, and drifted so slowly as to scarcely seem to move... It was warm without the pressure of heat, soft, luxurious; the summer, like them, reclined, resting in the fullness of the time... A sense of rest, the rest not of weariness, but of full growth, was in the atmosphere; tree, plant, and grassy things had reached their fullness and strength.

The summer shadow lingered on the dial, the sun slowed his pace, pausing on his way, in the rich light the fruits filled. The earth listened to the chorus of the birds, and as they ceased gave them their meed of berry, seed, and grain. There was no labour for them; their granaries were full. Ethereal gold floated about the hills, filling their hollows to the brim with haze. Like a grape the air was ripe and luscious, and to breathe it was a drowsy joy. For Circe had smoothed her garment and slumbered, and the very sun moved slow."

The second paragraph is sheer music, with not one harsh sound in it: it is full of soft consonants and long vowels, and such words as brim, smoothed, slumbered, summer, shadows, meed, ethereal, ripe, breathe, and drowsy.

I mentioned the mystical experience that little Bevis had at the end of "Wood Magic", when "he felt with his soul out to the far-distant sun". In "Bevis", there are similar

episodes: on the night before the battle, there is a tremendous thunderstorm, and Bevis "fell into one of his dream states, when, as Mark said, he was like a tree." Since this is seen through Mark's eyes, we do not learn what Bevis was feeling.

On another occasion, "He could not, as he reclined on the garden path by the strawberries, physically reach to and feel the oak; but he could feel the oak in his mind, and so, from the oak, stepping beyond it, he felt the stars. They were always there, by day as well as by night... The heavens were always around and with him... They were neither above nor beneath, they were in the same place with him; just as when you walk in a wood the trees are all about you...so he felt the constellations and the sun on a plane with him, and that he was moving among them as the earth rolled on, like them, with them, in the stream of space... Bevis lived not only out to the finches and the swallows, to the faraway hills, but he lived out and felt out to the sky... It was living, not thinking. He lived it, never thinking, as the finches live their sunny life in the happy days of June. There was magic in everything, blades of grass and stars, the sun and the stones upon the ground."

A second example:

The cuckoo was gone, the nightingale silent, the finches were in the stubble... There was no song but that of the waterfall.

Bevis sat on the raft, leaning against the willow bulwark. Pan crept to his knee.

The forget-me-nots and the hart's-tongue, the beeches and the firs listened to the singing.

Something that had gone by, and something that was to come, came out of the music and made this moment sweeter. This moment of the singing held a thousand years that had gone by, and the thousand years that are to come... They were there *now*, the sunshine and the wind above, the shadow and the water and the spray beneath - that was all in all. Bevis and Mark were there now, listening to the singing, that was all in all.

Finally: -

The sun had not yet stood out from the orient, but his precedent light shone through the translucent blue...the blue of the precious sapphire is thick to it, the turquoise dull. Down through the beauteous azure came the light itself, pure, unreflected light, untouched, untarnished even by the dew-sweetened petal of a flower, descending, flowing like a wind, a wind of glory sweeping through the blue. A luminous purple glowing as love glows in the cheek, so glowed the passion of the heavens.

Bevis, the lover of the sky, gazed and forgot; forgot as we forget that our pulses beat, having no labour to make them. Nor did he hear the south wind singing in the fir tops.

I do not know how any can slumber with this over them... The greatest wonder on earth is that there are any not able to see the earth's surpassing beauty.

*Up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying:
Hear the drums of morning play;
Hark, the empty highways crying
'Who'll beyond the hills away?'*

*Up, lad: thews that lie and cumber
Sunlit pallets never thrive;
Morns abed and daylight slumber
Were not meant for man alive.*

*Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;
Breath's a ware that will not keep
Up, lad: when the journey's over
There'll be time enough to sleep.*

[from "Reveille", A.E.Housman ("A Shropshire Lad")]

Before I finish discussing *Bevis*, I must just point out Bevis's fervent desire to go to the sea. This is mentioned, you will remember, in the episode when little Bevis is missing, and his parents think he might have gone to look at the road and the signpost to Southampton. The older Bevis feels just the same:

'I've a great mind to walk to Southampton, and see the ships. It's only sixty miles.'
'Well, come on,' said Mark, quite ready."

Fortunately, since it would have been a quite different book if they had, Mark remembers that the road goes past Jack's, and he suddenly suggests going shooting with Jack. Bevis agrees, and the walk to the coast is forgotten. But not entirely, as we shall see.

The book started in May, at a time of long grass and butterflies. It ends in the winter, at the time of snow and ice. But, while this structure may contain the subconscious message of the inevitable movement towards death, on a conscious level there is huge vitality in the last few pages: the writing is positive and vigorous, with strong verbs and adjectives.

Bevis and Mark skate down the frozen New Sea, blown by the south wind "at a tremendous pace", and there is "a tremendous grinding and splintering of ice". Then the wind changes - "The black north swooped on the earth and swept across the water." The dialogue is rapid: there are 8 short lines of 9 words, 4 words, 2, 6, 9, 3, 3 and 2 words; then "ice and spray rushed up the steep sand"; and "the ice was torn into jagged bits". "Down came the black north", like a sledge-hammer on the anvil - a violent image, but also an image of the creative activity of a blacksmith.

Splinter-splanter! Crash! grind! roar! a noise like hundreds of gnashing teeth. 'Oh!' said Frances. 'It is Dante!'

This bizarre piece of erudition makes one wonder whether Frances really would have read *Purgatorio*. Bevis reads Homer, of course - but that is intrinsically more likely, I think.

There is an exciting description of the *Pinta* in ice, followed by more splintering, grinding, crashing and roaring - "the horrible inexpressible noise of chaos - an orderless, rhythmless noise of chaos." "'Hurrah!' shouted Mark. 'Hurrah!'" That one word "Hurrah!" sums up the *joie de vivre* of the book.

The narrative now begins to move slowly, lingering on the birds roosting and sheltering in the boys' summer hut on the island. Significantly, the sundial is still standing, reminding us that time passes; but this inexorable fact is disguised by the absence of shadow on the dial, since the sun is now below the horizon.

Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.
["Fern Hill", Dylan Thomas (1914-54)]

The return journey is brilliantly described: the sentences roll and rush, surge and pause. They leave New Formosa, and pass by places that have contained so many

of the events of the book - Fir Tree Gulf, Mozambique, Thessaly - and finally they glide into harbour. "Frances sprang ashore" - a lovely, evocative and resonant phrase - and is met by the relieved but indignant Jack. "Why, it was splendid!" said Frances, and they went on together towards Longcot." Young love is confirmed, and we know that Bevis and Mark will grow up straight and strong. Mark will be a pleasant and right-thinking young man; Bevis will be more of a sensitive and a dreamer, though capable of being assertive where necessary. The future is assured; and the stars are always over the ocean.

We have seen several passages in *Bevis* which foreshadow *The Story of My Heart*. Now let us look at that most important work.

*The hills look over on the South,
And southward dreams the sea.*
["Daisy", Francis Thompson (1859-1907)]

Jefferies' own description of *The Story of My Heart* states: "The author claims to stand face to face with nature and with the unknown...to free thought from every trammel...entering upon another and larger series of ideas...outside and beyond those which now exercise us."

This courageous statement is a huge claim, so it is hardly surprising that he expressed (and felt) doubts about his success, both in Chapter 1 and in the last chapter:

Clumsy indeed are all words the moment the wooden stage of commonplace life is left

and

I have as it were seventeen years of consciousness of my own inability to express this idea of my life.

This is, of course, a common complaint of writers. Chaucer writes, in "The Parlement of Foules": "The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne." and T.S.Eliot, in the fifth section of "East Coker", was very specific:

...each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion.

Jefferies is an effective and successful writer, but he would have agreed with Eliot when it came to attempting to express the inexpressible - in other words, his deepest mystical experiences. Let us see how successful he is in his task.

Softly breathed the sweet south wind, gently the yellow corn waved beneath; the ancient, ancient sun shone on the fresh grass and the flower, my heart opened wide as the broad, broad earth.

That is beautiful, exquisitely controlled writing, soft, slow and gentle, full of long vowel sounds, very close to poetry. It is indeed the story of Jefferies' heart, recreating in its own beauty the beauty of the experience.

Moving up the sweet short turf, at every step my heart seemed to obtain a wider horizon of feeling; with every inhalation of rich pure air, a deeper desire.

That is brilliant: it says everything in simple language, using mostly monosyllables, and the words with more than one syllable are simple ones, anyway, except for the Latinate "inhalation", which gives a touch of formality to the episode. "Sweet short turf" (without a comma) not only describes the footing; it also conveys the short quick steps required to climb the slope. The similar phrase "rich pure air" (which requires careful enunciation -which helps to accentuate the meaning) contrasts with the long and formal, but not ponderous "inhalation"; and the sentence ends with the lovely lingering alliterative phrase "a deeper desire", with its yearning vowel sounds. We are clearly in the presence of an artist and craftsman.

The subsequent mystical experience persuades by its utter conviction and its direct and unapologetic expression: the last four words of the preceding paragraph, "I was quite alone" are transformed to the more powerful "I was utterly alone", with the addition of "with the sun and the earth." We can confidently respond to such openness. The four elements are introduced: "Lying down on the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air and the distant sea far beyond sight." The slow vowel sounds of the last four words confirm the vastness and the distance of the sea. Each element is now mentioned, in phrases which are varied and non-formulaic:

"I thought of the earth's firmness - I felt it bear me up." We, too, can feel it bear us up on that solid phrase "the earth's firmness." He enlarges on the idea of being borne up: "through the grassy couch there came an influence as if I could feel the great earth speaking to me." Solidity is conveyed by the heavy phrase "the great earth"; the length of the sentence conveys certainty, and we feel that we can believe him.

"I thought of the wandering air - its pureness, which is its beauty." "Pureness" is right: "purity" can have moral connotations; "the air touched me and gave me something of itself." We breathe the air, and so we have a particularly intimate relationship with it.

"I spoke to the sea: though so far, in my mind I saw it, green at the rim of the earth and blue in deeper ocean." A long, evocative sentence, full of long vowel sounds which convey the vastness depicted by "the rim of the earth" and "deeper ocean". But Jefferies is not finished with the sea yet: he goes on - "I desired to have its strength, its mystery and glory." The rhythm of those three abstract nouns is persuasive - just try them in any other order and the sentence limps.

Finally, the fourth element, fire: "Then I addressed the sun, desiring the soul equivalent of his light and brilliance, his endurance and unwearied race." What a wonderful piling up of nouns! Light and brilliance, endurance and unwearied race. A phrase from Addison's great hymn comes to mind:

The unwearied sun from day to day
Does his Creator's power display.

Then comes what is for me the most affecting part of this extraordinary paragraph. I first read this book when I was seventeen, and it was a revelation, an amazement and a delight. The sentences about the colour of the sky expressed in powerful and memorable language what I had inarticulately felt: it was so exposed, but it was so true, and I was a changed person. "I turned to the blue heaven over, gazing into its depth, inhaling its exquisite colour and sweetness." Then comes a sentence which goes on and on, with each new word enriching it further, until it reaches its quiet and piercing climax. "The rich blue of the unattainable flower of the sky drew my soul towards it, and there it rested, for pure colour is rest of heart." It was like hearing the music of Delius or Vaughan Williams for the first time; it was a life-enhancing experience - and that is the word that Bernard Berenson used to define art - "life-enhancing." For fifty years I have remembered that phrase when I have looked at the blue sky - "pure colour is rest of heart."

Now Jefferies winds up the paragraph with a statement that we have to take on trust: "By all these I prayed; I felt an emotion of the soul beyond all definition; prayer is a puny thing to it." And at the end of the next paragraph- "thus I prayed that I might touch to the unutterable existence infinitely higher than deity."

He is here "moving about in worlds not realised", as Wordsworth puts it. Ordinary mortals cannot follow him, because language fails at this point to convey what he feels. Even our wonderful language, which has the largest vocabulary in the world, cannot express his deepest thoughts.

But there is an ecstasy here, a transport, an unashamed glorying in the beauty of the earth and of the cosmos - one can only envy Jefferies that he feels so exquisite a joy. One is again reminded of the Traherne passage, and also of the ecstasies of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was an exact contemporary of Richard Jefferies, in his breathless joy in the harvest:

*These things, these things were here and but the beholder
Wanting; which two when they once meet,
The heart rears wings bold and bolder
And hurls for him,
O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.*

["Hurrahing in Harvest", Gerard Manley Hopkins, (1844-89)]

A page later he becomes seriously mystical - though he is only echoing the similar experiences of Bevis, already referred to, in both *Wood Magic* and *Bevis*:

I felt down deep into the earth under, and high above into the sky, and farther still to the sun and stars. Still farther beyond the stars into the hollow of space, and losing thus my separateness of being came to seem like a part of the whole... My soul prays that I may have in myself the secret and meaning of the earth, the golden sun, the light, the foam-flecked sea.

Again, it is the sheer poetry of that list of four things that is so effective -the earth, the golden sun, the light (standing, excitingly, for the air) and the Homeric-sounding "foam-flecked sea" - such an evocative phrase.

Wordsworth's Pedlar (1798) has a similar view of the world:

Oh then what soul was his, when on the tops
Of the high mountains he beheld the sun
Rise up and bathe the world in light. He looked,
The ocean and the earth beneath him lay
In gladness and deep joy. The clouds were touched,
And in their silent faces he did read
Unutterable love. (11.95-101)

It is enormously encouraging and inspiring to find that such experiences are shared by poets and writers, to know that one is not alone. Wordsworth, though nominally a Christian, was a pantheist, and he did link his experiences with the spiritual and the numinous, while Jefferies was less precise in his relationship with ultimate being. In addition, I think it is true to say that Wordsworth was more interested in the world of men, even if he was more concerned with humanity than with individuals - "hearing oftentimes The still, sad music of humanity" ("Tintern Abbey"). Jefferies had a deep concern for the rural poor, but his mystical experiences were his and his alone - "Let my soul become enlarged." In addition, Wordsworth intellectualised his feelings, and based his world-view on them: He says of the Pedlar (who is Wordsworth in disguise):

*he had an eye
Which from a stone, a tree, a withered leaf,
To the broad ocean and the azure heavens...
Could find no surface where its power might sleep -
Which spake perpetual logic to his soul,
And by an unrelenting agency
Did bind his feelings even as in a chain. (11.349-356)*

There is an ecstatic quality in *The Story of My Heart*, and Jefferies reveals an extraordinary ability to express his feelings in poetic language: "I became absorbed in the glory of the day, the sunshine, the sweet air, the yellowing corn turning from its sappy green to summer's noon of gold, the lark's song like a waterfall in the sky." There is an unerring sense of rhythm, a brilliant faculty for creating emotional satisfaction - and therefore agreement, conscious, subconscious or implicit - in the mind of the reader.

This passage continues with the mystical idea of timelessness that was presented to Bevis in *Wood Magic* - that the man in the hill, in the tumulus, is still somehow alive, or has only just died: "He died about a minute ago, dear, just before you came up the hill." "He was as real to me two thousand years after interment as those I had seen in the body...his spirit could endure from then till now, and the time was nothing." This is also what the brook sings to little Bevis: "Now there is no such thing as time, Bevis my love...all things are as bright and beautiful as ten thousand times ten thousand years ago, which is no longer since than a second." Bevis is healthily sceptical about this - at the age of six he can afford to be - but we have a duty to Jefferies to try to understand it, since it is clearly a meaningful concept for him. As I suggested, the beauty of the language can help us to acquiesce, even if we do not fully understand.

Listening to the sighing of the grass I felt immortality as I felt the beauty of the summer morning, and I thought beyond immortality, of other conditions, more beautiful than existence, higher than immortality.

Unfortunately, as in the passage about existence higher than deity, those resonant phrases seem to be a semantic blank, just words. But we can be swept away by the next passage, which is ecstatic music:

It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it, as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air. Nothing has to come; it is now. Now is eternity; now is the immortal life. Here this moment, by this tumult, on earth, now; I exist in it...all is, and will be ever, in now.

There is so much more that one could say about this book; but time presses, and I shall just touch on the importance of the stars to Jefferies. "Bevis's Zodiac" celebrates the beauty of the night sky, and the major stars are mentioned again in *The Story of My Heart*:

"I prayed with the glowing clouds of sunset and the soft light of the first star coming through the violet sky. At night with the stars, according to the season: now with the Pleiades, now with the Swan or burning Sirius, and broad Orion's whole constellation, red Aldebaran, Arcturus and the Northern Crown." A list of stars has become poetry, because of the author's controlling intellect and his sensitivity to words.

"The sweetness of the sky, the fullness of the earth, the beautiful earth, how shall I say it?" Well, as far as I am concerned he *has* said it - fully, and effectively, and evocatively.

It is important, I think, not to turn away from the bitterness of Jefferies' last essay, "My Old Village". He had been ill since December 1881, so the three books that I have been discussing were written against the background of pain and illness. But one would never know. However, in one of his last notebooks appears the sentence, "Three great giants are against me - disease, despair and poverty." Giant Despair finally conquered him in this last essay, written not long before he died, in which he speaks of "the iron grip of hell", and through which the fact of death tolls like a funeral bell. It starts, "John Brown is dead," and synonymous phrases recur throughout: "He is gone through the great doorway," "gone as you might casually pluck a hawthorn leaf from the hedge," "There is not one left," "next harvest-time he was under the daisies," "The pickaxe and spade have made almost a full round," and "Time has shuffled them about...like a pack of cards."

The theme is the sadness of memory, and the impossibility of returning to the land of lost content: "let us never go back, lest we too die."

The sun shone there for a very long time, and the water rippled and sang, and it always seemed to me that I could feel the rippling and the singing and the sparkling back through the centuries... There were nights in those times over those fields, not darkness, but Night, full of glowing suns and glowing richness of life that sprang up to meet them.

But at the end of the essay he seems to distrust even his memories: "No one else seems to have seen the sparkle on the brook, or heard the music at the hatch,

or to have felt back through the centuries... No one seems to understand how I got food from the clouds."

But then irony takes over, of a sort that we have not seen in his writing before, except briefly in *Amaryllis at the Fair*. There it was semi-humorous; here it is bitter and painful to read:

Perhaps after all I was mistaken, and there never was any such place or any such meadows, and I was never there. And perhaps in course of time I shall find out also, when I pass away physically, that as a matter of fact there never was any earth.

It is astonishing, considering the desperate conditions under which he was composing this essay, that the control is still there, that the writing is still masterly. One is filled with admiration, and the unaccustomed bitterness is forgiven.

I do not wish to end on this sad note. I began with the opening of *Bevis*, and I shall end with the last few lines. You will notice that the four elements are present, implicitly and explicitly, in this passage - which, like other passages from the book, is among the most beautiful pieces of Jefferies' writing. The book ends hopefully, with Orion striding the sky, the buds quick with the power of the spring, despite the north wind, the rising of Arcturus looked for, and Bevis and Mark determined to go to the sea. The last word of the book holds huge significance for Richard Jefferies.

Bevis and Mark stayed to furl sails, and leave the *Pinta* shipshape. By the time they had finished it was already dark: the night had come.

On their way home they paused a moment under the great oak at the top of the Home Field, and looked back. The whole south burned with stars. There was a roar in the oak like the thunder of the sea. The sky was black, black as velvet, the black north had come down, and the stars shone and burned as if the wind reached and fanned them into flame.

Large Sirius flashed; vast Orion strode the sky, lording the heavens with his sword. A scintillation rushed across from the zenith to the southern horizon. The black north held down the buds, but there was a force in them already that must push out in leaf as Arcturus rose in the East. Listening to the loud roar of the oak as the strength of the north wind filled them -

'I should like to go straight to the real great sea like the wind', said Mark.

'We *must* go to the great sea,' said Bevis. 'Look at Orion!'

The wind went seawards, and the stars are always over the ocean.