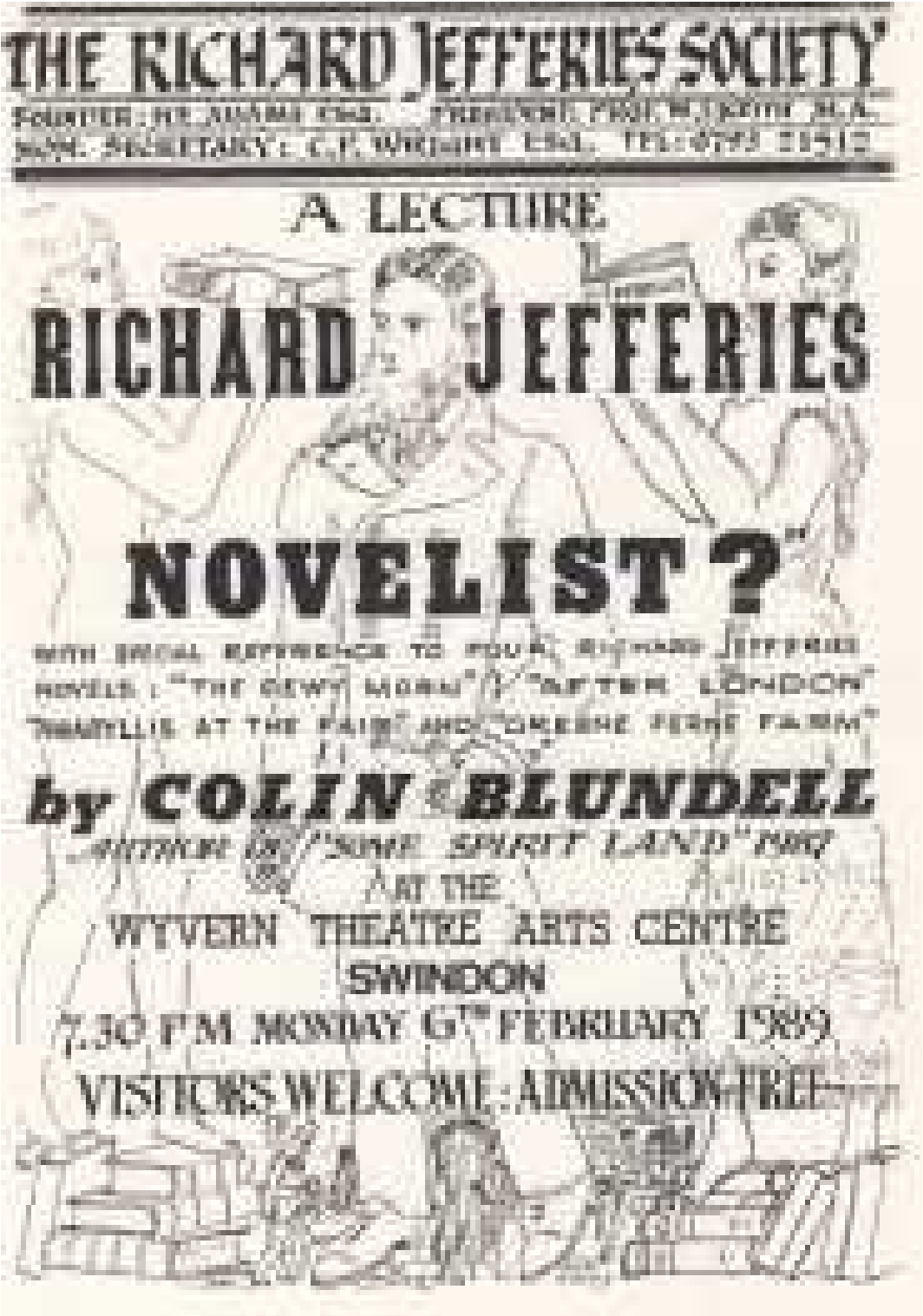


FOUR NOVELS OF RICHARD JEFFERIES



THE RICHARD JEFFERIES SOCIETY
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A LECTURE

RICHARD JEFFERIES

NOVELIST?

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO FOUR RICHARD JEFFERIES NOVELS: "THE DEWY MORN", "AFTER LONDON", "AMARYLLIS AT THE FAIR" AND "GREENE FERNE FARM"

by COLIN BLUNDELL
AUTHOR OF "SOME SPIRIT LAND" 1987

AT THE
WYVERN THEATRE ARTS CENTRE
SWINDON

7.30 P.M. MONDAY 6TH FEBRUARY 1989

VISITORS WELCOME - ADMISSION FREE

Greene Ferne Farm (1880)
The Dewy Morn (1884)
After London (1885)
Amaryllis at the Fair (1887)

Some General Questions

Before we look at the novels themselves, I'd like to ask a few questions about reading novels in general, for instance:-

Where does our understanding of a novel come from?

How does it arise?

How do we learn to come to terms with the complex activities required of us by a writer of fiction?

How do we stand in relation to a novel?

How do we construct the writer behind the text?

What does the fiction tell us about the writer?

Does it matter?

And rather more generally:-

How do we construct our reading list?

How do we decide what to read and what not to bother with?

What is the role of the critics in helping us to come to terms with the world of fiction?

I think that it is particularly important to ask these questions in relation to the reading of Jefferies' novels because for a variety of reasons they constitute a special challenge to readers to be clear about their motives for reading him and the nature of an engagement with his texts.

Walter Besant says...

If we listened to the voice of Walter Besant in *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (Chapters 6 and 9) it strikes me that we would never bother to waste time reading Jefferies' novels at all. I'm glad I came under the spell of two of his 'novels' before I could be influenced by Besant:-

He never was a novelist; he never could be one... He wholly lacked the dramatic faculty. He could draw splendid landscapes but he could not connect them together by the thread of human interest... In his later books he lays aside all but the mere pretence of a story... There is only the promise of a story not worked out—left, not half untold, but hardly begun... You may put down any of his so-called novels at any time with no more regret than that this scene or that picture was not longer. As the writer never took any interest in his own characters... so none of his readers can be expected to feel any interest...

In the ordinary sense of the word, Jefferies was not a novelist; in the artistic sense of the word he was not a novelist... This fully understood and conceded, we can consider his later so-called novels as so many storehouses filled with priceless treasure. ...

[Jefferies] had a brain which would hold millions of facts, each consigned to its proper place; but he had little or no humour; he had no power of creating situation and incident; and he could never possibly get outside himself and away from his own people...

You can find these ideas repeated, uncritically, down the years by one writer on Jefferies after another; even some of the most ardent Jefferies enthusiasts subscribe to the idea that he was not a novelist and, what's worse to my way of thinking, that he had no sense of humour. Like those made by politicians. such formula statements, achieve the status of absolute truth just by being repeated over and over again.

I want to state categorically that I regard the four novels that are the subject of this address as possessing an extra-ordinary power and what I hope to do is to go some way towards proving that, by looking clearly at what goes on in the novels, Jefferies was stepping into the world of the Modern Novel before it had ever been defined as such; that his novel-writing method is consciously in line with what very modern literary theorists have to say about the role of the reader.

I could, of course, be accused of being blinkered: a Jefferies devotee mistakenly arguing that everything he wrote was perfect. In fact I suppose I have to agree with John Fowles, whose novels have, I think, to be constructed by the reader in the same way as Jefferies' novels do, when he says that '...Nothing, beyond blindness, can make of Jefferies a nature-writer of less than genius; and nothing, beyond an excess of sympathy, can make him a great novelist...'

I think that I am a fairly critical reader of novels, pretty sure about my responses to them and I'd accept that Jefferies is not a 'great' novelist, whatever that means... But I have to ask myself how it is that, after repeated readings over thirty years, *After London* and *Amaryllis at the Fair*, , still have the power to move and fascinate me. And it is not just the 'splendid landscapes' that make this happen—it is precisely the 'thread of human interest' that brings me back to them.

In general I am not in the habit of re-reading many novels—too many still to read & not enough time left—but these I anticipate re-reading with excitement. They are always on my reading list! *Dewy Morn* and *Greene Ferne Farm* I have also read and re-read in the last five years—they too are now (having for many years been merely evocative names) on my regular reading list.

A chance conversation in which I find myself trying to explain the delights of Jefferies, a sudden desire to renew the first feeling of amazement at Part 1 of *After London*, that such a thing could actually have been written (that was my first ever response to a Jefferies novel), a sudden feeling that I should like once again to go into the garden with Amaryllis to look at the first daffodil or feel with her the sensation as ‘...the strong gale filled her throat as if a hand had been thrust down it; the wind got its edge like a knife under her eyelids, between them and the eyeballs and seemed as if it would scoop them out...’ and then renew acquaintance with her father—such things prompt endless re-readings.

During the Summer of 1988, I re-read after many years Hilaire Belloc’s *Cruise of the Nona* and came across the following which I had previously either not read properly or had just not focused on:-

To our own modern world there must come either some vast religious reaction, or some vast religious novelty, or both. It is inevitable; for men live by religion. Yet no one speaking of the future takes it for one moment into account. I know of but one book, a book of singular genius, in which the thing appears, though tentatively; and that is in Richard Jefferies’ fine vision called After London. But even Jefferies did not make of it the main source of change. In his day men had already begun to lose the significance of religion in human affairs.

I was on a train journey at the time I read this and could not therefore reach for my tattered Everyman edition to begin immediately the re-reading that Belloc’s paragraph prompted.

I prefer Belloc’s ecstatic response to *After London* to the waste of time and energy trying to classify it as novel or not. It is the personal response to literature—the words on the page—that is important rather than the arid judgements about whether Jefferies was a novelist or not.

After all, what is a novel?

If we turn to EM Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel* a novel is defined there quite simply as ‘a fiction in prose of a certain extent...’ What comes into the category ‘novel’ is, as Forster points out, ‘a formidable mass’ which ‘no intelligent remark known to me will define... as a whole...’

Since it is such a simple thing, Forster rather grudgingly accepts that a novel should tell some kind of story—one thing happening after another. In spite of what Besant says, nobody can deny that Jefferies makes one thing happen after another.

Jefferies is a novelist because he wrote what can be put into the category ‘novel’. Looking at the quality of his novels, it seems to me to be possible to conclude that he is a novelist whose method includes the juxtaposition of elements which causes the reader to have to work quite

hard to identify the irony that spills out of his pages; his humour, in spite of Besant, is in an ironical awareness of the existential absurdity of human life. Just look for a moment at the love affairs in *Greene Ferne Farm*: the relationship of the masters and their loved ones are paralleled, as in *As You Like It* or in Hardy's novels, by that of 'Tummas' and 'Rause', here stimulated to passion by the marriage feast of Margaret and Geoffrey, May and Felix :-

The bats had now left the tiles of the barn and were wheeling to and fro. But the band blew and fiddled, well refreshed by Augustus's can, and the dancers whirled about yet more fast and furious. Sly couples, however, occasionally slipped aside to do a little courting. Tummas and Rause, after slowly sauntering up the hedgerow, came to a gateway, and, looking through, beheld the broad round face of the full moon placidly shining.

"Aw, thur be the moon, you; a' be as big as a waggon wheel," said Tummas, putting his arm as far round her plump waist as it would go.

"Let I bide," said Rause.

"I wooll kiss ee," said Tummas sturdily.

"Thee shatn't."

There was some struggling, but Tummas succeeded with less difficulty than he expected. The damsel was relenting under the influence of long and faithful attentions. Tummas like a wise man hit while the iron was hot and pressed for publication of the banns.

"Aw," said Rause. at last, with a finished air of languid weariness, as if quite worn out with importunity that could not have been much improved on in the drawing-room, "aw, s'pose us med as well, you. If thee woot do't, I can't help it, can 'ee?"

Notice the arch tone of voice that Jefferies uses to comment on and contrast with the language of Thomas and Rose.

The novels do perhaps just peter out in a way that would upset anybody who required a spurious, artificial order which does not in fact replicate the way in which events in 'real life' simply die away. As though answering the criticism about the lack of rounded plots, Jefferies shows his consciousness of what he is at:-

... Incomplete tales? All the [previous] aim has been to give complete [novels] with complete plot. Dramatic in fact. Nothing of the kind ever happens. Just the reverse, incomplete, non-dramatic. A True History of Life has no wind up and nothing finished or complete... (Notebooks: Looker p113)

The end of *After London* seems to many to be an inadequate rounding off—what does Felix go back to after he has set out across the trackless waste? I'd set against this both what amounts to Jefferies' defence of himself and Forster's comment that novelists '...give us the feeling that

though the character has not been [fully] explained, it is explicable and we get from this a reality of a kind we can never get in daily life...'

That not all is explained in *After London* serves to emphasise the idea that setting out across a trackless waste is a symbol for the religious grasp of life that Belloc identifies: merely to set off in search of paradise or God or whatever serves for one's 'religious' goal can be said already to be a finding of it.

Modern literary criticism is based upon the idea that the writer needs the imagination of the reader. As long ago as 1947, Sartre described the role of the reader as a 'revealer' of meanings; a reader willing to adopt this role finds the unfinished text infinitely more interesting than the polished one in which everything is sown up neatly—nothing left to the imagination of the reader.

Just listen to Laurence Sterne in 'Tristram Shandy' (1760):-

... no author. ... would presume to think all: the truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding is to halve this matter amicably and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. I...do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own...

There is a passage in *The Dewy Morn*, quoted later on, which shows that this was exactly the approach Jefferies wanted to adopt as novelist.

Another reason for differences of opinion about *After London* is suggested by Forster's comment on fantasy in novel-writing:-

...The general tone of novels is so literal that when the fantastic is introduced it produces a special effect: some readers are thrilled, others choked off; it demands an additional adjustment because of the oddness of its method or subject-matter—like a sideshow in an exhibition where you pay sixpence as well as the original entrance fee. Some readers pay with delight, it is only for the sideshows that they entered the exhibition... Others refuse with indignation. ... a disinclination to meet certain demands that are made on [the imagination]...

Oddity of method is typical of Jefferies' novels; they demand that the reader fully engage with the text in an imaginative encounter with the pattern of the novel so that in the end the characters are seen, as Forster writes of another novel, as having 'bound the scattered incidents together with a thread woven out of their own substance'.

In any case, as Forster points out, the novelist '...has the right to invent, and we know when he is inventing truly, because his passion floats us over improbabilities...'

This is precisely what I believe Jefferies does: ‘...his passion floats us over improbabilities...’ His passion is in the text itself.

To conclude this rather lengthy pre-amble, for me to read a novel is to recreate a novelist’s pattern-making art in terms of my own life, to allow my own view of things to play between the covers with how things seem to be depicted by the author, or rather the author’s words on the page, and then return to ‘real’ life with a vision enriched by the temporary contact with somebody else’s point of view. The novels, in general, which I value as having done this are those I come back to over and over again.

A look at Jefferies’ novels requires us to forget, I think, at least temporarily, that Jefferies is behind the text; to be very conscious that he is dead twice over—physically and as a ghost behind what’s on the page. We need to look at the form and structure of the novels, to see how they actually work, the way everything relates together in them. For instance, deliberately forgetting for the moment what we know about Jefferies, the man, how do we articulate for ourselves what can be described as the heavy-handed authorial interventions in *Amaryllis at the Fair*? I shall come back to this.

After London

The first part of *After London* is just about the most memorable opening to a novel that I know: a vivid description of a world after some great catastrophe has hit it. As we read it we are transported into the future and the effect is so telling that we became, like the writer, able to live with the mystery of the cause of the catastrophe and speculate about it.

It appears that 140 years before the writing of Part 1 there were ‘...wars and hatreds which sprang up and divided the people, so that one would not listen to what the others wished to say and the truth was lost...’

Jefferies aims at creating a piece of writing that has the status of a ‘true history’.

There are ‘various traditions’ about what caused the ‘changes’. An all-embracing theory has been written by one Silvester in *The Unknown Orb* which is rejected as ‘colouring’. However, if the theory were true, the effect of the ‘enormous dark body’ passing through space would in itself explain the changes in sea levels, the silting up of rivers and ports, food shortages and conflagrations which consumed the towns—a train of events which would lead to social unrest from which ‘the richer and upper classes made use of their money to escape’. How true all this sounds from the vantage point of the Nuclear Weapon Century!

The theologians 'have pointed out that the wickedness of those times surpassed understanding and that a change and a sweeping away of the human evil that had accumulated was necessary'—the future equivalent of the Biblical Flood.

However there are still mysteries which intrigue the writer: nothing has been heard of the 'vast multitudes that left the country'; in a passage of sustained energetic verbal destruction it is described how the secrets of the 'iron chariots' and the 'magic wires of intelligence' have been lost since 'the cunning artificers of the cities' had departed.

Various writers, Edward Thomas included, have written as though there could be some cause for regret that after the destruction of a civilisation Jefferies could not have designed a Utopia more all-encompassing than a castle by a lake for Aurora. Personally, I have always had a sneaking feeling that if everything could be swept away (and I include the word processor I am writing this on) humanity might be able to start again to make a different fist of things. Jefferies' Utopia is an image of the mind based on the archetype of '...a beautiful expanse of water... clear as crystal, exquisite to drink, abounding with fishes of every kind and adorned with green islands. There is nothing more lovely in the world than when upon a calm evening the sun goes down across the level and gleaming water... '

As an archetype, maybe the crystal water represents the clarity of life constantly renewing itself at its origin; the fishes represent the treasures of the creative intelligence; the green islands are the achievable aspects of the creative life force.

At the beginning of Part 2 of *After London*, Felix is discovered asleep although it is clear that he had been writing late into the night. '...On the recess of the window was an inkstand, which had been recently in use, for a quill lay beside it, and a sheet of parchment partly covered with writing...'

Although the parchment is later said to be covered with rough sketches for a boat, I like to think that Felix has been burning the midnight oil writing the amazing torrent of words that forms Part 1; he is exhausted after a piece of writing that has all the appearance of having been poured out on to the page in a sustained effort to write a 'history' of the last 140 years based on his own annotations of old manuscripts and the speculations of the contemporary theorist, Silvester.

It explains the speculative tone of the opening; it accounts for the writer's assumption that the reader is 'in the know'; a contemporary writer putting things down in order for himself would not need to explain so much—this is why we feel deprived of temporal/spatial clues, feel an acute sense of loss as well as the writer's sense of excitement.

Jefferies' prose structure at the beginning of Part 1 is noteworthy; it works in two ways simultaneously: read as Felix' research it is very matter of fact; read as 'story' it works as a sort of litany:-

...after London ended...
...in the autumn. . .
...as winter came on...
...next summer...
...by the second year...
...year by year...
...in the course of about twenty years...
...by the thirtieth year...

Jefferies contrived to write a very 'modern' novel—the sort which makes the reader work hard to establish connections.

In the world of *After London* learning and writing are despised ; books are used '...by the servants for greater convenience in lighting the fires...'; Felix is ridiculed by his peers for poring over old books: in consequence he feels he must do his studying in secret.

By the end of Part 1 we know that we are going to be in the company of a character who demonstrates independence and pride of spirit and is contemptuous of those who engage in what might be considered to be the more 'manly' pursuits of 'the chase, ...love intrigues and war'. Except for his bow and arrow, at which, as we learn later, he is a dab hand, Felix' weapons are stacked in a corner gathering dust and there is a large bowl of flowers on his table.

We are left wondering how this quasi-historical sketch will be applied to the story that we now eagerly anticipate. During Part 1 we are haunted by the idea that people still exist in this new world. How will they live? How will the writer, whose sensitivity to nature is clear, who is aware of hypocrisy, history, the forces of social change and who values learning in a world distracted by other concerns, fare in a world over-run by 'gipsies', Bushmen and pirates? How will he avoid falling foul of 'laws framed for the object of reducing the greater number of the people to servitude'?

The Outsider

Felix, 25 years old, is '...already down in two lists, the one at the palace, of persons whose views, if not treasonable, were doubtful, and the other, in the hands of a possible pretender, as a discontented and therefore useful man... '

He is oblivious of this; he 'supposed himself simply despised and ignored'. It satisfies some masochistic drive in him to believe that Aurora has rejected him and he quits the party at her place where

He was among the crowd, he was in the castle itself, he sat at the table with the most honoured visitors yet he was distinct from all. There was no sympathy between them and him. The games, the dancing, the feasting and laughter, the ceaseless singing and shouting, and jovial jostling, jarred upon him...

Felix/Jefferies is an outsider as is Aurora who, going some way towards the religious affirmation that Belloc identified in the novel, has reverted to a fundamentally Christian sense of values, believing in '...the duty of humanity to all, the duty of saving and protecting life, of kindness and gentleness... a living protest against the lawlessness and brutality of the time...' Doubtless Aurora was on the same blacklist as Felix...

... in the evening we walk by the beach, and from the rising grounds look over the waters as if to gaze upon their loveliness were reward to us for the labour of the day...

Who is the 'we' here? The writer and who else? Felix and Aurora? Whoever the characters suggested by the pronoun, the writer is implying that there is not much else to be desired from life—detachment & realisation of selfhood.

Felix presumably learned his feeling for detachment through nature from his father, Sir Constans, 'famous for his gardens', unconcerned about advancement at court and therefore, like Farmer Iden, responsible for his wife's disappointment with life.

How Jefferies' characters regard the culture of a garden is a key factor in their definition.

The Voyage

Having started on his voyage, Felix felt blessedly alone: '...He had parted from the shore and from all the old associations... out into the unknown future...'

So Felix cuts loose, starts over again—what would it be like if we could all start over again? We are, each one of us, always 'on the balance' between what we have been and what we could be, capable of making choices that would change the whole of our lives.

Sitting to eat at the table of a 'slave' in Aisi [Basingstoke?] to eat

...he felt it an important moment; he felt that he was himself, as it were, on the balance; should he adhere to the ancient prejudice, the ancient exclusiveness of his class or should he boldly follow the dictate of his mind? He chose the latter and extended his hand to the servant as he rose to say goodbye...

Chapters 23 and 24 are remarkable for their images of destruction and desolation that we are familiar with from 1st World War newsreels, natural disasters, Hiroshima, Dresden, Vietnam, [Iraq].

Against the background of the setting sun like a 'vast upheaved billow of glowing blood surging on the horizon' Felix crosses a desolate 'iron land' radiating heat and comes across the Hiroshima-type image of a skeleton drawn on the ground as though with a broad piece of chalk. Gas clouds 'floated beside him like the vague monster of a dream' until he realised that the 'deserted and utterly extinct City of London was under his feet'. At what depth? I think we know precisely! It may be gauged from the description of the 'giant' buried up to its chest in hardened sediment—surely this is Nelson and Felix is walking in a nightmare thus far above 'The Lions in Trafalgar Square'.

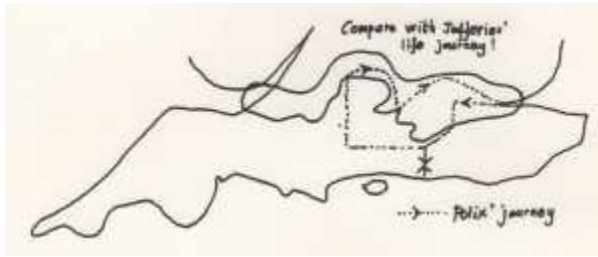
While I was putting together notes for this talk a boat containing dangerous chemical waste was being refused entry at ports all round the world. Jefferies continues his description of submerged London:-

There were said to be places where the earth was on fire and belched forth sulphurous fumes supposed to be from the combustion of the enormous stoves of strange and unknown chemicals collected by the wonderful people of those times...

Felix' escape from the marsh was 'like waking in paradise'. After such horror as he had experienced

...the song of the thrush, the chatter of the whitethroats, the sight of a hedge-sparrow, gave him inexpressible pleasure. Lying on the sward, he watched the curves traced by the swallows in the sky. From the sedges came the curious cry of the moorhen; a bright kingfisher went by...

In the first chapter of *A Wiltshire Village*, Alfred Williams describes the valley of the White Horse as it would have been when it was an inland sea. Jefferies' fictional prestidigitation returns the valley to how it was in pre-history. This is how Felix' journey on the lake stretching from the Bristol Channel to the Thames might have been:-



After London is an allegory about human rejuvenation: we are transported from the world as we know it in Part 1; 'normal' life is suspended; the world after the disaster is a kind of Limbo—Felix is waiting listlessly as an outsider for fresh inspiration; then, his superior intelligence going without recognition at Aisi, he makes a journey into Hell—as a result of his experiences there he becomes physically 'like a child' (precondition for entering the Kingdom of Heaven!) Enlightenment comes when he escapes from Hell and becomes recognised as a leader for what he is good at—to set out to become a Leader is a false ambition whereas to be acknowledged as leader for some special prowess is natural; paradise is what he sets off back to Aurora for..

Amaryllis at the Fair

To move from *After London* to *Amaryllis at the Fair* as one does if one reads them one after the other in the Everyman Edition is to experience two quite different universes. Yet the common factor—Jefferies' mind—works with the same kind of images.

Amaryllis has a constantly recurring (and therefore highly significant) dream that their house is on fire:-

... Somehow there seemed to be an alarm in the night, and they ran out of doors and found the corner of the roof on fire, over the window with the wire network instead of glass. It ran up from the corner towards the chimney, where the roof was mossy by the ridge. There was no flame but a deep red seething heat, as if the straw burned inwardly, and was glowing like molten metal. Each straw seemed to lie in the furious heat, and a light to flicker up and down, as if it breathed fire... In the midst of her anxiety Iden came with the largest ladder in the rickyard, and mounted up, carrying a bucket of water. She tried to follow, holding on to the rungs of the ladder with one hand and dragging up a heavy bucket with the other...

The fire is an inner fire as with the hidden fires in the marsh in *After London* or the opal sun in *Bevis*. Amaryllis' interpretation is that it is unlikely to be about the house really catching fire—more to do with the all-consuming fire of debt, poverty and misfortune which she felt might burn them conceptually to the ground. Another possible interpretation, working subconsciously maybe for Jefferies, is that the inwardly burning fire—the fire that doesn't burn—is Amaryllis' own dynamism, the fire of creativity, which is thwarted by circumstances and kept hidden; a furious

heat which she gets from her father and which threatens to overwhelm them both; she and Iden strive to control it in themselves.

In his life, Iden's method of control is through a thorough self-discipline :-

...Organisation was the chief characteristic of his mind—his very dinner was organised and well-planned, and any break or disturbance was not so much an annoyance in itself as destructive of a clever design, like a stick thrust through the web of a geometrical spider...

In reality, Amaryllis' way of controlling her pent up sense of injustice is to retire to the room at the top of the house which is

...her study, her thinking room, her private chapel and praying-room, her one place of solitude, silence and retirement... Cell-like it was, in its monastic or conventual bareness. It was vague with bareness: a huge square room, gaunt as a barn, the walls and ceiling whitewashed, the floor plain boards. [The few] bits of rude furniture were lost in the vastness of space, as much as if you had thrown your hat into the sky...

Amaryllis went straight to the window and knelt down. She brought a handful of violets, fresh-gathered, to place in the glass which she kept there for her flowers.. . White wild violets, a dewdrop as it were of flower, tender and delicate, growing by the great hawthorn hedge, by the mosses and among the dry, brown leaves of last year, easily overlooked unless you know exactly where to go for them. ..

This is where Amaryllis goes for serenity of mind: the bareness and whiteness of the room works as an image of clarity and withdrawal, wholeness of self, similar in effect to that which the crystal clear lake has on Felix.

Outside the security of Amaryllis' room there is debt and uncertainty. Notice one of Jefferies' striking, sudden, surrealistic images at this point; gauge the shock it produces in the mind:-

The hoarse baying of the hungry wolves around the house had shaken the pencil from her fingers—Siberian wolves they were, racing over the arid deserts of debt, large and sharp-toothed, ever-increasing in number and ferocity, ready to tear the very door down. There are no wolves like those debt sends against a house... Every knock at the door, every strange footstep up the approach, every letter that came, was like the gnawing and gnashing of savage teeth...

Nothing sums up better the strife—working against his sense of order—that has grown down the years between Iden and his wife—resulting from his lack of worldly ambition—than the following economical image:-

...That part of the garden was called Plum Corner because of a famous plum tree—the one that had not been pruned and was sprawling about the wall... Mr Iden had planted that plum-tree specially for Mrs Iden, because she was so fond of a ripe, luscious plum. But of late he had not pruned it...

Once he had done things to please her, now there is nothing but enmity between them.

And Amaryllis takes after her father: she '...had no ambition whatever for name or fame; to be silent in the sunshine was enough for her...'

The form of Iden's garden, source of irreconcilable difference between him and his father because he grew flowers in it, serves as a symbol of perfection for Amaryllis and her father and there was a 'magic power of healing in the influences of this place which Iden had created'. Its effect is clear on Amadis and Alere Flamma.

One side of the summer house was a thick holly bush, Iden had set it there; he builded the summer-house and set the ivy; and the pippin at the back, whose bloom was white; the copper birch nearby; the great sycamore alone had been there before him, but he set a seat under it, and got woodbine to flower there; the drooping ash he planted, and if Amaryllis stood under it when the tree was in full leaf you could not see her, it made so complete an arbour; the Spanish oak in the corner; the box hedge along the ha-ha parapet; the red currants against the red wall; the big peony yonder; the damsons and pear; the yellow honey bush; all these, and this was but one square, one mosaic of the garden...

A place to eat and drink, and think of nothing in, listening to the goldfinches, and watching them carrying up the moss and lichen and slender fibres for their nest in the apple; listening to the swallows as they twittered past... to the vehement starlings whistling and screeching like Mrs Iden herself...

All this, summer-house and all, had dropped out of the pocket of Iden's ragged old coat...

Iden's garden, full of life and growing things, is to be compared with the barren, high-walled garden of the rich high-class Tories, the Pamments, whom Grandfather Iden so pathetically reveres, liaison with whom would solve all her father's monetary problems:-

... they came to the smooth lawn before the front windows; three centuries of mowing had made it as smooth as the top of [Grandfather Iden's] own head where the years had mown away merrily... There was not so much as a shrub—not a daisy—between them and the great windows of the house...

Grandfather Iden is permitted the key of this garden and looked upon the privilege as though he possessed 'the key of Paradise'... False paradise compared with Iden's.

The very images of the two gardens tells us what kind of life Amaryllis will choose.

The novel is said to fail at the point where it collapses into authorial comment. Does it matter? Jefferies credits us with the imagination to engage with the text as it stands: what comes over to us is a set of words in which the author engages us in an analysis of what we can assume to be Amaryllis' point of view: 'the rich, living in the fool's paradise of money, think they know life, but they do not...' Why shouldn't a novelist collapse his fictional dream into the dream of so-called reality?

'Modern' novels deliberately set out to engage the reader with direct addresses as though from the 'author'. Just read Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*...

In the last fifty pages or so of *Amaryllis* we are challenged to make connections between George's healthy eating habits—'a dish for a king'—Amadis sitting at the dinner-table 'like a ghost', the idea that 'only those who have shared the struggle literally for bread—for a real actual loaf—understand the dread realities of man's existence', Alere Flamma's benevolent feelings towards the urchins looking at the 'baked potatoes and the roasted chestnuts... on the street stove', Goliath Ale as a cure and then, like a bolt out of the blue, 'I have tried the effects of forty prescriptions upon My Person ... I am still very ill' which might as well be Amadis talking as Jefferies addressing us directly for then we get Amaryllis caring for Amadis:-

"You must drink it all—every drop," said Amaryllis masterfully, as Amadis lingered over the glass of milk she had brought him. He had but half-finished it; she insisted, "Come, drink it all." Amadis made an effort and obeyed.

What seems like heavy-handed authorial intervention in the 'story' actually enables us to construct a complex pattern of attitudes to sickness and health in a context of social and personal relationships.

Jefferies doesn't care about his characters? Does he not credit us with the imagination to live in their boots and feel intimately for them? Ah well...

The Dewy Morn

In a way a novel becomes more interesting when the writer *does* intervene to reveal the process of his/her thinking. In *The Dewy Morn*, Jefferies reveals the contrasts between the 'organic' characters and the barren ones with a straight authorial question:-

Is it best to have a strong imagination, or to be entirely without it?

An imaginative mind creates for itself a beautiful world; but upon entering into practical life, at every step, first one and then another portion of the structure is shattered till the entire fabric falls to pieces. Dust under foot and bitterness to the taste are all that remain; a void heart, a hopeless future, a weary present. The commonplace crushes the ideal as a cannon-ball might a statue...

Robert Godwin had never any difficulty in choosing between these two courses—the imaginative and the practical—because he had not even imagination enough to see that there were two courses...

Robert Godwin never walked by the sea nor gathered a flower...

Felise is set in clear contrast to Robert Godwin. The novel works by these clear oppositions; they set up the impossibility of two such people ever making sense to one another; readers have to make this idea clear to themselves. It is not, of course, that difficult but what it does do is to reflect back into life: this is how people are—separate, existing in separate chapters, never able to communicate in any kind of real way, unable to bridge what Jefferies calls a ‘vacancy’— ‘the lack of anything to lay hold of...

In the light of this Jefferies provides us with a very important key to his method of writing a novel. As compared with the playwright, he says:-

The unfortunate narrator has... to explain every little circumstance, or else it would appear that he was violating probability. He has to show you the why and wherefore and to tell you how certain people got into certain positions at a certain time. My arm and hand often ache with the labour of writing just to explain the simplest set of circumstances which upon the stage would not have been thought of. They would be taken for granted..., Could you not let me write my scenes one after the other, and supply the connecting links for me out of your own imagination, as you do on the stage?

A very modern idea as far as novel-writing is concerned! The direct address from the ‘author’, a challenge to readers to construct things for themselves in whatever way they choose.

So in contrast to Godwin Felise ‘...thought of nothing but the sun and wind, the flowers and the running stream. She listened to the wind in the trees and began herself to sing...’

Chapter 22 is one long glorious catalogue of ‘the woven embroidery of the earth’ threaded into her being:-

She knew...

The place where the stream ran at the foot of a cliff...

The time when the fields were fullest of flowers...

The sound of the wind in the oaks and in the pines...

The light of the sun shining on the green sward...

Storms darkening the face of heaven...

The blackness of frost...

The first swallow...

The stars rising, constellation by constellation, as the year went on.

Paragraph after paragraph without a main verb all related back to the original simple statement 'she knew'. Jefferies weaves the fabric of the world into the character, the writing and us by the simple, innocent device of cataloguing direct experience. All this had been translated for her by Goring whose:-

...gardening and planting was in reality only a manner of self-employment, so that he might be ever under the sun by day, under the stars in the evening, that he might be out-of-doors face to face with the wonders of the earth and sky...

It is no wonder to us that Godwin's passion for Felise should be barren, impossible to fulfil: he had no imagination which I take to be the power to enter into the spirit of things and other people much as Jefferies has allowed us, imaginatively, to enter into the spirit of Felise. Godwin was concentrated upon one fixed idea: he 'saw nothing but mounds of chalk and pieces of timber where there were woods and hills'. For him Felise is an object of desire and possession: mere flesh where there is mystery and vivid living—to which Jefferies admits us with a sustained dramatic irony.

Godwin's garden is an image of decay:-

...The apples had ceased to bear, and the plums, as the felt slips rotted from the nails, drooped forward from the wall, destroyed themselves with their own weight... The caterpillar had worked its fell intent, and the leaves remaining were shrivelled and brown... Mosses grew along the coping of the wall and marked with green lines the mortar between the stones...

And in this inauspicious context Felise and Martial meet and talk, 'not of what was in their thoughts, but making up little speeches addressed to the audience, as it were...' A living relationship within a dead scene.

In the following chapter Jefferies takes us straight into their thoughts:-

How well he talks—what ideas he has... his lips are well-shaped—I should like a kiss...

How fortunate I exhausted all my romance before I met her! There is no knowing to what lengths I should have gone... These are very common old Windsor chairs... What a lovely shoulder she has beneath that dress—I shall never forget it...

And so on. Brilliantly dramatic. Stream of consciousness. Ironical. Leaving us to feel for the pair of them...

And poor Cornleigh, the apparent tyrant, stage managed, like Shakespeare's Coriolanus, by his wife, living in a mansion whose privacy was now complete, 'absolutely isolated and guarded by lodge-keepers in every direction', shut in by high walls—all the poor chap really wanted was to be left alone to smoke his cigar in the lane:-

Whenever an important division was at hand, the Squire ran up to town, patiently sat out the debate, recorded his vote on the right side, and came down home again to his morning cigar in the lane... His morning cigar in the lane under the oak was Cornleigh's real life...

Is Jefferies really so devoid of humour? Here the humour takes the form of a marvellous irony. And there's a black humour, too, with Martial stuck in the mill-pond sump trying to reason with the miller to go for help when the latter has already decided that 'Martial's death by drowning was a foregone conclusion'...

Martial at last comes really alive in Chapter 49 where Jefferies has him make a speech that goes from faltering uncertainty to a completely confident flow demonstrating total command of himself and his audience.

Martial is certainly not a nonentity as some commentators suggest: when he makes his speech he expresses what the reader feels as a result of the depicted unfairness of Godwin and the situation of Old Abner. He performs a dramatic purpose. We don't even know for sure what Felise feels about the speech; she doesn't express herself nor does Jefferies bother us with the telling—we just know the fittingness of the speech and the certainty, because of what we also know of Felise, of what her reaction will be—"My hero!" We also know for sure that Cornleigh, desiring only to smoke his cigar in the lane, will be moved at last to throw off the influence of his wife...

The Dewy Morn is full of marvellous images that linger in the mind and make you want to re-read the whole whenever you dip into it. There is a sense in which it is a novel that can be read backwards and forwards or starting from the middle and radiating out in all directions. It exists in

the mind as a complex network which all its elements work together to achieve; readers are encouraged to make their own thread.

In any case... 'The final test of a novel will be our affection for it, as it is the test of our friends...'
(EM Forster)

Greene Ferne Farm

What can one feel for *Greene Ferne Farm* but affection?

Jabez the shepherd sang like a giant refreshed with wine and got through four verses magnificently. But in the triumph of the moment he forgot the clerk's warning not to 'zeng too fast'. The verse finished with the word 'Jacob'; Jabez unfortunately got a little in advance of the time and, desperately struggling to lengthen it out, an ale-house chorus slipped from his tongue: 'Ja-aa-fol-de-rol-cob!'

Against the vivid and humorous background of the villagers there comes as a dead chorus the descriptions of Old Andrew Fisher sitting at the window of his great house gradually dying with a heart as hard as his nether millstone.

High up in the cloudless azure, the swift, extending his wings like a black crescent, slid to and fro; the swallows, mere white specks in the dizzy blue, wheeled in ceaseless circles.

For ninety seasons, as man and boy ... had Andrew looked from that window. There he played in his childhood; there he rested from his labours in the time of manhood; there he sat in his old age. The deep gashes he had made with his first boy's clasp-knife still showed in the edge of the oaken window-seat...

Ninety times the snowdrop had hung her white flower under the sheltering wall. For ninety springs the corncrake's monotonous cry had resounded in the mowing grass. The cuckoo came and went...

Ninety times; and the scythe was busy in the grass, and the corn would soon turn colour yet once more.

Peggy was dead too... who had reaped and gleaned and garnered her master's evil passion among the convolvulous and poppy. Sweet Peggy, cast aside like the threshed out straw... (Chapter 3)

Behind the simple events of the novel, the pageant of people going about their tasks there lurks the meanness of Andrew Fisher.

Was he wiser, happier now in the fullness of his days than when, with peeled white willow wand, a thread and crooked pin. he angled in the bend of the brook where the eddy scooped out a deeper hollow?

His sight is dull and sinews stiff; never again will Andrew Fisher mark a covey down as they skim across the uplands...

The blue-stained sunbeam moved onwards, the sun declined, and the wearyful women came homeward from the gleaning and the labour of the field. Their path passed close beneath the great window and their stooping shadows for a moment shut out the sunshine...

They trooped past the window and saw the old man sitting in his chair; and one said to another, "Thur be thuck ould varmint! He never done nought all his time and have got more vittels than a1 can yeat..."

"Wonder how long it wull be to the Judgement Day?"

So they went by the window and each as she passed dropped a lowly curtsy to the 'Measter' in the beehive chair. Then at last the great blood-red rim of the sun went down and a wondrous glory of light rushed over the earth. A fiery blaze surged up into the sky, shooting from the west to the zenith, and thence to the east in the twinkling of an eye... Men stayed and looked up, amazed at the beauty and the awe of it; for the world was changed as if it were on fire and the flames like a flood sweeping up from the western edge. Into the chamber came the reflection—as of the last conflagration that we dare not think of when the sky shall roll away as parchment—and the place was filled with a luminous glamour. Listen! faintly up from the silence of the ages comes the chaunt of the monks: Dies irae, dies illa....

Away down in the vale and yonder over the everlasting hills flowed the wonder of the light; but the old man's face gave no sign, dazed maybe by the grandeur of it.

So, Andrew Fisher is already dead. The labouring women are curtsying in grim irony to a dead man.

The Everlasting Hills

What is it that can transcend the meanness and machinations of the rich, the ruling classes, the Power Possessors, King, Pope & President, the Parament's, the Cornleigh's, the Fisher's?

Jefferies' implied answer is—the everlasting hills and the processions of ordinary people down the ages.