RESTLESS HUMAN HEARTS
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by
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Richard Jefferies began work on *Restless Human Hearts* in the spring of 1874, immediately or soon after completing *The Scarlet Shawl.* Doubtless his aim was to keep to the programme of publishing two novels a year which he had adumbrated to William Tinsley in February. The new novel was finished between July and the autumn. It is not clear whether Jefferies contributed to the cost of publication. Walter Besant quotes a letter which reveals that since the *Reporting; Editing & Authorship* manual of 1873 Jefferies had had second thoughts about the advisability of the neophyte publishing at his own expense. From the letter it appears that Tinsley did ask Jefferies to contribute, not surprisingly given the failure of *The Scarlet Shawl* and the appreciably higher cost of producing a novel in three volumes; but that, initially at least, Jefferies baulked at paying him more for the privilege of having his fiction published. Jefferies' reluctance is understandable: he had not only lost the £60 he (or his aunt) paid towards *The Scarlet Shawl* but failed to make his name, the point of the exercise. Besant gives neither date nor addressee but the letter must refer to *Restless Human Hearts.* In it Jefferies makes plain his position:

> This is about the worst speculation into which I could possibly put the money. Therefore I am resolved to spend no more upon the matter, whether the novel gets published or not. The magazines pay well, and immediately after publication the cheque is forwarded. It seems the height of absurdity, after receiving a cheque for a magazine article, to go and pay a sum of money just to get your tale in print. I was content to do so the first time, because it is in accordance with the common rule of all trades to pay your footing... I might just as well put the cheque in the fire as print a tale at my own expense.[1]

We do not know whether Tinsley insisted on payment. Certainly, despite his adamant tone, Jefferies was prepared to pay £20 towards the cost of his next novel, *In Summer Time,* which Tinsley turned down and was never published.

Terms, however, must have been agreed for by November Jefferies had received proofs of the first chapter from the printers Robson. There was then a hitch, for on 12 January 1875 Jefferies wrote to Tinsley to complain that two months had elapsed without further proofs and asked for an explanation of 'this very great delay'.

[1] Quoted in Walter Besant, *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1888), pp.158-9.

Jefferies's bibliographers[2] suggest reluctance on Tinsley's part to proceed after the failure of *The Scarlet Shawl* as the likely reason. Or Tinsley may not have intended to send out more proofs, those for the first chapter merely meant to indicate the format and type-face. At all events *Restless Human Hearts* was published in February or early March, only seven months after *The Scarlet Shawl.* Jefferies's first three-decker, it was bound in red cloth, priced 31/6, and like the début novel its print run was probably 500.

Restless Human Hearts was an even greater critical and commercial failure. It was soon remaindered and later in the year offered rebound as a single volume price 7/6. The poor sales reflected not only the mauling the novel received from the reviewers but the grounds on which they based their condemnation. The *Athenæum, Graphic* and *Spectator* all protested against the novel's immorality. The *Athenæum* intimated that Jefferies's animadversion on the 'loathsome scurrility' (120) of contemporary French fiction was a case of the pot calling the kettle black, while the *Graphic* fulminated against 'the really gross immorality of the plot' which rendered the book's publication 'little, if at all, short of an offence against decency,' and opined that 'not a few of his situations are indelicate beyond all allowable limits'. The *Spectator* pursued the theme, saying 'we would gladly pass over the novel in silence' but 'it seems a duty to warn possible readers against what is an offensive and even noxious book'. It advised 'any one to whom the librarians may send this book unordered, as they will sometimes send such books, to keep it safely under lock and key'.

Such reviews would be music to the ears of most modern publishers but in Jefferies's day the shade of Mrs Grundy loomed large and they would have killed the book stone-dead. The circulating libraries such as Mudie's would not have touched a novel reviewed in those terms. Much like their erstwhile rivals W.H. Smith today, Mudie's operated a silent censorship of the titles they ordered and were careful to exclude any they deemed unsuitable.

The reviewers also complained of the many digressions with which Jefferies had 'padded up' the novel to the required dimensions. He had laid himself open to such criticism by a diatribe against the diffuseness of contemporary fiction of which he took Charles Dickens as the exemplar:

> This is the age of verbiage. Everything must be so long and spun out. No matter how clever a novel may be, the publishers will not issue it unless it will extend to six or seven hundred printed pages. The same plot and characters condensed into two hundred and fifty would be interesting, even exciting; but drawn out to this melancholy length, it is simply a bore... The typical writer of our time, Charles Dickens, is the very impersonation of this verbiage and flow of words. (5-6)

[2] George Miller and Hugoe Matthews, *Richard Jefferies: A Bibliographical Study* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1993), p.103.

The *Athenæum* and *Academy* duly pounced and quoted Jefferies's strictures back at him. 'It is simply a bore,' echoed the *Athenæum,* adding 'whether any degree of condensation could have made it interesting we venture to doubt'. The *Graphic* found the novel 'on the whole a very tedious one', while the *Academy* contented itself with some complicated arithmetic to prove to its satisfaction that, on Jefferies's own figures, all but eight out of his 908 pages were trash. The only consoling note came at the end of the *Graphic* review, which conceded that the scene of Carlotta and the cobra was 'original, and drawn with considerable power'.

The hostile reception of *Restless Human Hearts* may not have had the same devastating effect on Jefferies as the slashing *Spectator* review of *Desperate Remedies* on Thomas Hardy, who later in life recalled, 'The bitterness of that moment was never forgotten; at the time he wished he were dead'.[3] But it did temporarily shake Jefferies's confidence in his ability as a novelist. In May he wrote to Oswald Crawfurd, editor of the *New Quarterly,* 'You may possibly have seen that I am a novelist, and I could write you a short tale, but I cannot recommend myself in this department, for I have never received a single favourable notice of a novel of mine'.

One can have some sympathy with the reviewers. Jefferies had deliberately set out to startle his readers' jaded sensibilities (the ennui of the age was a major theme of the novel) by the audacious views presented on Christianity, marriage, education, women's rights, the press, technology, suburbia, ladies' fashions, and sundry topics. He had spiced the narrative with a string of sensational incidents. They included two adulterous elopements; a trial marriage; an illegitimate stillborn baby; a peeress parading in Regent Street dressed as a man and later flaunting her breasts in the face of her maid; an orphanage in France for the abandoned bastards of the English aristocracy; a negligee-clad heroine ablaze in a bedroom in a cheap commercial hotel; a murder, an attempted suicide, a duel, and several brawls; and a secret society of would-be Nietzschean supermen fomenting world revolution and planning to plague London with typhus and cholera by damming the sewers and to kidnap Queen Victoria and hold her to ransom. Jefferies had depicted a villain and villainess dyed in the most lurid stains of the Romantic Agony. Probably he was trying to write a saleable fiction by pushing some of the conventions of the sensational novel to their limit. Perhaps he should have foreseen that such *jusqu'auboutisme* would give offence. Perhaps the novel puts an unsavoury stress on violence and cruelty; perhaps there is a faintly decadent, *fin-de-siècle,* Yellow Book flavour to the scenes involving the jaded Des Esseintes-like peer Lord Fontenoy. But it's difficult to take all the villainy and *fleurs du mal* atmosphere too seriously. There is a strong element of posturing and one suspects Jefferies of writing more or less tongue-in-cheek. In the case of Heloise and Noel's he goes to tedious lengths to stress the propriety of their behaviour. Nothing more untoward happens than a brush of hands and a kiss. The *Spectator* acknowledged the integrity of Jefferies's intentions when it said, 'We do not suppose him to have written a deliberately

[3] Florence Hardy, *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy,* 1840-1891, Macmillan, p111.

immoral story', and admitted that 'he even writes occasionally... as if he had a moral end in view'. This was certainly so but the reviewers preferred to focus on the novel's sensational features rather than its underlying message. That was clearly spelled out in the many highly-charged and poetic passages on nature mysticism, the education of the soul, and human spiritual aspiration in an increasingly artificial and industrialised society, passages often of an exquisite purity like that describing Heloise's raptures on the downs, the wonderful paragraph beginning 'It was a peculiar religion, it is true' (17).

The faults are artistic rather than moral. The reader can understand why Besant decreed that Jefferies was not and never could be a novelist[4]. The characters are usually strikingly presented — Heloise with her undefined but heartfelt longings, her dislike of the cold, dim church, her secluded upbringing in the country under the possessive yet enlightened tutelage of her father, Pierce Lestrange; the father himself, a shy, meditative, Prospero-like recluse whose old manor-house rambles like his mind, a Taoist devoted to the flowers, trees and birds of his garden, high-walled against the tumult of the world without; and Georgiana Knoyle, a tall commanding Athene-like figure, calm and grey-eyed, seen standing on the steps outside the British Museum. They at once engage our interest: they are individuals yet have a touch of the archetypal — the sensitive young woman with something of Psyche, of Goethe's Marguerite, of Emily Brontë, of D.H. Lawrence in her; the wise elder living in harmony with nature and pursuing the Epicurean ideal of *ataraxia* (inner stillness); the feminist intellectual whose name carries echoes of George Sand and George Eliot, a courageous thinker who defies convention and subjects all received opinion to her rationalist microscope. Not just these: Louis, Lord Fontenoy, the Baudelairean connoisseur of evil; Horton Knoyle, the Caesar Borgia of Lombard Street, 'a man of polished steel':

> A light spare form, well proportioned; a handsome face, only expressionless; a low voice, but a voice which you could hear at double the distance of the hissing thick sounds which issue from the great majority of throats; (22)

and the voluptuous Carlotta, a *belle dame sans merci* decked out in the conventional trappings of late romanticism, a *femme fatale,* variously compared to a panther, tigress and boa-constrictor, but drawn with verve and some ironical admiration. Even the minor figures are interesting, from the embittered housekeeper Maud to the Nazarene artists Ella and Claudius.

But the characters do not develop. They are fully realised on their first entrance, their complexity grasped. They lack the vital principle of growth. It is as if Jefferies could depict the mature oak but not the acorn and stages of development between. He can capture essence but cannot show existence. As the late novelist John Fowles

[4] Besant, p.150.

put it[5]: 'Jefferies can always observe adults accurately, and sometimes in great depth; but only what they are, not what they might become'. The characters remain static and because they do not develop, they tend to diminish as the story proceeds. Heloise, who begins so promisingly, soon becomes the conventional heroine of Victorian romance, wan and anaemic, a shadow of her former self, almost totally inert and passive, literally an invalid. Georgiana degenerates into Georgie, and a resemblance to Enid Blyton's tomboy suggests itself. The only character to maintain life is Carlotta and this because she is the only truly active character, who determines events rather than responding to them. Even the virile Noel, the battered Nimrod, is completely unreal. He is written about, not realised, an abstract idea rather than flesh and blood. This is not to say that the characters don't come alive in individual scenes — Heloise's guilt over her elopement; Horton alone in his counting-house and full of wistful regret, feeling the emptiness of a life devoted to the pursuit of money; Georgiana finally bowing to the crushing weight of tradition and history. The portraits have much psychological truth, and the characters sporadically return to life. But in general they remain static and the chief reason for this is that Jefferies cannot show them interacting.

A symptom and cause is the poverty of the dialogue. It is not only that there is little dialogue in the novel, most of which is plain narrative, often of high quality. Jefferies was a master of the *récit* and such passages show his gift for limpid prose at its best. His enviable style, as effortless as grass growing, was part natural gift, part the harvest of his years as reporter and local historian assiduously researching the antiquities of his native Wiltshire. It is the prose of the historian, annalist, chronicler, as much as the novelist. But significantly when he recounts the impassioned debates between Georgiana and Neville on the marriage question, he does it in indirect speech, as if reporting a meeting. We hear the arguments on both sides but we do not catch the inflections of the voices, the silences, the pauses. The couple are heard and seen from a distance, through a transparent medium that renders them abstract and disembodied. They do not engage us emotionally.

What dialogue there is, is wooden and stagey. An example comes in the scene where Jefferies clumsily assembles his cast at Avonbourne for what is meant to be a dramatic confrontation but soon degenerates into farce:

> 'Where is my sister — my sister?' she shrieked. 'Give her back, traitor !'
> 'Ay, traitor!' said Pierce.
> 'Traitor!' said Neville.
> 'Traitor!' said Georgiana,
> 'Where is she — my Heloise — my darling child?' screamed Carlotta, darting up to him, shaking him.
> 'I — I — really — ' began Noel, utterly dumbfounded. 'I am come to bring her — '

[5] John Fowles, introduction to the World's Classics edition of *After London* (Oxford University Press, 1980), p.xiii.

> 'What, tired of her already?' interrupted Louis, who was now on the lawn. 'So soon?'
> 'Blackguard!' said Noel. 'Sir,' addressing Pierce, 'believe me, your daughter is pure as when she left.' (387-8)

Doubtless in such exchanges Jefferies was merely following the conventions of Victorian popular fiction and doing so consciously, with a hint of parody. But it does sound like a scene in a Whitehall farce.

It is tempting to explain the deficiency in character-drawing, the lack of dramatic instinct, the incapacity to invent dialogue that will not only reveal character but forward the action, to explain these signal shortcomings in Jefferies's armoury as a novelist by the author's own introverted and highly individualistic nature, and say that he could only see the world through his own eyes, he could not imaginatively project himself into the mind and feelings of another person. Besant[6] made the point that his characters tend to be reflections of himself or of a part of himself. Thus Heloise's intense sensitivity to natural beauty is obviously Jefferies's, as is Neville's nature mysticism, while Heloise's father is clearly based on Jefferies's own, or at least an idealised version.

The terms of the indictment could be multiplied. The General Shebang conspiracy is childish and implausible, the satire of the chit-chat of the Dukes and Hons at the Royal Academy exhibition feeble. Towards the middle of the second volume, with the entrance of Ella and Claudius, the story starts to tread water, its momentum increasingly slowed by the many digressions. These were lively and interesting enough at first but Jefferies now begins to pontificate, sounding at times an opinionated ass. The book loses structure and unity. It comes to resemble a string of essays rather than a novel. One tires of the authorial voice, assertive, dogmatic, yet reedy and hollow. The writing is breathless and cliché-ridden, that of a novelette or women's magazine story. The book fitfully picks up but there are signs Jefferies found difficulty meeting the demands of the three-decker. One winces at Heloise's emphatic 'dear's and 'sir's in conversation with Noel; growls at the assertion apropos of the Roman poets Catullus and Martial that their 'only beauty' was 'their learned lewdness' (291); wearies of the 'old, old houses' and 'many, many years' and the 'pah!'s, of the device of having a character skulking in the shadows as a curtain-fall to a chapter. Much is made of fate, destiny, the concatenation of circumstances, but it won't wash.

To point out the failings is child's play. Yet for all its faults — the clumsy stage-management, the often risible dialogue, the lack of dramatic interplay — *Restless Human Hearts* does not commit the cardinal sin; it does not fail to live. The novel represents a definite advance upon *The Scarlet Shawl.* It is a more ambitious work and closer in spirit to the mature Jefferies. Nature and nature mysticism, barely touched on in the début, becomes a central theme, explored in depth and opposed to

[6] Besant, p.151.

the decadence of fashionable Mayfair society. Heloise's transports on the downs are described in language almost as pure and eloquent as that of the opening of *The Story of My Heart* and *The Dewy Morn.*

The novel is rich in anticipations of the later works. Heloise's heightened consciousness and the transfiguration of visible world wrought by the alchemy of her love for Noel foreshadow Felise's love for Martial Barnard in *The Dewy Morn,* where love between man and woman, love of nature, and love of life are similarly fused. Noel's near-drowning in the Thames reads like a sketch for the scene of Martial drowning in the mill-pond. *In extremis* both men think of their beloved. While Martial frantically struggles to save himself, the miller looks impassively on ('You be drownded'); Noel's shouts reach the ears of a bargee but he's drunk and does nothing. The conclusion of both novels presents a woman who has found fulfilment in love, while the man's restless heart strives ever onwards. Heloise's poetic passivity — she is exquisitely sensitive yet incapable of expression — will be a trait of Amaryllis. The depiction of her sensitivity:

> whatever living creature, be it plant or flower, animal or insect, on which her eyes rested, her soul seemed to enter into its existence, and she felt with and understood it. This delicate faculty of perception, this exquisitely sensitive organisation, which is the attribute of the true poet, gave her an intense but indescribable delight. It was as if her own enjoyment of the sunlight and the spring were multiplied a hundred fold — as if her own identity were divided into innumerable portions, each an 'I', each basking in the sunshine; (236)

looks forward to a key passage in the autobiography, where the same idea is more succinctly stated:

> I was sensitive to all things, to the earth under, and the star-hollow round about; to the least blade of grass, to the largest oak. They seemed like exterior nerves and veins for the conveyance of feeling to me.[7]

Neville's absorption into nature, the loss of his sense of a separate existence, again anticipate *The Story.* His dream of discovering a limitless continent where a man might travel without ever reaching the other side is elaborated into the fable of the endless Tibetan forest in *Bevis.* The beautiful fir-tree celebrated on p. 234 reappears in *The Story* and in 'Wild Flowers'. The reclusive Pierce Lestrange is a prototype of Felise's uncle in *The Dewy Morn.* His brother Henry's doctrine of the soul, and puzzlement that it should receive no training like the mind and body, reappears in the autobiography. Jefferies's hatred of Gradgrindery, his concern for the education of the heart and soul, which he thought the highest and most

[7] *The Story of My Heart*, [1883] (London: Quartet Books, 1979), p.133.

important of all, and not to be learned from books, his creed of the unconscious teaching of nature and the open air, are expressed in the charming parable of the goose girl (292-4), which anticipates the message of *Bevis,* the oft-quoted passage on the education of children in *The Dewy Morn,* and the Wordsworthian diatribes against the futility of books in *The Story of My Heart* and 'The Pigeons at the British Museum'. The celebration of Greek statuary—Jefferies calls sculptors 'the prophets of the body, the apostles of matter'; his belief in the body's perfectability ('for there shall be a new earth and an incorruptible body', 278), his Hellenic (and Keatsian) equation of the good and the beautiful (*kalon kagathon)* ('while we pursue the beautiful, so long as our souls are wrapped up in the contemplation of loveliness, so long is it impossible for us to commit sin', 279), his faith in the moral power and educational value of art (which allies him with John Ruskin); his hint of the possibility of an *earthly* immortality — all this in Chapter 16 of Volume II looks forward to ideas elaborated in *The Story.*

Restless Human Hearts is notable also for its gallery of women. They reflect different facets of their creator: Heloise the aspiring psyche, Georgiana the adventurous, exploring intellect, her independence of mind reflected in a gait and dress free from 'the fetishes of fashion':

> She walked perfectly upright, as God had designed her to walk, putting her feet firmly down upon the ground, feet unencumbered with narrow and high heels. Her limbs moved freely; hence her walk was striking and stately, as those antique statues would have walked could they have been warmed into life. (36)

and not least the remarkable Carlotta, who imperiously bestrides the book. Jefferies obviously enjoyed painting her. She owes much to Swinburne. She despises Georgie ('that poor eccentric creature with the enormous waist') and shows no interest in Pierce's garden of wild flowers. She is artifice personified. We first meet her disguised as a man, a bejewelled fop in top hat and waistcoat smoking a cigar, swinging a cane, and pausing to admire her reflection in the windows of Regent Street. She and Louis have an incestuous sado-masochistic relationship, with Carlotta in the role of dominatrix. She is the mistress of the grand gesture, spitefully smashing a Sèvres vase with a cut of her cane — the vase on which she has previously deposited her hat. When roused (Jefferies speaks of her 'latent *pantherism'*) she's all flashing eyes, heaving bosom and raking claws. In quieter mood, she interrupts her toilette and indolently reclines half-dressed on her ottoman, provoking the author to ask, 'How is it there has never been written a "vision of evil women" as there was one of "fair women"?' One might reply that the Roman poet Juvenal did just that in his Sixth Satire, as did Swinburne in his 'Masque of Queen Bersabe' with its roll-call of cruel Oriental queens with exotic names. Swinburne would have recognised a kindred spirit in Carlotta's creator. 'There was an indefinable *horror,* as it were, hovering over her, much as there is over the curling folds of a still serpent glowing in colours' (94). Much is made of her magnificent

bust, which she flaunts while bathing in the face of her housekeeper, taunting the older woman 'with the want of such splendid curves'. 'I am white, firm, smooth, full.' Her career in Vienna is a masterpiece of *chutzpah.* She is utterly ruthless and Jefferies holds that it is her sublime selfishness that keeps her from aging. Time 'ripened her as the sunshine ripens a peach'. She is a consummate actress whose *coup de théâtre* comes when she plays the contrite prodigal. 'It was admirable, it would have won plaudits at Drury Lane.' Even the sceptical Georgie can scarce forbear to cheer. Such a splendid creature deserves a fitting comeuppance and Jefferies provides it in the episode with the cobra, a tour de force worthy of Ian Fleming. The novel is worth reading for Carlotta alone, drawn with admirable *éclat*. Heloise by comparison pales into insignificance. If she represents 'the lilies and languors of virtue,' then Carlotta glows with 'the raptures and roses of vice'.

The novel has much biographical value and interest. Jefferies drew on his abortive youthful escapade with cousin Jimmy Cox for Victor and Francis's adventure in France, just as he used memories of his 1870 Brussels holiday for Ella and Claudius's wanderings in that city and visit to the field of Waterloo. Claudius's preferring the beautiful stained glass of an obscure Gloucestershire church to that of St Gudule's Cathedral (275) reflected Jefferies's own taste: he had described the Fairford windows in the last chapter of his history of Swindon and neighbourhood for the *North Wilts Herald.* The nightmarish details of Noel's fever after his fall during the hunt (229-232) are based on those of Jefferies's illness of 1867. Heloise's fancy that she can hear the heart of the world throb slowly far beneath her, as she lies in a hollow on the downs, reappears in the autobiography. Neville reflects the quietism of Jefferies himself, and the whole passage beginning 'What other people called dull'(153f) is a self-portrait drawn with unusual detachment, insight and irony. Neville's day-dreaming and moments of absorption into nature; his sensitivity, solipsism and ivory-tower tendencies; his love of silence and solitude; his obsession with the idea of the Beyond: all were characteristics of Jefferies.

Percival in *The Scarlet Shawl* had fantasies of becoming a new religious teacher of mankind. That Jefferies saw himself as the prophet of a new religion of nature many passages in *Restless Human Hearts* make clear. He is describing himself when he writes

> Persons whose whole being vibrates to the subtle and invisible touch of Nature... are living at this day; and well for the world and society that they do, for they act as air-holes, as breathing places, through the thick crust of artificialism which weighs us down more and more year by year, and they let in a little of the divine light and ether, to purify the air, and vivify the corrupting mass. (3)

Similarly, when apropos of Renan's *Vie de Jésus* he says

> The scenery of Judea — the romantic hills and plains, the seas and woods — heightened an originally poetic temperament, till a tension of the mind was produced in which it became capable of the most extraordinary efforts' (*ibid.*)

behind Jesus and the landscape of Judea we glimpse Jefferies in mystical transport on the Marlborough Downs. If, living in a landlocked county, he was deprived of the sea, he often saw it in mind's eye, its presence suggested by the waves of endlessly rolling hills, and by the hissing of the grass in the wind that whined in the thorn hedges and seethed with oceanic roar as it coursed through the beech clumps. He felt himself to be the 'originally poetic temperament' whose mission was 'to let in a little of the divine light and ether', and the new religion of which he would be the St John was a nature religion designed to supersede Christianity — organised Christianity at least — which he regarded as defunct and incapable of meeting the spiritual needs of the age. His delusions of grandeur were in part compensation for the humility of his situation, which his proud and sensitive character felt with especial keenness; and the phrase 'corrupting mass' has a nasty ring. But as Thomas remarked, Jefferies makes his appeal 'by his sympathies, his creation, not by his antipathies'[8]. And Jefferies was a seer, magus, *illuminatus.* On the downs with the relics of earlier peoples who had worshipped nature in the form of Neolithic mother-goddess or Bronze Age sky-god, on chalk-hills compact of the minute remains of a myriad sea creatures, alone with sun, sky and wind, he experienced moments of *satori* that elevated him to the company of the gods, had a vision 'of a state of existence all and every hour of which should be light and joy and life' (18); and wished to translate that beauty into human life that it might be restored. In Thomas's fine words, 'he unsealed a new fountain of religious joy'[9]. Though the source was nature, it was his constant theme that we didn't need to go into the country to find nature, which was all about us and entered even the great city of London:

> The dead brown leaves, driven by the wind, penetrate even into stony London, and rustle along the pavement and whirl round in eddies at the corners of the street. They are a voice from the woods, an echo from the forgotten land, messengers from Nature, abiding still in her solitudes, warning wilful and blinded men to return ere it be too late. (4)

Yet with Jefferies things are never clear-cut. The nature and artificiality antithesis is not so simple. Jefferies reveals himself again when he says:

> Yet the delight in the artificial is not altogether an acquired taste only. How is it, else, that the freshest and purest heart, beating warmly with the generous blood of youth, longs so eagerly for the feverish excitements of society? (4-5)

[8] Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work* [1909] (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p.297.
[9] Thomas, p.294.

Similarly, when he speaks of the 'sensual spirituality' of a painting of the interior of Antwerp Cathedral in the National Gallery, defined as 'a union of the beauty perceived by the chaste and somewhat sad mind and of the beauty which fascinates the eye', he is describing a characteristic of his own work. When he talks of the 'undefined blue mist' which fills 'the long dim arches of the cathedral' — 'You cannot see this blue mist if you look straight at it, or even if you think of it, or search for it' (7), his words fit the nebulous character of his own spiritual aspirations, those of a highly romantic nature in love with the undefined and ineffable, with what hovers tantalisingly out of reach, a will-o'-the-wisp leading ineluctably on towards 'the great and beautiful thought', as he later put it in 'Meadow Thoughts' which 'quivered in the azure overhead' and which 'could not be fully grasped, but there was a sense and feeling of its presence'. In *The Story* he speaks of 'the rich blue of the unattainable flower of the sky'. In Novalis's novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1800) the eponymous hero sets out on a dream quest for a blue flower of whose existence he has heard from a stranger and the thought of which fills him with yearning. For the German Romantics the Blue Flower came to symbolize the intense yet undefined aspiration (*sehnsucht*) after the infinite which was one of the movement's prime characteristics. Blue was the romantic colour par excellence. In his *Theory of Colour (Farbenlehre,* 1810) Goethe wrote: 'As we readily follow an agreeable object that flies from us, so we love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it.' Wassily Kandinsky stated in *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911-12) that 'the deeper the blue becomes, the more strongly it calls man towards the infinite, awakening in him a desire for the pure and, finally, for the supernatural... Blue is the typically heavenly colour.' This is not the place to examine the role of the colour blue in Jefferies's work; but there was in him a fruitful tension between romantic idealism and an equally strong realist strain. He himself expressed the conflict in a note-book entry on 26 August 1884: 'My fatal tendency to run into the Ideal. I begin resolved on coarseness and soon get to the dawn, damn it'[10].

Restless Human Hearts is permeated by romantic longings associated with nature and the open air. The embodiment of the longing, a nostalgia for the divine, is Heloise. Her aspirations have no clear object; they are of the *je ne sais quoi:* 'Heloise's heart was full of aspirings — after she knew not what, but which she deemed were sacred hopes'. Hers was not a religion in the usual sense: 'an aesthetic longing rather than a tangible realisation… it had no existence apart from colour and light and joy'. It could therefore be satisfied in church which was 'all stone—dead... There was no sunshine in it, no colour, no light'. It was 'no matter of one hour every week' but 'a religion that mingled with every hour of her daily life... an ever-present reality' (17-18), an intensely personal religion that Heloise lived and felt with her whole being. The religion is Heloise, the mere fact of her being expresses it.

[10] *The Nature Diaries and Note-Books of Richard Jefferies*, edited by Samuel J. Looker (London: Grey Walls Press, 1948), p.190.

Interrupted by her disastrous marriage to Louis, it reawakens with her love for Noel. Love heralds the dawn of a new moral and spiritual life:

> Once more, as she had done in the olden time at Avonbourne — only so much more intensely now — Heloise saw beauty in everything, the very apples on the poor old costermonger's truck, as it was wheeled along before the door in the street, had a glory and a beauty about them. The lovely tints of gold and red and green, so delicately intermingling, and lit up with the last departing rays of the autumn sun, shone out with a splendour in its ray equal to those luscious fruit-scenes which painters love to limn. The sunlight of her love lit up everything upon which it fell with hues and tints borrowed from her own soul. She moved in a dream — a dream that ever grew more absorbing, that abstracted her day by day more and more from the outward and visible world, till she dwelt in the circle of her own consciousness, utterly unaffected by the passing of time. (142)

In another beautiful passage Noel, the male par excellence, suddenly realises Heloise's superiority:

> Slowly there grew upon his mind a sense that he could not understand her. The radiance upon her countenance came from he knew not where; the emotions that were reflected there were not such as he had known — they came from no source of which he had the key. They flowed up from a well at which he had never drunk. A superstitious feeling, almost reverential, took possession of him: he felt as though he had been walking by the side of an immortal, of one of those divine beings which in the old time came down to mortals, and brought with them an indefinable Presence. His feelings towards her underwent a change. He had looked upon her as a child, as something weaker, lower than himself — something to be protected and watched over. Now it dawned upon him that she was in reality higher and more divine than he was — that she could watch over and protect him. His was the lower existence. So he came to watch her motions almost with reverence, as if her step was holy, as if her face shone with divine light, and a halo went about her. (237)

Heloise's absorption into nature, the dissolution of her separate consciousness, is experienced also by Neville, and the end of Jefferies's 'natural' religion becomes clearer:

> He reposed upon the grass under the shadow of a tree, till the warmth of the sun filled his veins with a drowsy, slumberous, yet intense *vitality*, while the leaves danced in slow and intricate measure between him and the sky, and the clouds sailed onwards to their havens far away below the horizon. The grass grew alive around him with countless numbers of tiny living things, barely visible to the eye, yet each with its organs, its senses and sensations, its hopes and fears and

> griefs, its life, and its hour of bitter death to come. He lost all sense of his own *separate* existence; his soul became merged in the life of the tree, of the grass, of the thousands of insects, finally in the life of the broad earth underneath, till he felt himself as it were a leaf upon the great cedar of existence. Then he lost all sense of joy or pain, of hope or fear, of ambition, of hatred and jealousy, even of love. He was merged in the great soul that binds all things together. It was the Nirvana — the extinction of existence, and yet the entrance into true existence. Time, thought, feeling, sense, were gone, all lost; nothing remained but the mere grand fact, the exquisite delight, the infinite joy of existence only. (263)

It is arguable whether in the autobiography Jefferies expounds his nature mysticism more clearly, realises it more vividly, or links it more closely to the here-and-now. There is truth and honesty in his account, for he shows how Neville's ecstasy crumbled in the face of the intrusions of the 'real' world:

> Then a word, a noise, the sound of his name awoke him. The sunlight lost its glamour, the dancing leaves moved no more in regular rhythm, but helplessly and purposelessly, the clouds became vapour only, the azure only the result of extreme distance and tenuity; matter jarred on him again; (*ibid.*)

and how, once this 'abstract idealism' clashes with the reality of living from day-to-day with Georgiana, Neville begins to hanker after 'his old existence, his ancient silence and solitude, his halo of imagination, his communion with the soul of the world' (264-6).

If the novel is worth reading for evidence of Jefferies's early mysticism, expressed with a freshness, charm and irony not always found in *The Story of My Heart,* where the tone is more high-pitched, then it also claims our attention for the light it sheds on his thinking. Jefferies is normally regarded as feeler rather than thinker but *Restless Human Hearts* brims with suggestive ideas, such as Neville's plan of trawling the seabed for traces of vanished civilisations. Of course we know better, but the idea produces a frisson by its originality. Most of the ideas are contained in the many digressions, others integrated into the story, such as the cogent arguments Georgiana marshals in favour of a trial marriage. The spectacle of two unhappy marriages among her acquaintances has deterred her from a conventional one with Neville:

> There were indefinite possibilities of discord evidently in married life. And what struck her as the worst of all was the impossibility of escape when once the ceremony was completed. Let the wife be never so miserable, let the husband be never so disagreeable, there was no escape. It was only after the close intercourse which followed marriage that the true characteristics of man and woman came out; it was in that familiar relation that the weak points first came into view. (47)

The details of the trial marriage are carefully worked out and though they obviously interested Jefferies more than they will the reader, the rationalism and detachment with which Georgiana approaches the enterprise impress.

The digressions offer Jefferies's opinions on various facets of late Victorian society. In boots, for example, he sees a symbol of slavish conformity:

> Socrates and Plato, Leonidas and Caesar — all the heroes — the gods too, walked with naked feet, or in sandals. They knew nothing of Day & Martin, of ugly squat earthenware bottles, of a thick odoriferous liquid, of brushes, nor of scrapers. Their feet were open, free, unrestrained. Look at the feet of the statues, how beautiful they are. But the feet in those boots — 'cabined, cribbed, confined,' distorted. Somehow there is something about these boots at which my mind revolts. No man can be a god in boots. They are the very symbols of our dirty macadamised times. Our very souls are getting macadamised, laid down, levelled, and metalled, so that we may run in grooves for ever — smoothly, without the slightest fear of seeing anything fresh. (199)

The *tædium vitae* of modern society, tortured by longing for an elusive ideal; man reduced to machine; the vicarious nature of sensation; the tyranny of fashion; the humbug and cant drilled into us by parents and school; the evils of book learning; the power of the suburban middle-classes; the press as a secret police sniffing out scandal; the marvels of medicine which have lengthened our lives without making them any happier; the doubtful nature of human progress; the weight of history and tradition; the possibility of telepathy: the digressions contain some of the liveliest writing in the novel. Those in the first half are better than those in the second, where fatigue begins to set in. For example, the tone of the lecture to young women on the health hazards of chignons is wrong. Often they are amusing: Jefferies descanting on the terrors of railway terminus hotels recalls the arrival of Proust's Marcel at the Grand Hotel in Balbec. They offer a coherent critique of Victorian society and are linked to the nature-versus-artificiality theme. The ideas impress by their modernity and relevance. The novel directly addresses our concerns — our desire for spiritual nourishment; the restlessness, soullessness, artificial nature of our age; the old animal passions lurking under our civilized veneer. Jefferies anticipates D.H. Lawrence in his passionate attack on industrialised society and in his vision of a grander future for man through a life lived from nature, more tender sympathies and a wider consciousness: 'The problem is a new life.'

Impressive, too, is the sheer readability of much of the story. The episode of Carlotta and the cobra stands out, but the duel; the hunt and Noel's fall; his drowning in the river after his skiff capsizes, and Francis's suicide attempt show Jefferies's gift for pacey, dramatic narrative. The details are vividly, accurately, observed: in the case of Francis's suicide leap, the engine-driver's frantic efforts to brake, the sparks showering from the wheels, the mental paralysis afflicting the

other passengers on the platform. There are nice touches of historical detail — the passengers cutting the book-pages with a paper-knife; the porters clinging to the carriage door-handles and running beside the train as it draws into the terminus. Jefferies is often supposed to have lacked a sense of humour but there are one or two delicious examples — the image of the Austrian archduke ensnared by Carlotta, dressed in full military costume and turned on a spit like a side of mutton in a Regent Street shop-window. There irony is almost constant. Even at his most absurdly preposterous and melodramatic — perhaps especially then — Jefferies writes with a twinkle in his eye. The writing is unshowy — none of your applause-begging pyrotechnics — but graphic. Noel's arm breaks 'like a pipe-stem — snapped across instantly'; his skull crushed 'much as a spoon dashes through an egg-shell' (228).

The novel ends on an open, ambiguous note after a powerful homily on the vanity of human wishes with Noel pacing the terrace and gazing out at the distant sea, an Ulysses still dreaming of sailing into the unknown. Here Jefferies draws a parallel between restlessness of the ocean and that of the human heart.[11] It will be by the sea in 1880, 'in the old castle of Pevensey, under happy circumstances,' that he will make the first notes for *The Story of My Heart.* In passages like the following he has already begun to write it:

> But above all things, he showed her how to listen to the promptings of the soul within her; to distinguish between the pseudo soul and the true; to choose between the promptings of passion and even the decisions of the mind, and the still inner voice, the real revelation that came in silence and self-communion. This was her Bible, her Koran, her guide, her judge, her friend, her deathless Mentor. To this she was to listen, this to follow, utterly heedless of all else. It was part of his theory that the excessive cultivation of the mind alone which distinguished this time was more than even the cultivation of the body, destructive of the soul. It overlaid the soul with a thick impenetrable armour of logic and conceit; turned away its attention from itself; making it deal with the outward instead of the inward, and taught it to seek God in machinery. (256)

Note

The introduction is a revised version of that originally written for a new edition of *Restless Human Hearts* proposed by Ariel Books but never published. The numbers in brackets refer to the pages of the text. I have been greatly helped by *Richard Jefferies, A Bibliographical Study* by George Miller and Hugoe Matthews; and *The Forward Life of Richard Jefferies, A Chronological Study* by Hugoe Matthews and Phyllis Treitel (Petton Books, 1994), two works of magisterial scholarship to which every student of Jefferies is immensely indebted.

[11] Hugoe Matthews points out (private communication) that the phrase 'the restless heaves of human hearts' had appeared in 'The Man of the Future', an article published in the *Swindon Advertiser* on 19 June 1871 and reprinted in the *Richard Jefferies Society Journal* No 12, 2003. There the phrase was also associated with the sea but from his vantage-point atop East Cliff, Hastings, Jefferies remarked that distance rendered the waves and the heavings of the ships invisible. He speculated that 'from the limitless distance of eternity even the motions of great earths and suns and the restless heaves of human hearts may appear absolute stillness'. The sea is a common symbol of the emotions. 'There is sorrow upon the waters, for they cannot rest' (Jeremiah).