Introduction to *World's End*

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In April 1875 Richard Jefferies left the family homestead at Coate, where he and Jessie had been living since their marriage the previous July, and moved to 22 Victoria Street (now Road), Old Swindon. The house formed part of a stone-built terrace at the top of the hill, opposite what is now the Post Office. This part of Victoria Street was "the home of prosperous tradesmen and professional men".[1] The three-storey building with pairs of narrow, round-headed windows was in the Italianate style characteristic of Old Swindon houses "in about 1850 and onwards".[2] A plaque records Jefferies' residence. The move was probably necessitated by Jessie's advanced pregnancy and the lack of space (and privacy) at Coate. On 3 May, soon after the couple settled into their new home, Jessie gave birth to a boy, named Richard Harold.

In the autumn Jefferies offered Macmillan a new novel called *The Rise of Maximin.* Edward Thomas mentioned the title in his biography but said it was never published.[3] No trace of the manuscript survived and it was presumed lost until, in the late 1970s, Hugoe Matthews and John Pearson independently discovered that the book had been serialised in the *New Monthly Magazine,* between October 1876 and July 1877. The novel was rejected by Macmillan, whose reader (possibly John Morley) dismissed it as

> a sort of imitation of Gulliver or Defoe but entirely without merit. The realism is childish, and the imaginative traits are dull and poor. Quite unworthy of serious consideration.[4]

In October Jefferies submitted *The Rise of Maximin* to Tinsley Bros, describing it as "a book of adventures on a novel plan" about "the rise to power of an intelligent man in a half-civilised country". Purporting to be an actual history, the novel chronicles the adventures of the eponymous hero, a farmer's son who rises from obscurity to become emperor of a vast continent. A quest novel, it has affinities with "Ben Tubbs Adventures", *Bevis,* and *After London.* Set in an unspecified past that blends features of classical antiquity, the last years of Roman Britain, the Middle Ages, and the English Civil War, it is part *roman à clef,* part escapist Walter Mitty fantasy.

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[1] Elizabeth Crittall, K.H. Rogers and Colin Shrimpton with architectural descriptions prepared in collaboration with Margaret Tomlinson, *A History of Swindon to 1965.* Re-printed from *The Victoria History of Wiltshire Volume IX,* edited by Elizabeth Crittall and published by the Institute of Historical Research (Trowbridge: Wiltshire Library & Museum Service, 1983), p.116.

[2] John Betjeman, "Architecture" in L.V. Grinsell, H.B. Wells, H.S. Tallamy, John Betjeman, with an introduction by David Douglas, *Studies in the History of Swindon* (Swindon: Swindon Borough Council, 1950), p.163.

[3] Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p.88.

[4] Quoted in Hugoe Matthews and Phyllis Treitel, *The Forward Life of Richard Jefferies: A Chronological Study* (Oxford: Petton Books, 1994), p.71.

Maximin is a lonely neglected genius, a prophet crying in the wilderness, a misfit and outsider scoffed at by his peers. He is filled with "a species of romantic mysticism" nurtured by his long contemplation of "the stars, the hills, the waters, and the great sun"; and by the study of the mysteries of his own soul. His insights have found expression in a prose-poem called "Rah" (the Egyptian sun-god) or "Sunlight". His liberal views, his hatred of tyranny and superstition, have rendered him suspect to the repressive government of Sandover (i.e. Swindon) — "that cruel, heartless place which had treated him so roughly, and despised him, a presumptuous fool" — the city situated a mile or so from the farm where he lives with his parents. The king's chief minister Burgon reads Maximin's books, which he finds dangerously subversive; denounces the author as a spy in the pay of the hostile city of Brucester; and orders him to be executed and his books publicly burnt.

Maximin becomes a fugitive in a nearby forest of beech and fern (i.e. Savernake), where he is joined by a band of loyal followers. He raises an army, defeats the forces of Sandover but is unable to capture the fortified city, and leads his men on a long march to the south and west across swamps, deserts, plains and mountains, until they reach the vast open spaces of Bazal where he defeats the host of the Great King Carausius and enters Iscapolis, the fabulously wealthy capital of his empire. After further campaigns he returns to Sandover the conquering hero and wins the hand of his beloved Genèvre, the lady in the high tower of medieval romance.

The novel has little literary merit. Apart from Maximin himself the characters are one-dimensional, the human interest is virtually non-existent, and for most of the way it's *Boys' Own Paper* stuff or, at worst, like something out of *Wizard* or *Hotspur.* On the credit side the battle scenes are authentic and exciting, while the landscapes are invested with a surreal, visionary quality that variously recalls the Coleridge of "Kubla Khan," the Poe of "The Domain of Arnheim," and the early J.G. Ballard of *The Drought* and *The Drowned World.* Notable for its brooding, oppressive power is the sea of black mud in Chapter VI:

> A more dismal, forbidding sight has probably never been beheld by man... Far as ever the eye could see on either hand, the edge of the forest of reeds stretched away, and in front — in front a boundless ocean of black hard mud reached to the extreme horizon. Over this hung the great sun, so low apparently as almost to be within reach, and not a moving creature was visible. It was one vast vacuum.

Also vividly described is the approach of the Great King's armies, as immense as those of Xerxes. But most of the book is tedious. Jefferies succeeds in interesting the reader in neither his story nor his characters. The geography is confusing. There is no clear direction or purpose to Maximin's wanderings and the narrative likewise gives the impression of aimlessly meandering from one episode to the next. Small wonder both Macmillan and (later) Tinsley turned the novel down. Serial publication was the best Jefferies could get for it. The novel's chief interest and value lie in the light it sheds on Jefferies' psyche at this stage in his career, the hints of

paranoia and megalomania, the dreams of escape, the contrast between Maximin's feverish, exalted visions and the humbleness of his actual situation.

Simultaneously with *The Rise of Maximin* Jefferies offered Tinsley a two-volume novel called *In Summer Time,* which he declared "the best thing I have ever written — it is full of the odd humour of the rustics I know so well & has some original positions". After Tinsley declined the novel Jefferies submitted it to Richard Bentley & Son on 5 February 1876. On 22 April, having heard nothing, he wrote to George Bentley to request a decision. He was now staying at Shanklin Villa, his Aunt Ellen's imposing residence in Sydenham. According to Edward Thomas, he had gone up to find a house near London and "to make sure of his journalistic connections".[5] He remained with his aunt for the rest of the year. This was the bitter period to which he would later refer in his autobiography, "when it was necessary to be separated from those I loved".[6] Bentley turned down *In Summer Time* and on 25 May Jefferies wrote to express his disappointment and to seek advice:

> I cannot help feeling a little disappointed at your final reply after waiting three months. As I have waited so long & have at last been disappointed, I would like to ask a favour of you. There must be some reason why I do not succeed as a novel writer, & as I am really anxious to succeed, & quite ready to accept advice from experienced persons, I would much like to know in what I fail, & how it would be possible for me to improve. The MSS. is I think on about 600 folios. Now I would cheerfully rewrite the whole if I had any idea of the proper course to pursue...
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> ... I think there must be some mistake upon my part in the composition of my novel, & it is possible if I could receive a little advice from an experienced person I might greatly improve. Therefore the favour I would ask of you is this, that you would allow your reader to send me a short criticism of my novel, pointing out my faults & suggesting a course for me to follow.
>
> Or I would ask you to permit me to have an interview with you so that I might ask a few questions — I feel certain I fail from want of what I may call technical knowledge, & also from being totally ignorant of the traditions & customs of the publishing business...
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> I am now just entering upon the prime of life being in my 28th year, & very likely a little advice from you may save me years of disappointment by putting me into the right path.

The humble tone is a far cry from Jefferies' airy vaunt to Tinsley less than two years earlier that "to write a tale is to me as easy as to write a letter".[7] Perhaps the influence and sage counsel of the aunt can be detected behind the letter, in which Jefferies puts his finger precisely on what he most lacked, technical skill and guidance as to where he was going wrong. In his previous novels he had shown himself singularly clumsy, even inept, in the rudiments of the craft of fiction-writing, basic skills like the art of stage-management and the ability smoothly to move a

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[5] Thomas, p.102.
[6] *The Story of My Heart* [1883] (London: Quartet Books, 1979), p.72.
[7] Quoted in Walter Besant, *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1889), p.156.

character from one place to another (of which difficulty he would later complain in *The Dewy Morn*). The want of expertise does not appear such a heinous crime to the modern reader, accustomed to loosely-constructed novels where almost anything goes, but to a writer trying to compose a formula fiction in Victorian times it was a serious handicap.

The letter reflects Jefferies' increasing desperation over his continued failure to make his mark. 1876 is the year of his first extant notebook, which covers the months of May to July and is written in his private shorthand. The herculean labour of decipherment and transcription was carried out by John Pearson. The entries, fragmentary, disjointed, often incoherent, suggest that Jefferies was in a depressed, even suicidal, state at this time. The prolonged separation from his family can only partly explain it. Jefferies' sense of failure seems also to have been a factor. On 14 July he again wrote to George Bentley, pleading with him to reconsider his decision and "to just glance at the MS. yourself". *In Summer Time* was returned the same day.

Nevertheless Jefferies was blessed with the heroic qualities of patience, perseverance, and ceaseless labour he'd extolled in *Restless Human Hearts,* in the character of the Abbé in Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo.*[8] He also had remarkable fertility and inventiveness. On 26 July he approached Macmillan with yet another work, a three-volume novel entitled *World's End*:

> The leading idea in the tale is this: at Birmingham there is an immense property without an owner, and two years ago over 100 claimants from America and other countries held a family council there which was reported in the papers at the time.
>
> Something similar (under different names of localities etc.) forms the nucleus of my novel, which shows how this vast property influences the lives of many people.
>
> The story is exciting, but contains nothing immoral, not even an elopement or clandestine attachment.

The last was a veiled reference to the outraged reviews which had greeted *Restless Human Hearts.* Macmillan wrote back next day politely to decline. Jefferies then resorted to the reliable, good-natured William Tinsley. Walter Besant quotes a letter in which Jefferies tells Tinsley that he has spent "a whole winter" (i.e. 1875/6) upon a novel and outlines the story previously rehearsed to Macmillan, concluding "I think, upon perusal, you would find it a striking book, and full of original ideas".[9] In view of the disastrous failure of *Restless Human Hearts,* he offered Tinsley the whole of the first edition for nothing.

Despite its often despairing tone, the 1876 notebook is crammed with ideas for newspaper and magazine articles, and the year was a qualified success. Proximity to London helped Jefferies place his work and if he did not achieve his primary goal

[8] *Restless Human Hearts* (Longcot: Petton Books, 2008), p.120f.
[9] Besant, p.160.

of success as a novelist, then he found regular employment as a columnist with *The Live Stock Journal and Fancier's Gazette,* to which he contributed articles almost weekly between January 1877 and October 1878.

During the winter of 1876/7 the family was reunited and moved into a rented house at 2 Woodside Terrace, Ewell Road, in Tolworth, a hamlet near Surbiton in the parish of Long Ditton in north Surrey. Tolworth answered Jefferies' needs perfectly. It was twelve miles from London, to which the London & South Western Railway provided a fast and frequent service (half an hour from Surbiton to Waterloo), yet was surrounded by country still largely unspoilt. Jefferies saw trout in the Hogsmill Brook, and was surprised and delighted by the richness and variety of bird-life. Ironically Surbiton in its way was as much a railway town as Swindon, owing its sudden growth to the arrival of the LSWR in 1838; it was billed the Queen of the Suburbs. By coincidence, Thomas and Emma Hardy spent the first few months of their married life in furnished lodgings at St David's Villa, Hook Road, less than a quarter of a mile from Woodside Terrace; and it was while he was living at Surbiton in 1874 that Hardy became famous with the publication of *Far from the Madding Crowd* by Smith, Elder & Co., who in 1878 would publish *The Gamekeeper at Home,* the book which made Jefferies' own reputation. Hardy and Emma were for a long time unaware of the stir the novel was making, except that when they went up to London by train they often noticed "ladies carrying about copies of it with Mudie's label on the covers".[10]

Tinsley accepted *World's End* but apart from Jefferies' offer of the first edition *gratis* nothing is known of the terms agreed. The book was published in three volumes on 5 July 1877 and like *Restless Human Hearts* was priced 31*s* 6d with a probable print run
of 500.[11] The reviews were mixed but more favourable than those of Jefferies' previous two novels. Tinsley later said that "had *World's End* been published before *The Scarlet Shawl* and *Restless Human Hearts,* Mr Jefferies would have made his way at once as a writer of fiction".[12] The *Graphic* complained of the demands the novel made upon the reader's attention but said that

> for intricacy and complication of plot *World's End* stands *facile princeps* amongst all novels that have fallen in our way for a long time past, whilst for startling and sensational effects it will compare favourably with any of them.

Although he commented on the thinness of the characterisation and the paucity of dialogue the reviewer allowed that the plot was "built up with a great deal of care and skill" and concluded that if Jefferies would curb

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[10] Quoted in Florence Hardy, *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1891*
(London: Macmillan, 1928), p.133.
[11] George Miller and Hugoe Matthews, *Richard Jefferies: A Bibliographical Study* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), p.118.
[12] William Tinsley, *Random Recollections of an Old Publisher* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton and Co., 1900), vol. I, pp.316-7.

> his tendencies in the direction of needless and annoying complexity, of extravagance, and of melodrama, and think out his *dramatis personae* with at least as much care as he does the outward incidents that are to affect them, he may one day be entitled to an honourable place in that school of novelists of which Mr Wilkie Collins is the admitted chief.

This was fair, perceptive, and by no means unkindly comment. The *World* also complained of "the weirdness and wildness" of the incidents, the impossible plot, the thin characterisation. However, "there are an ingenuity and industry displayed in the marshalling of facts which almost remind one of Jules Verne" and the reviewer found in the novel a "fund of genuine entertainment". The *Spectator* similarly balanced criticism with praise. It thought the story improbable "yet undoubtedly *World's End* is cleverly told, and not without something of the art which gives the air of probability to the improbable". Aymer's courtship of Violet was "excellent in its way," and "though we cannot admire the conception of the novel before us, it is easy to see that the writer might both plan and execute one that should be really good". The *Academy* thought some episodes "most uncomfortably sensational"; the machinations of the villains Marese and Theodore "would make even a disciple of Mr Edmund Yates shudder". The *Queen* regretted to see "so much ability so ill applied". The novel displayed "even an excess of ingenuity in construction"; the plot thickened to the point of opacity; but the opening section, which traced the growth of the great manufacturing town of Stirmingham "from its protoplasm by a process of natural selection" was "really very cleverly imagined". The reviewer paid grudging tribute to Jefferies' "ingenuity in devising crime on a stupendous scale".

The only uniformly hostile notice came in the *Saturday Review:*

> We have read many, very many, foolish novels, but we doubt we ever came across one that rivalled in pure folly this story of Mr Jefferies.

The chief complaint was the complexity of the plot, which the writer exhaustively and sarcastically rehearsed, to conclude that Jefferies had out-Braddoned Miss Braddon in the number of crimes he had packed into his novel:

> Mr Jefferies, if he continues to write, will learn wisdom in time, and will not use in one story crimes enough, if properly husbanded, to serve for thrice three volumes.

Despite its warmer reception *World's End* was no less a commercial disaster than *Restless Human Hearts*. Later in the year Tinsley offered it rebound as a single volume priced six shillings.[13] The novel's failure on the heels of that of its predecessors seems to have ended Jefferies' relationship with Tinsley, who

[13] Miller and Matthews, p.119.

nevertheless was at least partially justified in his claim that, though he lost "a good sum of money" by publishing the three novels, he gave Jefferies "as much encouragement in his literary career as any other publisher".[14] Jefferies was not the only author whom Tinsley helped launch. Thomas Hardy, George Meredith, William Black and George Moore were also given their start. In his memoirs, writing with knowledge of the course of Jefferies' later development, Tinsley expressed disappointment that he had not made a name as a rural novelist in the same way as the early George Eliot or Hardy:

> He had a wonderful knowledge of English country life, its scenes, people, and ways, and a skill in portraying them, not surpassed by many authors at any time during this century — such a knowledge as has made many of our best-known writers of fiction.[15]

Yet Tinsley had turned down Jefferies' first two rural novels, *Only a Girl* and *In Summer Time*, presumably because he considered them not commercial enough.

Henceforth Jefferies would abandon any attempt to make his name as a writer of "sensation" novels in the mould of Wilkie Collins and Miss Braddon; eschew the outré and artificial; and concentrate in his fiction on depicting scenes of rural life in a naturalistic and unsentimental manner. Between *World's End* and his next novel *Greene Ferne Farm* came the first non-fiction books, *The Gamekeeper at Home* and its companions, whose success probably encouraged publishers more readily to accept his novels, now he was recognized as an authority on country life. Yet the distinction between the novels and the non-fiction books is not clear-cut. Just as one of the charms of the fiction is its basis in direct observation, its rootedness in scenes and characters intimately known to the author, so the non-fiction works are endowed with extra depth, drama and vitality by Jefferies' imaginative powers. Who is to say that the poacher Oby or the dairymaid Cicely are not as much fictional creations as Augustus Bassett or Margaret Estcourt in *Greene Ferne Farm?*

Nor is there any rigid distinction between Jefferies' early novels and later. Nature and nature mysticism played a major role in *Restless Human Hearts,* in which the downland country about Avonbourne acted as one of the chief poles, the other being the corrupt and sterile world of London society. *World's End* similarly oscillates between the industrial city of Stirmingham and the remote upland village of World's End. The rural element is even stronger than in *Restless Human Hearts,* and the chapters depicting life at World's End are the equal of all but the finest passages in *Greene Ferne Farm.* They have the same spring-time freshness and purity, despite the horrors that impinge under the baleful influence of Stirmingham.

World's End is altogether the most accomplished of the three Tinsley novels. It is the most tightly plotted; has fewer digressions; and the author's personality obtrudes less. To be sure, there are excesses, but overall it is a more mature, disciplined and unified work.

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[14] Tinsley, pp.316-7.
[15] Tinsley, pp.316-7.

The opening chapters are among the best things Jefferies has yet done. They propose a novel foundation-myth of the city of Stirmingham, whose phenomenal growth is traced back to the activities of a family of water-rats. As some reviewers remarked, this section shows the theory of natural selection in practice. Given Jefferies' antipathy to Darwin, one guesses some satiric intent lay behind the exercise. Certainly the stages of the process of creation *ex nihilo,* from "an expanse of utterly barren and desolate ground, on which nothing would grow," through marsh and first human habitation, to the birth of a great city dedicated to the gods of Coal and Iron, are chronicled with a fine irony and flashes of sly humour:

> If Stirmingham objects to owe its origin to a water-rat, it may at least congratulate itself upon the fact that it was a good old English rat — none of your modern parvenu, grey Hanoverian rascals. (5)[16]

The prelude was rightly praised. What the reviewers could not have foreseen was that later in his career Jefferies would write something not dissimilar and even more powerful in the magnificent "Relapse into Barbarism" section of *After London* (1885). There the process is from civilization back to primitive wilderness. The fields lie uncultivated, nature takes over, London becomes a miasmal swamp. In *World's End* the movement is in the reverse direction, from wilderness to civilization. Or is it? Jefferies' depiction of Stirmingham makes clear that he did not regard the change as progress, rather as a fall from grace, Eden supplanted by Babylon. The corrupting power of money, the greed of the claimants, the sewer-rats — a different kind of barbarism is at work. Jefferies implies that one swamp has been replaced by another, the natural by a figurative sink of iniquity and corruption.

The opening is a minor *tour de force.* The creation of the marsh; the plant, animal and bird life; the arrival of the gipsies; the concatenation of circumstances, the determinism by which the teeth of a tiny water-rat leads to the growth of a huge city — every stage is plausible and convincing. The story has an allegorical flavour. The idyllic picture Jefferies paints of the virgin marsh becomes a metaphor for the world before the Fall, a brief Golden Age over which swiftly descend the shadows of Steam (industrialism) and Legal Rights (human greed). The chapters are notable for touches like the loving description of Sibbold's flintlock, and for the informed and sympathetic picture of the gipsies, the gifts they leave the villagers in return for being allowed to squat on the marsh, a "silent tribute" in the form of baskets, clothes-pegs, wild duck, and smuggled brandy and gin. Jefferies evokes a cruder and more lawless age. As often in his fiction (Neville and Noel in *Restless Human Hearts,* Felix and Oliver in *After London*) we have two brothers of contrasting temperaments, one delicate, dreamy, sensitive; the other tough, extraverted, dynamic: a contrast which reflected that between Jefferies and his younger brother Harry. Jefferies exercises his satiric talents in the amusing episode of the puffing of

[16] Numbers in brackets after quotations refer to the pages of the Petton Books edition.

Sternhold Baskette's biography. The rivalry between the two Stirmingham newspapers probably reflected that between the liberal *Swindon Advertiser* and the Tory *North Wilts Herald.* The episode is interesting for the light it sheds on how books were advertised in Jefferies' day.

However, the plot's increasing complexity does not lead to any gain in dramatic tension. The names of the skinflints Sibbold and Sternhold are confusingly similar. The assiduous reader will be reduced to drawing up family trees and cast-lists. Before long we are embroiled in the great Baskette claims case, of which Thomas sagely remarked, "into this labyrinth it is unnecessary to go, though it was, in Jefferies' opinion, the principal attraction of his three volumes".[17]

This said, Sternhold Baskette's career (after statues have been erected in his honour, libraries and parks named for him, and his portrait hung in the town-hall) attains a genial apotheosis in the arms of the busty half-Italian actress Lucia Marese, a gold-digger whom he zealously sugar-daddies. The liaison of miserly pantaloon and scheming actress, and the latter's career on the boards in Paris as Lady Godiva riding a milk-white palfrey, elicit some chuckles. The plot meanwhile grows ever more intricate. By the end of Chapter IX Jefferies comments, "Thus a new element of complexity was added to the already chaotic state of this estate". Enough said, but by Chapter XI he feels constrained to recapitulate the story for the reader's benefit. His summary, however, sows only more confusion.

Marese and Theodore's diabolical schemes probably reflect Jefferies' interest in Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia, and perhaps his reading of Suetonius' lives of the Roman emperors (the plan to poison the American claimants with a deadly gas released from a box secreted aboard their ship recalls Nero's attempt to murder his mother Agrippina by means of a collapsible boat). Jefferies rather preens himself on the plan's fiendish cunning; refuses to name the gas lest any reader be tempted to copy-cat crime; and dilates upon the psychopathology of the villains. The last chapter of the first volume introduces Odo, a homicidal maniac incarcerated in Theodore's asylum, a Pan-like figure with simian features who plays a tin whistle and is happiest out of doors in the company of dogs and gipsies. The chapter ends with a homily on primal innocence superseded by the corruption of Stirmingham, a city undermined by sewer-rats, successors of the original water-rats, whose "nimble feet and black eyes would be seen no more hiding among the flags, or plunging out of sight into the water as a footstep was heard" (118). The human equivalents of the sewer-rats are Marese and Theodore, and "a numerous company of lesser men and masculine brutes and female fiends". Jefferies' tone when he speaks of the sewer-rats is as repugnant as when in the essay "On the London Road" (collected in *The Open Air*) he refers to "the leery London mongrel". As Thomas observed:

[17] Thomas, p.93.

> Something there was in him, perhaps, akin to his uncomfortable humour, which unconsciously repelled — something that creeps into his writings, particularly in the more emphatic parts, and gives us a twinge as at an unpleasant voice.[18]

We need not go so far as to accuse Jefferies of the hypocrisy of the catchpenny moralist who implicitly glamorises what he explicitly condemns; but the story's lurid sensationalism contrasts with the high moral tone he periodically adopts, perhaps as a sop to the delicate sensibilities of Aunt Ellen and the reviewers. More effective, anyway, as a comment on the evils of Stirmingham than the tirade against the sewer-rats is the switch of scene at the beginning of Volume II to the lonely spot on the hills known as World's End. Suddenly, instead of absurd melodrama, machiavellian plots, and the sulphurous atmosphere of the wicked city, we are out of doors in the country, breathing the pure air and treading the short elastic turf of the downs. The volume's first five chapters are the finest piece of sustained fiction Jefferies has yet written. The setting is firmly realised and for once Jefferies has an interesting male hero.

Aymer Malet is again a thinly-disguised version of the author. The chapters where he is introduced have much biographical value and interest as a *bildungsroman* tracing his early emotional and spiritual development. Like many of Jefferies' protagonists Aymer represents the romantic sensibility par excellence. He is Jude the Obscure out of Young Werther, a pale, somewhat effeminate young man, orphaned, poverty-stricken and friendless, yet of good family. He lives with his miserly uncle, a farmer who means well but doesn't understand him. Aymer has neither the physique nor the inclination for work on the farm. He delights in literature and art. Lacking money to buy books, he wires ground-game, which he then sells to the carriers who cross the downs, and thus acquires many of Bohn's series of classical authors in translation, as well as "the English poets, a few historians, and a large number of scientific works".

> ...for he was devoured with an eager curiosity to understand the stars that shone so brilliantly upon those hills — the phenomena of Nature with which he was brought in daily contact... He saw — he felt — Nature. The wind, that whistled through the grass and sighed in the tops of the dark fir trees, spoke to him in a mystic language. The great sun, in unclouded splendour slowly passing over the wide, endless hills, told him a part of the secret. His books were not read, in the common sense of the term: they were *thought* through. Not a sentence but was thought over, examined, and its full meaning grasped and firmly imprinted on the memory. (128)

He longs to escape:

[18] Thomas, p.290.

> Poor Aymer. How desperately he longed to escape! How the soft summer breeze seemed to woo him onwards he knew not whither! How the sun seemed to beckon, till he fancied he could hear the echo of the surge as it roared on the far-distant beach! (128)

Like many northern romantics, Aymer dreams of the warm south, of Italy ("Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn?"[19]). Visiting Florence, he bursts into tears before the Venus de Medici. His raptures are secretly observed by Lady Lechester, who, struck by the singularity of a poor youth coming to Florence "from pure love of the beautiful", is moved to become his fairy godmother.

Aymer has faults of pride and over-sensitivity. To the locals he is an object of derision:

> They laughed him to scorn at World's End. The poor fellow wandered about in the daytime on the Downs, hiding in the fir copses, lying on the ancient earthwork entrenchment, and dreaming of his fair Florence, so many hundreds of miles away. (130)

For all his lack of self-confidence he feels unusual powers latent within him.

> The boy — he was but twenty then — was a born genius. He could not help it; it would force him on. (127)

There is a different tone to this chapter; something quickens; we feel closer to the real Jefferies in love with nature and *le beau idéal*; a writer who combines powers of acute observation with the ability to suggest the existence of a spiritual world of intense beauty beyond the threshold of everyday consciousness, a world whose presence is felt rather than seen and for which nature acts as the hieroglyph. There is a fruitful tension between the disparate tendencies. Jefferies analyses his hero's romantic longings with almost scientific precision and detachment, while at the same time making us feel their power to enchant and enthrall. The sun, particularly the rising sun, acts as a symbol of Aymer's enlightenment. Like Jacob Boehme, Jefferies saw light as the mystical force that released the human soul from material bondage.

The ideal is balanced by the actual. Jefferies puts his local knowledge to good use in the depiction of the lonely race-course on the downs (based on Burderop race-course under Barbury Castle). The passage is rich in the kind of detail that would have won an approving nod from Hardy: the lichened sign-post, whose arms the ploughboys have mischievously transposed, the illiterate poster advertising the races, the shepherd's hut[20] used as a weighing-room and stone "quarters" as

[19] "Do you know the land where the lemon-trees bloom?" asks Mignon in the song from Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* ("Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship") (1794-6).

[20] There used to be an abandoned shepherd's hut beside the path from Liddington Hill to Shipley Bottom. Ken Watts pointed it out to me on a walk and included a photograph on p.160 of his *The Marlborough Downs* (Bradford on Avon: Ex Libris Press, 1993). A more recent photograph appears on p.8 of *Walking the North Wessex Downs*, a booklet published by the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society (2008).

makeshift weights, the course roped off for the last hundred yards only, and so on. Jefferies writes about these things with delightful ease and naturalness, and quiet authority. He does not romanticise: he stresses the driving rain which sweeps across the hills, the bleakness and desolation of the spot.

Aymer's courtship of Violet looks back to the dawning love between Heloise and Noel in *Restless Human Hearts* and forward to that between Felise and Martial in *The Dewy Morn.* Love transforms the natural world, heightens its beauty, invests it with spiritual radiance:

> That was the happiest autumn Aymer ever knew. Even now he looks back at its sweetness with a species of regret. The sunshine was warmer, the blue of the sky richer, the yellow mist that hung over the landscape softer, the bee went by with a joyous hum, the crimson-and-gold of the dying leaves was more brilliant than ever it had been before or since. Love lent his palette to Nature, and the world was aglow with colour. How delicious it is to see everything through the medium, and in the company of, a noble girl just ripening into womanhood! (136)

The passage anticipates similar evocations of natural beauty intensified by love's agency in *Greene Ferne Farm* and "The Pageant of Summer". Aymer's attempts to write and draw in his "cold, lonely room" foreshadow Amaryllis sketching with numbed fingers in her solitary cell at Coombe Oaks and reflect Jefferies' own experience in his attic room at Coate.

Violet's father Jason is a scholarly eremite like Pierce Lestrange in *Restless Human Hearts.* He lives a life of quiet seclusion in a many-gabled old house with mullioned windows and gargoyles. He is devoted to his garden and trees, his yew hedge and filbert walk. He holds that trees are "really far more beautiful than flowers" (133). Most of those in his garden he has planted himself; and he quotes to Aymer the eastern proverb, "those who plant trees live long". He shares Jefferies' preference for native deciduous species over imported evergreens. He owns a Guarnerius violin, whose craftsmanship (or "hand-art" as Jefferies would call it in *Amaryllis at the Fair*) he celebrates:

> he handled it with more care than a mother does her infant, expatiating upon the quality of the wood, the sycamore and pine, the beauty of the varnish, the peculiar, inimitable curl of the scroll, which had genius in its very twist. (139)

Also characteristic is Violet's beauty, which derives less from formal aesthetic qualities than from the life, the vitality, the wonderful freshness which seemed to throw a sudden light over her, as when the sunshine falls upon a bed of flowers. (137)

The description looks forward to the scene of Margaret Estcourt standing out among the church congregation in *Greene Ferne Farm*:

> A single flower in a gloomy room will sometimes light it up as with a glory — the eye instantly rests upon it; a single violet will fill the place with perfume. She was the violet in that ancient building.[21]

The wedding preparations are depicted with charm and humour. The locals, who have previously despised Aymer as a beggarly upstart, change their tune once they learn he's to marry the squire's daughter. Over foaming jugs of ale at the Shepherd's Bush they decide to give him a royal send-off.

> "Arter all," said an old fellow, "he beant such a bad sort o' chap. A'mind e'tuk a main bit of trouble loike to pull a ewe o'mine out of a ditch where hur laid on her back. (145)

The Wiltshire dialect, which Jefferies was to employ so effectively in *Greene Ferne Farm*, may have been prompted by the success of Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far from the Madding Crowd.* He had already begun to use it in "The Midsummer Hum" and "Gaudy as a Garden," two tales published in the *Graphic* in the summer of 1876 but apparently written after *World's End.*

The wedding day itself, bathed in autumn sunshine, with church bells pealing forth and volleys of musket shots fired in salute by the farmers, an arch of flowers by the lich-gate, children waiting to strew the path with roses as the newly-weds emerge from the church — is in the happiest tradition of the pastoral. Its sensational conclusion, with the news of Jason's murder, has genuine shock-value, and (to one sexagenarian reader at least) recalled the death of Phil's young wife Grace in a blazing barn in *The Archers* radio serial, which came like a similar bolt from the blue. Perhaps there is some mawkishness in Jason's feelings at the prospect of losing Violet; perhaps the irony of the wedding turning into a funeral is pointed up too emphatically. However, Jefferies puts his reporter's experience to good effect in the scene of the inquest, which is held in the local pub, and which nicely blends pathos (the solemn words of the burial service, the funeral bells tolling) and humour (the jurors staying behind in the pub to spend their ninepenny fees).

Other highlights of Volume II include Aymer's indictment of jobbery and corruption in the legal profession ("class prejudice operating in the minds of those on the judgement-seat"), the loneliness of his life in his Barnham lodgings, and his sense of being "imprisoned by the iron bars and strong walls of poverty". The career of the gardener Jenkins after Jason's murder makes a poignant vignette. Found guilty by association, he is forced to leave his native village and work at starvation wages for a cruel, tyrannical employer. Jefferies' political views have evidently

[21] *Greene Ferne Farm* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1880), p.23.

shifted from the knee-jerk conservatism of the young provincial reporter. In *The Times* letters of 1872 he'd said nothing about bad masters like Albert Herring:

> Hard work, long hours, small pay, and that given grudgingly, and withheld on trivial pretences — these were the practices which gained for him the hatred of the labouring population. Yet with singular inconsistency they were always willing to work for him. This is a phenomenon commonly to be observed — the worst of masters can always command plenty of men. (206)

Jefferies does not investigate the causes of this remarkable fact but makes plain that Jenkins has no alternative, unless he is to starve or go to the workhouse, "dreaded almost as the prison". The volume ends with a nightmare vision of the city, after a powerful passage on the poison engendered by the cash nexus:

> Society is divided into two sections — the first, infinitely numerous, and the second, infinitely few — i.e. the Screwed-down, and the Screw-drivers. (247-8)

The employers have one terrible weapon, which they use in their efforts to thwart Marese's candidature for the seat of Stirmingham:

> They had one terrible engine — a fearful instrument of oppression and torture — invented in our modern days, in order that we may not get free and "become as gods". They put on the screw.
>
> There is not a working man in England, from the hedger and ditcher, and the wretch who breaks the flints by the roadside, up to the best-paid clerk or manager of a bank — not one single man who receives wages from another — who does not know the meaning of that word.
>
> Let no-one imagine that the "screw" is confined in its operation to the needy artisan or the labourer. It extends into all ranks of society, poisons every family circle, tortures every tenant and householder — all who in any way depend for comfort, luxury, or peace upon another person. There is but one rank who are free — the few who, whether for wages or as tenants, never have to look to others. (247)

Not that Jefferies desired a dictatorship of the proletariat. He evinces distaste for "the mob" and suggests that the remedy will come not through political reform but a radical change in the individual consciousness. Anti-Darwin, he yet believed that mankind must evolve in order to survive as a species, and this required a realization that *homo sapiens* did not stand at the apex of creation.

> It is contrary to all reason and logic, to all analogy and all imagination, that there should be so many myriads behind, and nothing in *front.* (271)

Science "has long speculated as to the possibility of life in some shape or another in the stars and suns of the firmament". (272)

All this leads into the odd behaviour of the book's most interesting character, the lonely châtelaine Lady Lechester, who is the focus of much of the final volume. Her eerie trysts with a winged daimon by the Kickwell Pot remind us that Jefferies' interest in the supernatural had a long pedigree: his earliest boyhood "told tales" were ghost stories, and his first fiction published in the *North Wilts Herald* was a tale of the paranormal entitled "A Strange Story".

Aymer's poverty-stricken existence in London, where he goes "literally to seek his fortune," his struggles in Grub Street, the book which he writes and illustrates and which a firm agrees to publish if he will contribute £40 towards the cost, all this again has biographical interest. The book runs through several editions, "which is a point where Aymer's career is unlike Jefferies".[22]

Aymer's incarceration in the asylum, Theodore's cremation stove, and the concert-hall's collapsing floor return us to the world of the sensation novel but at least the imagination at work is original. The theme of the sane man imprisoned in an asylum and his every action being taken as further proof of his madness is peculiarly modern. The scene where the wicked doctor espies the fugitive from his asylum among the audience in the concert-hall, and immediately rises and leaves his box, induces a Hitchcockian frisson. There are pathos and beauty in the scene in the final chapter, drawn against the witchery of a May evening, where Fulk discovers Odo seated astride a tree fallen across the stream, playing weird music on his tin whistle while his dog dances on its hind legs beside him.

There are longueurs, but *World's End* is the best of the three early novels published by Tinsley and deserves to be better known.

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[22] Thomas, p.93.