

a place of black-marketing, bodies for sale, "tragic vexation", exploiting and in its turn exploited by the American war-machine which superimposes on the old geography a map of mad systems and of bombing missions.

The theme of European darkness, usually seen as a facet of America's disturbing, exploitative, uninnocent innocence, has now become a common affair in more recent treatments of Europe in American writing, and it has had its challenging, even redemptive, associations. In *Giovanni's Room* (1956) there is a hope of European sanctuary for the homosexual outcast, struggling against American simplicities; in J. P. Donleavy's Irish novels, Dublin is a place of anarchistic romp for the displaced American, hunting vitality between money and death. In Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), the hero finds a dark, disturbing shore of experience late in his quest to be a latter-day

Columbus; in Bernard Malamud's *Pictures of Fidelman* (1969), Fidelman comes, the Jew in the wake of Hawthorne and James, to find art out of decadence, but finds more decadence than art, though a strange new self does emerge from it. In John Hawkes's *The Lime Twig* (1960), a totally imaginary wartime London, as Gothic as Poe's Europe, affords modern mythic stuff for a psychic fable; in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), the same blitz London becomes surreal, fabulous territory for an elaborate speculation into modern technological chaos and entropy. In all these, the old motifs have a secret existence; the decadent and darker version predominates; it then feeds back into a challenge to America. Still, if in self-conscious, ironic, modernised form, the old fable goes on. It seems a necessary aspect of the American imagination; and even the European mind must find it instructive.

Writing like Tickling

On Noël Coward—By GUIDO ALMANZI

FOR A FOREIGNER like myself, the immense greed of the British reading public for biographies of any type is one of the mysterious phenomena which take place in this inscrutable land of yours. The same people who would never go beyond the stage of a "Good morning, what a nice day!" with their closest neighbours are willing to go to any length in order to search the drawers in the private desk of a mistress of George IV. A British gentleman would never ask a friend about the latter's religious or political allegiance since the query would be indiscreet. Yet the same gentleman would spend £7.50 in order to discover the colour of Mary Montague's petticoats or Noël Coward's favourite scarf. He would fold over the lobes of his ears in order not to overhear a fragment of conversation in the London underground, and yet he would eagerly peruse a book where one can eavesdrop on the following exchange between Noël Coward and a lady called Gladys Calthorp, in the Grand Hotel at Alassio, on the Italian riviera, January 1920: "What exactly is the matter with Aunt Cordelia?" "She had a little sort of stroky thing, you know." Fifteen years of residence in this country have not really altered the state of bewilderment which overtook me when I first alighted from a train in Victoria Station.

But leaving aside the problem as to whether biographies are entertaining and worth reading—I am not even ready to discuss the question of their congenital unreliability—why should one read the biographies of literary figures? Jack the Ripper must have led quite an interesting life, and so has Cromwell, or Alexander the Great, Monsieur Landru or Charles Lindbergh, Christopher Columbus or Adolf Hitler. In comparison the writers I happen to know seem to be rather dull and lead unexciting lives. Yet the biographical facts of literary figures must be an inexhaustible source of interest for every reader of a respectable Sunday paper since its pages overflow with anecdotal information about them. The life of Shelley is certainly more popular than his poems; people are more familiar with the household details of Somerset Maugham ("what did he like for breakfast in the summer?") than with his work. Walk in any bookshop and you are likely to find four or five different lengthy versions of the life of Charles Dodgson, alias Lewis Carroll, and not a single copy of his complete works.

EVEN ACCEPTING the implicit interest of a literary or artistic biography, why Noël Coward? And why Noël Coward reconstructed

from the inside of his elegant home with the tit-bits provided by his secretary-chauffeur-companion?¹ The mind wavers at the thought of a publishing industry which promotes such a book, of a literary establishment which clamorously launches it with a number of prominent reviews, of a reading public which welcomes this sort of gossipy titillation. "Tuesday and Wednesday: Darling, I've been shopping all day, things for Ned's Davos Christmas Tree—The shops are lovely—I'm looking out for a nice winter coat for you . . . it's a lovely city, enormous squares and buildings and general grandeur." I'm sure my readers will be anxious to know who this Ned is whose Christmas Tree of 1923 was going to be bedecked with such unexpected gifts. Well, his name was Ned Lathom, and we learn quite a lot about him and his friendship with Snoop, which was at the time the intimate nickname of Noël, both from the informal gossip provided by the inquisitive scribe and the hard facts of the private letters dug out with scholarly endeavour by the conscientious biographer: "Monday night: Just a line before I go to sleep—*Madame Pompadour* had divine music, I bought the score for 1/6. Today I got a huge bottle of hairwash for three pence—I've just come in from the Opera—your beloved *Tosca*—I've never heard it so well done—it was *enchanting*. Good night, my lamb! Snoop." If Cole Lesley's was an article two or three pages long, it might have been quite amusing as an unintentional parody written by an innocent abroad in the world of letters. But it goes on for 486 pages plus a 12-page index; it is selling very well and apparently it is even *read* by some purchasers. It is clear that the innocent abroad is not Cole Lesley but your reviewer.

What really surprises me is the fact that several biographies of Noël Coward have already appeared—quite apart from his autobiographical works; and yet one finds very little in terms of a critical appreciation of Coward's work as a playwright. While preparing an anthology of his plays for a foreign publisher, I found it easy to learn a great deal about Coward's sartorial and gastronomic habits. The last time he condescended to travel second-class on a train or transatlantic liner is lovingly recorded, but there is very little about his plays. In some odd way, Coward is one of the major British playwrights of this century—yet there is not a single work which takes his comedies seriously. In spite of the intolerable veneer of Upper Crust worldliness that Coward himself has helped to spread all over his works, his major plays however are

still available to us, as the recent production of *Blithe Spirit* (1941) by Harold Pinter at the National Theatre has attempted to demonstrate.

Pinter's Coward must have been like the last adventure of the libertine, which is bound to be chastity. At the close of every period of experimentation we are faced by the final temptation, which is the experiment to abandon all experiments. Along this line recent events in the British Theatre are quite significant. On the one side the "haemorrhagic" writers smear their scribbling hands with a mixture of ink and blood, filling the desolate stage with dismembered bodies, cannibalistic feasts and necrophiliac performances. On the other side the "humorous" writers seem to have learnt the lesson of the absurdist theatre from the 1950s and the magic of *iteratio* from 16th-century rhetoric: "Quite." "Quite." "Well, well." "Quite, quite", signed Tom Stoppard (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*), "Well?" "Well, well!" "Well, well, well, well!" A long pause. "Well?", signed Michael Frayn (*Donkey's Years*). Meanwhile Harold Pinter, who has already gone through every trick in the book, has stealthily retrenched in the boudoir comedy of Noël Coward. The ultimate revolutionary exploit must be a return to polite manners, like the fashion of grandmothers' dresses re-adopted by girls who used to prance about in frayed blue-jeans.

THIS IS EXACTLY what separates us from the world of Noël Coward: polite manners. The model for a gentlemen's behaviour proposed in Renaissance treatises by Castiglione or Della Casa, or incarnated in a later age with the courtiers of Racine, is still conceivable in the modern world if one is willing to make an imaginative leap. The standards of behaviour in a Cowardian character are beyond the boundaries of our imaginative powers. Their very proximity in the time-span alienates them from us, like the skirts or hair-styles of fifteen years ago which appear even more distant in taste than those of the Victorian age. Noël Coward's characters seem exceptional because they are so impeccably *comme-il-faut*, brushed down and polished up, clear in their diction and delicate in their allusions. These strange beings "get up to all sort of tricks", as people used to say in those days, but their manners remain extravagantly appropriate. Their breeding and their etiquette become a curious trade-mark which these poor wretches are bound to exhibit like the conventional ring in the nose which conventional savages were supposed to wear at the time of our grandfathers—and it is not surprising to find a reference to a savage with a beringed facial protuberance in *Private Lives* (1929, Act II).

¹ *The Life of Noël Coward*. By COLE LESLEY. Cape, £7.50.

Thus in the 3,000 odd pages of Coward's theatre production I have found only one reference—elegantly turned—to the gradation of sounds associated with the stomach and the intestinal tract, that hierarchy of corporeal noises which has been the running sound-track of modern theatre from *Ubu Roi* onwards.

HAY FEVER (1924), one of Coward's most popular plays, can be seen in many ways as a precursor, undemandingly good-natured but still a little cuckoo, of the Theatre of the Absurd. Yet Coward's characters are estranged from us by the portentousness of their good manners. His characters may well be mad as hatters, pretend to be wickedly bohemian, admit to having anarchical ideas, but they never forget their breeding or table manners. The minute their behaviour falls short of the mark, some other character will jump up and say: "Don't be rude!", a comment which dates both the transgressive and the reprimanding voice. Any attempt to subvert or even merely to modify the code of etiquette is blocked before it gets off the ground by this all-purpose "Don't be rude!" You can elope with your best friend's wife, seduce innocent débutantes, argue faintly Wildean paradoxes, provided the knot in your necktie leaves nothing to be desired and your top-pocket handkerchief doesn't stick out too far. It is permitted to speak French in this atmosphere, or at least sprinkle your parlance with a touch of Gallic. But the convention holds that your French must be rotten, in accordance with an age-old British tradition which has still not entirely broken down (see *Conversation Piece*, 1934).

The early Bohème manner of Coward still relies on mansards and gentle florists in a melo-romantic aura which can be dated precisely because it is dateless, located in a temporal Ruritania. One has only to think of that marvellous piece of nonsense, *Bitter Sweet* (1929), where rich girls elope with poor musicians and go off to sing at the roadsides and perform in "sordid" cabarets. Yet later on the playwright's inclination tends to a modernised Bohème for the very rich; rich like Gilda, the heroine of *Design for Living* (1932), who enjoys "an adequate income" and passes casually from one hero to the other in successive years. The two men, Otto a painter and Leo a playwright, are of course highly successful in their calling, and events take place amid cocktail parties, auctions of antiques, and ocean cruises, and involve ruined or rejected careers, invaded bedchambers, bunches of roses, important contracts, first nights at the theatre and trips round the world to forget grief or find inspiration for the future. The naïve rendering

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of an "artistic" ambiance is so false, so distant from our everyday experience while at the same time being persuasively amusing, that it is redeemed by its being *alien*, a world apart in its utter brainlessness.

In fact *Design for Living* is a highly enjoyable play full of secret pleasures for us latter-day admirers of the combinative games of literature. Everything moves fluently, and even the mirror-games of combinatory technique become natural, provided characters are financially assured and their inheritance—still free of death-duties—guarantees their freedom and independence. This applies to most of Coward's heroes: they can always resolve a crisis of the heart or make reparation for a social blunder by taking the right cruise or going off on a long journey. Gilda transfers herself to an "exquisite penthouse" in New York. Elyot in *Private Lives* takes off for South Africa after his divorce from Amanda. Charles Commandines in *Blithe Spirit* abandons his country mansion to the unleashed ghosts of his two wives and leaves for an unspecified destination which is likely to involve an expensive sea-fare ticket.

The economic level of the main characters provides a further advantage: a place on stage and weekly wages for professional actors specialising in the role of servants. Like the heroes of classical drama, in Coward every protagonist has his servant or her maid. But there is something new going on: in 17th-century drama every appearance of a nurse or a tutor unloosed the floodtide of compromising or intimate revelations. The audience knew that it was about to find everything out: skeletons in the cupboard, muttered indiscretions, hints about illegitimate children abandoned by unspeakable relatives, heinous incestuous passions. In Coward's plays, when a servant comes on stage there is a parallel deafening silence. Conversation dries up and polite coughs ring out, with signalling glances of warning. People feel embarrassed as they hold their tongues, while the happy-go-lucky husband drones on despite the urgent hiss of his spouse: "Careful, darling, not in front of the servants." These servants are both present and absent on stage, and it is easy to forget their names, as in *Hay Fever*, or their presence, as in *Fallen Angels* (1925). Apart from just a few exceptions, Coward's servants are merely part of the house or the furniture. When they come to life, the resultant comedy of relations between the drawing-room and the kitchen has a Wodehousian stamp, though the classic Jeeves/Bertie Wooster relationship actually conceals a much richer interplay.

Wodehouse's values are very close to those of the hare-brained young aristocrat, but his

intelligence brings him naturally closer to the intellectual in residence, the family's butler. Loyalty and sympathy between representatives of totally different social classes is Wodehouse's favoured subject, and he plays on it in a series of reactionary novels devoted to one of the few resounding heroes of the servant class which European literature has produced after Ruy Blas. As we know, Jeeves is in a position to offer guarded disapproval of his master's tie, while his master even more timidly disapproves of Jeeves' female friends. In this area of subject-matter, Coward still figures as a parvenu who has scarcely learnt how to conduct himself in a drawing-room. He runs too great a risk when he tries to smuggle his jokes from the servants' quarters up to those of the masters.

IN *Relative Values*, for example, we have one of his most ridiculous plots, with a blown-up Jeeves figure on whom the intellectual responsibility for the whole house rests. Here the condescending paternalism of Coward grates on the nerves, since the butler can exert his intelligence provided he knows how to keep his place in the household. In Wodehouse the masters wield all the power but are fatally stupid, so that the author's lack of social conscience works in precisely this direction, broadcasting this lack of awareness. Coward on the other hand seems to harbour a lingering fear that his dinner-jacket might be confused with the servant's livery. This social uneasiness is visible in *Nude with Violin* (1956) where the polyglot butler Sebastien replies to constant telephone calls in five different languages. There is the exchange where Clinton says: "Do you ever think of Wagner?" and Sebastien answers: "Constantly." I imagine Jeeves would have said: "Not so much recently, Sir. I haven't seen the Ring Cycle all through for just over two years." Coward is far too cautious both in his social stance and in his cultural display. A comparison with the Wodehouse scene which pre-dates the one in Coward brings out the different style and class of the two writers. I'm referring to that crucial moment in Bertie Wooster's career as an eligible bachelor when Jeeves advises against the reading of Nietzsche. Nietzsche had been unjudiciously suggested by a recent fiancée, the unforgettable Honoria Glossop, daughter of Sir Roderick, the head-shrinker. Maybe Wodehouse hasn't read Nietzsche but he knows what it's all about and he's not afraid of being caught napping. In *Nude with Violin* Sebastien's funny repartee covers a chip on somebody's shoulder. One never knows what is going to happen if one starts meddling with Wagner.

In other words Coward is a bit of a charlatan and this is a good thing for his plays. His elegance and aristocratic demeanour are a trifle forced. He turns into a worldly writer with all the snob-bishness of a man who has even learnt to do his Social Climbing with airs and graces. His plays offered a High Society package for a public that was half-way up the ladder and therefore accepted its values. The main thing is not to be duped by Coward's tricks. We must learn how to criticise as well as appreciate the effervescent wit of his plays. *Fallen Angels*, for example, has recently been revived in this country. It features two well-off couples who behave in symmetrical fashion towards an eccentric outsider. The latter is a Frenchman, rich, elegant, good-looking, and he sings songs that say "*Je t'aime, je t'aime, je t'aime, je t'aime.*" This character pays court to the two wives, and causes tempestuous dilemmas in the tea-cup morality of this petit-bourgeois world. Here Coward seems to fail in his authorial intent not because the play is stupidly snobbish, but because it is stupidly stupid. Elsewhere the High Society ethos works in all its frivolity, as in *Private Lives* or in *Design for Living*, because of the very ostentatiousness with which frivolity is presented. Coward's best plays are not just frivolous: they become a defence of frivolousness, and herein lies their peculiar strength, as can be seen from the following quotations taken out of the two plays:

OTTO: The Methodists wouldn't approve of us, and the Catholics wouldn't either; and the Evangelists and the Episcopalians and the Anglicans and the Christian Scientists—I don't suppose even the Polynesian Islanders would think very highly of us, but they wouldn't mind quite so much, being so far away. They could all club together—the whole lot of them—and say with perfect truth, according to their lights, that we were loose-living, irreligious, unmoral degenerates, couldn't they?

GILDA: (*meekly*) Yes, Otto, I expect so.

OTTO: But the whole point is, it's none of their business. We're not doing any harm to anyone else. We're not peppering the world with illegitimate children. The only people we could possibly mess up are ourselves, and that's our lookout.

(*Design for Living*, Act II)

ELYOT: Don't you believe in anything?

AMANDA: Oh yes, I believe in being kind to everyone, and giving money to old beggar women, and being as gay as possible.

(*Private Lives*, Act II)

ELYOT: (*seriously*) You mustn't be serious, my dear one, it's just what they want.

AMANDA: Who's they?

ELYOT: All the futile moralists who try to make life unbearable. Laugh at them. Be flippant. Laugh at everything, all their sacred shibboleths. Flippancy brings out the acid in their damned sweetness and light.

(*Private Lives*, Act II)

On the one hand we know full well that these

characters are monsters of callousness, generously offering *brioche*s to people who need *bread*. Yet Otto is in the right: frivolous people harm no one, they don't murder, torture or invent gas-chambers. At worst they may kill the odd passer-by with their careless driving. So up with frivolity, and with a writer who devised an aesthetics of frivolousness. Not only the writer but the reader must become frivolous in order to accept the unwritten laws which regulate his plays. Vera Williams, one of Elyot's ex-mistresses in *Private Lives*, "had the nastiest looking hairbrush I had never seen." Paradoxically this crazy remark provides information to accredited listeners, as none of them could subsequently even dream of seeking Vera Williams's acquaintance, or of any woman who brandished such a hairbrush. The malice behind social small-talk forms the natural foundation of Coward's texts, and it is bound to be cruel. It requires little heart, an acutely aimed eye and a ready tongue.

George Steiner reproduces a long scene from the first Act of *Private Lives* in his book *After Babel* (1975), and makes the following comment: "The dialogue is a brittle wonder, as perfect within its trivial bounds as comparable scenes in Congreve and Marivaux." I would go even further than this, since neither Marivaux nor Congreve could have written an Act which is so "perfect"

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in its frivolousness as the whole first Act of *Private Lives*. Steiner dwells on the sentimental moments in Noël Coward, whereas I would like to concentrate on the nasty wit of the dialogue:

AMANDA: Have you known her long?
 ELYOT: About four months, we met in a house party in Norfolk.
 AMANDA: Very flat, Norfolk.
 ELYOT: How old is dear Victor?
 AMANDA: Thirty-four, or five; and Sibyl?
 ELYOT: I blush to tell you, only twenty-three.
 AMANDA: You've gone a mucker alright.
 ELYOT: I shall reserve my opinion of your choice until I've met dear Victor.
 AMANDA: I wish you wouldn't go on calling him "Dear Victor." It's extremely irritating.
 ELYOT: That's how I see him. Dumpy, and fair, and very considerate, with glasses. Dear Victor.
 AMANDA: As I said before I would rather not discuss him. At least I have good taste enough to refrain from making cheap gibes at Sibyl.
 ELYOT: You said Norfolk was flat.
 AMANDA: That was no reflection on her, unless she made it flatter.

(*Private Lives*, Act I)

I see this as a consummate point of arrival for theatrical dialogue: it exploits the resources of word and action, deploying intonation and repetition, cadence, implication and allusiveness—in other words the whole semantic potentiality of a conversation. Words here not only mean what the dictionary prescribes, but they also carry an added meaning dictated and imposed by the author. We do not have two developed characters as such—the play could not accommodate them—but we have two distinct voices. The ramification of their trite, everyday words, such as "Dear Victor", leads to a host of subsidiary allusions. The conceptual shift between geological plane and anatomical endowment suggested by the flatness of Norfolk is carried out with a delicacy as striking as the malice that prompts it. Possibly the context is trivial but the treatment is worthy of great theatre. That *iteratio* "Dear Victor" in three contexts with three separate meanings is a rhetorical manoeuvre as refined as Mark Antony's antiphrasis in his speech to the Roman people in *Julius Caesar*.

COWARD'S PLAYS also reserve remarkable structural surprises. Usually we have a game of love and chance that seems to follow the abstract rules of a ballet, or a society parlour game. These games are in fact common in Coward's plays (see *Bitter Sweet*, Act I; *Hay Fever*, Act II), and can be assessed as a minor symbol of the plot itself. The characters follow patterns of non-psychological behaviour with fixed rules which oblige them to court or not to court a given lady, as the case may be; to betray or not to betray a husband; to pretend a great

passion or total indifference. All of them inject the same worldly energy into their stereotyped adventures as they would into a parlour game. Thus the game that most closely matches the tone of the plays is Musical Chairs, for we have different pairs of performers, lovers, fiancés, married people, joining and parting according to the rhythmic pattern of music and dialogue.

The whole manner concerns the basic objective of producing a "well made" play, proportionately more predictable and less stimulating than the firebrand scenes which have revolutionised modern theatre. But symmetrical satisfaction is an important aesthetic consideration in Coward's plays, and is frequently derived from the mirror-image patterns produced by love-intrigue after the imitable model of *Così fan tutte*. The intrigues can be repeated, or reversed, or parallel and matching: thus in the first Act of *Design for Living* Gilda conceals from her present lover Otto the fact that Leo, her occasional lover, is somewhere in the bedroom; in Act II Gilda conceals from her new lover, Leo, the fact that Otto is now in her bedroom; in Act III both Otto and Leo are discovered in pyjamas inside the house of Gilda's new husband. In *Hay Fever* there is an eccentric family composed of a father who writes, a mother who acts, a son who paints and a daughter who does nothing. They invite four guests for the week-end with amorous intentions, but the four possible couples are uncoupled in Act I, form new couplings in Act II and then peter out in Act III. But there will be no illegitimate children: we recall that frivolous characters must only harm themselves, or at the very worst cause their friends to pass a "horrid" weekend. In *Present Laughter* (1939) we see a series of early morning embarrassments when different and unexpected women emerge from the guest's room wearing the host's pyjamas and demanding rapid service of a hearty breakfast. *Private Lives*, probably Coward's masterpiece, presents the famous situation of a divorced couple on their respective second honeymoons; they occupy two adjoining balconies of the same hotel in Deauville—notice how Coward's geography is as predictable as the tactics to be followed in the double-coincidence plot. These characters become pretexts for a combinative product, playing cards designed for a patience game which follows the same patterns in a different outward form.

Coward was only partly aware of this. Sometimes we may even suspect that the author takes his playing cards for something rather different, as though even the Queen of Clubs could have a "psychology" of her own—and the banished word, "psychology", turns up on the lips of Garry Essendine, Coward's *alter ego* in *Present*

Laughter, in a clamorously incongruous reference to Chekhov's plays. In point of fact the string of characters does not offer a psychological cast but a behavioural series to the observer. Coward is a pure behaviourist who can manipulate all the expected responses. He knows just how to wind up his mechanical toys so as to produce a rigid but amusing chain of reactions. Suppose, for example, the first wife is instinctively jealous of the second, and the first husband of the next one (the opposite way round is unthinkable in Coward's behaviouristic universe). The result of these jealousies is the "Dear Victor" dialogue and the remarks on the flatness of Norfolk. These plays exist because the characters have no real existence. If they really did exist, their roundness would slow down the rhythm of pure action. This rhythm is often "frantic" like the life-style in the Essendine household (*Present Laughter*), which is torn apart by collaborators, colleagues, ex-mistresses, wives in retirement or moth-balls, together with aspiring playwrights, secretaries and rivals. The same goes for *Blithe Spirit*, which is subtitled an "improbable farce in Three Acts", but is really the most plausible of Coward's plays despite its supernatural elements. The character of the psychic medium, Madame Arcati, and both the wives (whether in flesh and blood or in ectoplasm) are felicitous in their pure behavioural credibility—provided we admit that human beings have a range of reactions that can be compared to the chimpanzee.

AS WELL AS BEING a pure behaviourist, Coward is also a perfect hedonist, that is to say, someone who is unaware of, or evasive about, passion. "Passion", of course, does not mean the search for pleasure, but the search for real extremes of pleasure, and hence of pain. "It's so uncomfortable—passion", says Julia in *Fallen Angels*, and Fred, her husband, comments: "I think it's awfully silly of people to lead unhappy lives." Julia's programme is the following: "Complete happiness and tranquillity devoid of violent emotions of any kind with the possible exception of golf." So it will be sufficient to avoid excesses and search systematically for moderate pleasures—bank balance permitting—and all your troubles will fade away. Admittedly there is love, which complicates things, but this too can be made pleasant, light and easy like a dance movement. The moment of greatest intensity in love is suggested by the pirouette of a suitor on the sofa, beyond the familiar obstacle, into the arms of his beloved. Otto: "To hell with the sofa!" (*he vaults over it and takes her in his arms*), *Design for Living*, Act II. The sofa is the pivot around which circulates the whole story for the duration of

Act II of *Private Lives*. *Love à la Coward* involves a certain commitment and a measure of sexual gratification. But there is a strong caveat: sex is a highly over-rated form of enjoyment and so are honeymoons (*Private Lives*, Act I). It is worth allowing the playwright Garry Essendine in *Present Laughter* to express his point of view in full:

GARRY: Joanna's different again. She devotes a great deal of time to sex but not for any of the intrinsic pleasure of it, merely as a means to an end. She's a collector. A go-getter, an attractive, unscrupulous pirate. I personally am none of these things. To me the whole business is vastly over-rated. I enjoy it for what it's worth and fully intend to go on doing so for as long as anybody's interested and when the time comes that they're not I shall be perfectly content to settle down with an apple and a good book!

(*Present Laughter*, Act III)

In short, sex is something that is "beastly and rotten", and when it takes place it ruins everything (Julia in *Fallen Angels*). Passion is something different since it has a just place in the dictionary and so is surely right. Yet the vocabulary of passion is clearly seen to be mendacious. Here the case of *Blithe Spirit* is the most interesting. When Madame Arcati, the medium, argues that it was Charles's passion which called back the spirits of his first and second wives, one after the other, the husband is suddenly faced by a practical verification of his amorous vocabulary. In other words, not only did he say that he loved his first and second wives, but he actually did love them passionately. This idea absolutely bowls Charles over:

MADAME ARCATI: Love is a strong psychic force, Mr Commandines—it can work untold miracles—a true love can encompass the world.

CHARLES: I am sure it can, but I must confess to you frankly that although my affection for both Elvira and Ruth is of the warmest, I cannot truthfully feel that it would come under the heading that you describe.

(*Blithe Spirit*, Act III)

The semantic ambiguity of that superlative "warmest" betrays the hypocrisy inherent in the language. And as for hypocritical behaviour, we must consider the obsessive use of pyjamas in Coward. The sign of the erotic is far from the seven veils of Salomé, or the bikini of Raquel Welch, or the G-string of the striptease artiste, but rather a pair of silk pyjamas with monogrammed initials. Perhaps these people conducted their whole love-lives in pyjamas, like the Japanese with their kimonos in 18th-century erotic prints. And then, when everything is done, off they go to their separate rooms: the seducer to his bedroom, the seduced into the guest-room (*Present Laughter*, Acts I and II). Coward is a theoretician of passion in the house-coat, of love in pyjamas, of sensual transports in a *liseuse*, with shawl optional.

PERHAPS COWARD is aware that behind him there is a shadow that belongs to the forbidding figure of Oscar Wilde. Indeed, the cucumber sandwich which the ghost of Elvira would like to eat in *Blithe Spirit* is practically an act of homage to the author of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. However, we must draw a distinction: Coward's cynical jokes are totally inconsequential and die in their own time. Wilde's humour, on the contrary, is unforeseeable, and once he starts off on a string of his paradoxes nobody has a clue where he is going to end up. Coward seems to have understood everything about Wilde except his "greatness", but one of Coward's merits is that he could assess his own relative "smallness." There is a pleasant vein of ironic self-depreciation in Coward that makes his frivolity all the more acceptable. His semi-autobiographical characters, especially the hero of *Present Laughter*, where Coward seems to be

observing himself in the mirror—not without some measure of gratification—are exaggeratedly likable, excessively witty, irresistibly attractive; but they are also nicely ludicrous. In *Design for Living* the playwright Leo is described as one who "flips along with easy swift dialogue, but doesn't go deep enough" (Act II). His plays are not just "thin" but also "emaciated." The aspiring writer says to Garry Essendine in *Present Laughter*: "All you do with your talent is to wear dressing-gowns and make witty remarks", and this observation is much too pertinent in the context of Coward himself to be totally accidental. This particular arrow is sighted very close to the real target. Possibly Coward, aware of being a prodigiously gifted author, wanted to be different, to be capable of writing pungently, whereas instead his writing merely titillates. It fits the definition of Alexander Pope: "'Tis a sort of writing like tickling."

Joining Loose Threads

A Japanese Romance—By D. J. ENRIGHT

A NEW TRANSLATION, in 1100 closely set though handsome pages, of the early 11th-century classic Japanese romance. . . . A phenomenon which, in view of its originality and unprecedented scope, can only be likened to a combination of *Antony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale* (with a dash of *Love's Labour's Lost*) appearing in full flower against a backcloth of *Gammer Gurton's Needle* and *Gorboduc*. . . . To review it is analogous to reviewing the Revised Version, and inevitably comparing it with King James's—except that the general tendency of the Bible is rather better known than *The Tale of Genji*.¹ What can one say, and where can one start to say it?

Perhaps, on the grounds that he may be addressing the common reader, the reviewer may venture upon a few common and possibly vulgar observations. The hero of Lady Murasaki's *Tale*, or the larger part of it since Genji dies two-thirds of the way through, is that not uncommon fictional character, the Great Lover—potent, gifted, irresistible, and nice with it. Genji is

too good to be true, until sadness sets in. But that *The Tale of Genji* is not a "romance" in the pejorative modern sense, that it is not simply a Heian fantasy of an earlier and better Heian world, an altogether more sophisticated version of England's Restoration comedy at its most sophisticated, is indicated by reference to other 10th- and 11th-century Japanese women writers. And, most forcibly, Murasaki Shikibu's contemporary, Sei Shōnagon, whose *Pillow Book*² reveals her as an astringent, forthright and unromanticising witness while testifying to the general authenticity of Murasaki's more dream-like impressions.

The effect of reality in *Genji*, as opposed to fantasy, is assisted by the author's occasional cool intervention; for example, at the end of Chapter 4:

"I had hoped, out of deference to him, to conceal these difficult matters; but I have been accused of romancing, of pretending that because he was the son of an emperor he had no faults. Now, perhaps, I shall be accused of having revealed too much."

And rather more comically: "Though no one has asked me to do so, I should like to describe the surprise of the assistant viceroy's wife at this turn of events", she writes in concluding Chapter 15, "but it would be a bother and my head is aching." In Chapter 25 there occurs a passage

¹ *The Tale of Genji*. By MURASAKI SHIKIBU. Translated with an Introduction by EDWARD G. SEIDENSTICKER. Two volumes. Secker & Warburg, £15.

² See the late Ivan Morris's exhaustively annotated translation, 1967; also, in a general connection, his book *The World of the Shining Prince*, 1964.