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# BOOKS & WRITERS

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## Telmah

### *To the Sunderland Station—By TERENCE HAWKES*

THE STORY BEGINS on a train proceeding from Leeds to Sunderland one Saturday evening in November 1917. On that train, a man is opening his mail. Among his letters he discovers a square envelope containing the issue of the *Modern Language Review* (Vol. XII, No. 4) for October 1917. Leafing through it, he finds himself attracted to a particular article and, "all unconscious of impending fate" as he puts it, begins to read.

The effect, to say the least, is odd. In fact, he later uses the term "overwhelming" and speaks of the experience as capable of throwing "any mind off its balance." The man was the Shakespearean scholar and critic John Dover Wilson, then aged 36. The article was by W. W. Greg and it was entitled "Hamlet's Hallucination."

The thrust of Greg's article lies in his clear perception that something goes badly wrong with Hamlet's plans right at the beginning of the scheme he has devised to test the veracity of his father's ghost. The Ghost claims that he has been murdered by his brother, Claudius. Hamlet has organised an entertainment in the form of a play, *The Mousetrap*, whose story is so close to that of the murder that Claudius, watching the play, is bound to reveal his guilt by his response to it. *The Mousetrap* opens with a dumb-show presenting the stark details of the murder. But Claudius fails to make any response at all.

The "full significance" of that, Greg argues, has never been appreciated. Claudius's failure to respond means, quite simply, that the Ghost has failed the test aimed at establishing its veracity. There is no doubt, of course, that Claudius has murdered King Hamlet. The doubts are as to the mode and method of the act—and in this respect the Ghost is clearly revealed, Greg says, to fall short as an "objective" reporter. He hasn't given Hamlet true information. The "orthodox view" of the play, which requires an objective truth-bearing Ghost, with Claudius properly indicted by its testimony as the dastardly poisoning villain of the story, ignores or tries to think "around" the dumb show. It argues, say, that the King and Queen are in close conversation at the time and so pay no attention to what is going on. This explanation, says Greg, "is

indeed a lame one": it treats the play as "history", not drama. Such critics inquire "why Hamlet behaved in a ridiculous way, when the question they should have asked was why Shakespeare did—or whether he did."

For Greg, the "extraordinary nature" of the dumb show needs to be grasped. If we do so, we can see how genuinely upsetting Claudius's negative response is. Its effect is to "promote" Claudius: to make him more intriguing, his actions and his motives more complex. He becomes a *victim* of the Ghost's malicious reportage as much as a moustache-twirling villain in terms of the way the play is usually seen. In fact, he acquires a standing much more appropriate to the play's nomination of him as Hamlet's "mighty opposite": an impressive figure of potentially tragic stature. On the basis of the orthodox Hamlet-centred interpretation of the play, Claudius's response to the dumb show "not merely threatens the logical structure of one of the most crucial scenes of the play, but reduces it to meaningless confusion." As a result, Greg concludes, "we have to choose between giving up Shakespeare as a rational playwright, and giving up our inherited beliefs regarding the story of *Hamlet*."

Sixty-five years later, something of the panache of Greg's argument still communicates itself to us, though its potential as light reading for a Yorkshire Saturday night and Sunday morning might perhaps be a matter for dispute. What cannot be disputed is its effect on Dover Wilson. I have described this as odd: a better phrase might be "seriously disturbing", even "mind-blowing." He himself describes it as "an intensely felt experience" which resulted in "a state of some considerable excitement." It filled him, he reports, with "a sort of insanity", and cast upon him, in his own words of eighteen years later, "a spell which changed the whole tenor of my existence, and still dominates it in part." Give up Shakespeare as a rational playwright indeed! Give up our inherited beliefs! Having read the article "half a dozen times before reaching Sunderland", an almost Pauline sense of mission seems to have descended: "from the first [I] realised that I had been born to answer it."

WHY SUCH A HEATED RESPONSE to an article in a learned journal? And why—perhaps more interestingly—is it recorded in such detail eighteen years later, as part of the prolegomena to Dover Wilson's book *What Happens in Hamlet* (1935)?

We might, of course, pick up the not-quite-covert hint that the response is itself engagingly Hamlet-like. Dover Wilson describes what he calls his own "spiritual condition" at the time as "critical, not to say dangerous, a condition in which a man becomes converted, falls in love, or gives way to a mania for wild speculation." The War had its pressures, we are given to understand, and it perhaps did not seem inappropriate—it might even seem appealing—that a personality so highly charged might experience a reaction to such a situation which could be (as another critic was to put it of *Hamlet*) "in excess of the facts as they appear." Of course, a lot depends on how the facts are made to appear.

We can begin with the fact that, in November 1917, the War was not the only source of deep-seated disturbance in the world. On any of the Saturdays in that month, news of the impending or actual Bolshevik Revolution in Russia was likely to have been competing with news from the fronts. We have Dover Wilson's own statement that "I found it difficult to concentrate upon anything unconnected with the War", and also his comment that, spending a lot of his time in trains, "... the hours of travel were mostly occupied in reading the newspapers ..."

A glance at the newspapers of November 1917 confirms that the Bolshevik action received wide coverage, and one could reasonably assume Dover Wilson's awareness of the events from that. On Saturday 3 November, *The Times* reported "Persistent rumours in Petrograd of the imminence of armed action by the Maximalists [i.e. Bolsheviks] whose object is to seize the supreme power." The *coup* actually took place on Wednesday-Thursday, 7-8 November (by the Russian calendar, this was 25-26 October). On Friday 9 November, extensive reports appeared in *The Times* ("Anarchy in Petrograd: Power Seized by Lenin...") with editorial comment of a predictable nature: "... the most extreme party in the Soviet appears to be in power ... it is assuredly not the authentic voice of Russia." By Saturday 10 November, what *The Times* was then calling "The Lenin Revolution" was fully reported, together with an extensive account of what the headlines termed "Siege of the Winter Palace", and on both Saturday 17 November and Saturday 24 November there appeared lengthy reports headed "Civil Strife in Petrograd", "Russia's Starving Armies", etc. It would have been difficult for a newspaper reader to be unaware of these events.

<sup>1</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-45* (1965), p. 39.

It adds a dimension to the picture, and gives something of an edge to what we may presume to be the *quality* of Dover Wilson's awareness, if we take into account the nature of the mission on which he was currently engaged: his reason, that is, for being on that particular train at that particular time.

Dover Wilson's main employment then was as a school inspector for the Board of Education, stationed at Leeds. But, in common with other inspectors, he was also from time to time used in some war work: specifically, as an inspector for the Ministry of Munitions. The reason why he was travelling to Sunderland had to do with that work, and with a particular crisis concerning it. "Some trouble", as he decorously puts it, "had arisen with local trade-union officials" in Sunderland, and Dover Wilson had been urgently dispatched there to sort it out.

IT IS WORTH reminding ourselves that the Ministry of Munitions presented at that time an unusual and, to some, a rather dangerous spectacle in terms of British labour relations. The pressures of the War (including the arrival of women workers) had created a situation in which, to use A. J. P. Taylor's words, the local shop-stewards "were often revolutionary socialists ... some of them were opposed to the war." This meant that they found themselves frequently in conflict with "official" and conservative trade union policy, since they represented a much wider working-class interest in the face of it. Ministers such as Lloyd George and, by 1917, Churchill were forced to work "hand in hand with the revolutionary shop-stewards" despite "growls of protest" from the unions.<sup>1</sup>

For "trouble" to occur at any time in the munitions industry was obviously bad enough. Negotiations at local level with what were later indeed called "Bolshevik" shop-stewards must have been, if you'll pardon the expression, a potentially explosive business. Such trouble occurring in November 1917 would certainly have had a capacity for uncontrolled detonation more than sufficient to generate a "critical, not to say dangerous" condition (the submerged metaphor is of impending combustion) in a man about to be ignited by a copy of the *Modern Language Review*.

Insurrection was in the air. On the first day of the Bolshevik *coup* (7 November), speaking, by chance, in the House of Lords, the Marquess of Salisbury had warned that

"The governing classes hitherto had been inclined to regard the working class as a sort of dangerous animal of enormous strength and great potential violence, which it was necessary to be very civil to, but never to trust."

In short, the revolutionary proposals of Greg's article on *Hamlet* must have fallen into a powder

keg of a mind already in some degree prepared to be "blown" into "a sort of insanity" by them just as, in the wider context towards which the Leeds-Sunderland train seemed to be speeding, certain events were already shaking the world.

**B**EFORE DISMISSING THIS VIEW as one which makes far too much out of a mere coincidence of dates, certain other aspects of what is really rather a complex situation should be borne in mind. First, it is Dover Wilson himself who gives all the facts, as it were compulsively, in a "letter" entitled "The Road to Elsinore, being an Epistle Dedicatory to Walter Wilson Greg" which prefaces his highly influential book *What Happens in Hamlet*. The apparently immodest, unreserved commitment to total exposition of that book's title lends its own confessional, bean-spilling air to the letter, and of course vice versa.

The literary device of the publicly printed letter has always exploited means of communication generated by its paradoxical mode. As a document whose standing is both private and public at the same time, it "means" both by what it is seen to offer, in confidence, and by what it is seen to withhold, in public. It operates, that is to say, both directly, by intimate revelation, and indirectly, by evident obfuscation and suppression. The two methods of signifying are equated and intimately involved. What it says and what it does not say, its utterances and its silences, are both meaningful: each is an aspect of the other. In *this* letter, the overt commitment is to the whole truth. Greg is told "you may have guessed something of this, but you cannot know it all." The letter will thus tell all. It will explain "the origin and purpose of this book", take us to the source of what happened before *What Happens in Hamlet* happened, and thus lead us, in effect, to the root cause of its writing. That origin is precisely, specifically and insistently dated in a spirit of "classic realism": "It begins some time in the November of 1917... I reached home one Saturday evening to find an urgent telephone message awaiting me. . . ." The related, concomitant silence, however, is no less insistent. There is absolutely no mention before or after of the Bolshevik Revolution.

I think we can regard that silence as resonant, and not simply because of the interest of the Revolution itself, or because of any potential connection, however oblique, between it and Dover Wilson's current journey (Sunderland lacks a Winter Palace, but things have to start somewhere). It could be seen as finally a matter of discourse. The discourse of literary criticism in Britain and America, then and now, tends to exclude the area of politics as not overtly appropriate to itself and its purposes. It would seem literally unreason-

able for a literary critic to take such issues on board as, no doubt, it seems unreasonable for me to do so now.

But the truth is that Dover Wilson had to hand, and was perfectly capable of using, another discourse designed exactly for that purpose. There is, it seems to me, great significance in respect of the way discourses operate in the fact that he makes no mention of the Bolshevik Revolution. For it means that no connection is drawn between it and his present highly emotional state by a man who had lived within the Russian Empire (in Finland) for three years, who by his own account had become, on his return to Britain, "a well known public lecturer" on the subject of Russia, who was currently, as he writes to Greg, making "fitful and unsuccessful attempts to learn Russian", and who on more than one previous occasion had written coolly, seriously, and at length about exactly this possibility of revolution in Russia and its likely consequences.

**I**N 1906, DOVER WILSON's article "The Aims and Methods of the Social Revolutionary Party in Russia" appeared in *The Independent Review* (Vol. XI, pp. 137-50). It begins by making my central point for me: that a revolution in Russia (he is referring of course to the revolution of 1905) must be an event of considerable significance for Western Europe and that there can be no excuse for any suppression of awareness of it:

"The newspapers have been undeniably generous in the space devoted to the 'Russian Revolution', and no Englishman has any excuse for being ignorant of the fact that, from one end to the other of the great eastern plain of Europe which we agree to call Russia, a gigantic civil war is now being waged—a war which must to a large extent determine the destinies not only of Russia, but also of Europe as a whole."

The piece goes on to make what, even to entirely unsophisticated eyes, seems a somewhat oversimple analysis of Russia's political structure. "Russia possesses only two revolutionary factions of any real importance: the Social Revolutionaries and the Social Democrats." But, naive or not, the future reader of Greg's revolutionary proposals concerning *Hamlet* leaves us in no doubt that, of those factions, the programme of the Social Revolutionaries is infinitely preferable to that advanced by the Social Democrats. The latter, being "founded on the theories of a German doctrinaire", can have no success in the face of the former, whose Fabian mode especially recommends it and ensures, for Dover Wilson, that it finds its basis in "real Russian institutions." The future of the country thus "clearly lies with the Social Revolutionaries"—a situation confirmed by the fact that the

wretched Social Democrats had recently split into two parties, the Minority and the Majority, thus demonstrating their hopelessness. These two factions could confidently be consigned to outer darkness and forgotten. The Social Revolutionaries—whose policy of terrorism Dover Wilson explains, condones, and approves (he says it seems to be having “a distinctly beneficial result”)—win his support, for “the future of their country lies with them.”

Everybody makes mistakes, and a man who has espoused the cause of the Social Revolutionary party so wholeheartedly—even to the extent of condoning its commitment to terrorism—and who has so roundly dismissed the claims of the competing Social Democrats, whether Menshevik (as the Minority group was called) or Bolshevik (as the Majority group was called), a man who has uttered so confidently might reasonably and significantly fall silent on the subject.

IN FACT, Dover Wilson committed himself yet again to the same issue in 1914. In a piece called “Russia and her Ideals” in *The Round Table* for December of that year (Vol. 5, No. 17, pp. 103–35), he offers, in his own words, to correct prejudices: to look Russia “straight in the eyes, that we may hope to catch a glimpse of her soul.” The glimpse reveals, he assures us, a deep craving for order, arising

out of a constant struggle for self-preservation. Autocracy comes almost naturally to be the only form of government for such a society: “A State whose very existence is perpetually at stake, for whom discipline is the primary need, has really no choice but to place itself in the hands of an imperator, a Caesar, a Tsar.” As a result, autocracy in Russia is best seen as “part of religion itself”, with the Czar as God’s “representative upon earth.” Anything more complex, he concludes, would only puzzle the Russians, for Czardom is more than autocracy in their case; it is theocracy. And he adds, with the confidence of one who has gazed straight in the eyes of the teeming millions, “As both it is intensely representative of the national mind and character.”

The principle of autocracy, he continues, is thus the only principle that mind and that character can understand, and it would therefore be wrong to countenance any disturbance of it. Autocracy, he assures us—in 1914—

“still has a long life before it and much work to perform in Russia. It is therefore wiser to face the facts and to recognize that the Tsardom is after all Russia’s form of democracy . . . it is the kind of government the people understand and reverence, and it is their only protection against the tyranny of an aristocratic clique . . . when the will of the autocrat is clearly and unmistakably

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## CHICAGO

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expressed, it has always been found to correspond with the needs of the people. . . .”

Those who asked “How wrong can you be?” of Dover Wilson’s 1906 article are partly answered here. You can be *much* wronger. But the piece is certainly not without interest on another level. World-picture fanciers will already have recognised in it a version of what, by the time of the Second World War, had become a standard British response to national crisis: the construction of long-past, green, alternative worlds of percipient peasants, organic communities, festivals, folk-art, and absolute monarchy to set against present chaos. Dover Wilson’s revised Russian World Picture of 1914 has developed, since his essay of 1906, features which surface regularly in our century as part of a recurrent siege mentality. It thus has much more than a coincidental resemblance to E. M. W. Tillyard’s well-known war-effort of 1943, *The Elizabethan World Picture*. A discourse which, seeking for the final, confirming presence of authority, nominates the linchpin of the political structure as “God’s representative on earth” is clearly heard in both.<sup>2</sup> Each represents less an accurate picture of the world it purports to describe than an intimate, covert measure of its author’s fears about the fallen world in which he currently lives, and in the face of which he has constructed a peculiarly English Eden.

IT ISN’T JUST a question of getting it wrong, wronger, or wrongest. The point is that the decided modification in Dover Wilson’s views about Russia which takes place between 1906 and 1914—moving from an early commitment to Fabianism to a subsequent rejection of it in favour of Czarism—represents a serious narrowing of options, a growing sense of urgency, and a harder and harder line. And it is thus a modification which, given the previous confidence about insights into “national mind and character”, must have lent the *actual* events of November 1917, when they occurred, the quality of a nightmare, turning them into a horror of such proportions that perhaps no overt response to them was possible.

This is what I mean when I say that the absence of any mention of the Bolshevik Revolution in Dover Wilson’s account of his train journey strikes me as significant. It signifies, of course, that the Bol-

<sup>2</sup> In 1914, Dover Wilson also contributed, together with R. W. Seton-Watson, Alfred L. Zimmern and Arthur Greenwood, to a volume called *The War and Democracy* (Macmillan, 1914). In a chapter devoted to a comprehensive overview of Russia, he wrote of “the grand simple life they lead in the fields, a life of toil indeed but of toil sweet and infinitely varied”, etc. The Russians, he claims, have achieved Democracy, have virtually realised all the principles of Liberty, Fraternity, Equality, and indeed can be said to have “discovered the secret of existence.”

shevik Revolution *is* in effect being responded to, coped with, in that “intensely felt experience”, that “spell which changed the whole tenor of my existence”, and that “sort of insanity” provoked by Greg’s article on *Hamlet*.

Greg’s attack, after all, is on the smooth surface of the play, seen as the product of Shakespeare the “rational playwright”, but effectively, of course, created by an “orthodox” interpretation which seeks for unity, progression, coherence and, if possible, sequential ordering in all art, as part of a ruthless and rigorous process of domestication. There is no obvious way of placating Greg’s objections to that sort of *Hamlet*, for they constitute a frontal assault on what he terms the “inherited beliefs”—that brand of literary Czarism—which reinforce and sustain it. And the assault is certainly not Fabian in character. It is directly, violently, Bolshevik.

DOVER WILSON’S DEFENCE took various forms. There was an immediate diagnostic response to the editor of the *Modern Language Review* in the form of a postcard dispatched upon alighting from the train at Sunderland, which went so far as to nominate Greg as an unwitting agent of the arch-revolutionary himself: “Greg’s article devilish ingenious but damnably wrong”, it twinkled, and offered a rejoinder, which duly appeared.

There followed two major salvos: the edition of *Hamlet* prepared by Dover Wilson for the New Cambridge Shakespeare in 1934—a series of which he had become joint General Editor in 1921, provoked into the role, he says, by Greg’s article—and the book *What Happens in Hamlet*, which purports to release him from thrall to the problem, by telling all. Those interested in the details of his argument can pursue them there. Suffice it to say that I do not myself find them convincing, so much as replete with the charm and ingenuity of the truly desperate. To suggest that Claudius does not notice the dumb-show, engaged as he is in conversation with Polonius and Gertrude, seeks to “naturalise” the situation out of existence. The further suggestion that the Players (a burlesque of Edward Alleyn and Shakespeare’s rivals the Lord Admiral’s Men) constitute a kind of surly trade union, engaged in a dispute with their temporary boss, Hamlet, which provokes an unlooked-for work-to-rule, resulting in an unauthorised dumb-show as embarrassing to Hamlet as it is ineffective in respect of Claudius, so nearly proves my own point for me that I hesitate to use it, although connoisseurs will find it on pp. 153–63 of *What Happens in Hamlet*.

But if these represent Dover Wilson’s defence against Bolshevism in its specifically displaced Shakespearean form, it is possible also to suggest that the same battle was subsequently taken up on a

broader front by the same combatant. Two years later, in May 1919, a Departmental Committee was appointed by the President of the Board of Education to investigate what was termed "The Teaching of English in England." Its terms of reference were

"To inquire into the position occupied by English (Language and Literature) in the educational system of England, and to advise how its study may best be promoted in schools of all types, including Continuation Schools, and in Universities and other Institutions of Higher Education, regard being had to—

1. the requirements of a liberal education;
2. the needs of business, the professions, and public services; and
3. the relation of English to other studies."

The Committee's chairman was Sir Henry Newbolt, and prominent among its members was John Dover Wilson.

**M**ANY THINGS HAVE BEEN SAID about the Newbolt Report, as the published findings of the Committee became known. The first point to stress is that it was widely influential. It was snapped up, in Dover Wilson's words, "like a best-seller", and it can be said effectively to have shaped the nature of

"English" as the academic subject we know today. Its spiritual father is Matthew Arnold, its spiritual son F. R. Leavis. Its two central concerns—more or less overt—are related political ones: social cohesion in the face of potential disintegration and disaffection; and nationalism, the encouragement of pride in English national culture on a broader front.

The common coin of its discourse is generated by concepts we have already encountered: those of "national mind and character." English, in this light, is presented as "the only basis possible for a national education", being not merely the medium of our thought, but "the very stuff and process of it. It is itself the English mind." An education based on English would thus have a "unifying tendency", acting as an antidote to the divisiveness, the "bitterness and disintegration", of a class-dominated society. It would heal one of the major causes of "division amongst us": the "undue narrowness of the ground on which we meet for the true purposes of social life" (without specifying what those might be). Recognising that we are "not one nation but two", the study of English is capable of bridging, if not closing, the "chasm of separation", the "mental [sic] distances between classes." Offering a "bond of union between classes", it would "beget the right kind of national pride."

The Committee was in effect responding to the

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sort of view promoted by Lloyd George, when the War ended. Speaking at Manchester in September 1918, he had put the case that:

“The most formidable institution we had to fight in Germany was not the arsenals of Krupps or the yards in which they turned out submarines, but the schools of Germany. They were our most formidable competitors in business and our most terrible opponents in war. An educated man is a better worker, a more formidable warrior, and a better citizen.”

The Education Acts of 1918 (Fisher Act) and 1944 (Butler Act) are testimony to the fact that in Britain the threat of external disruption is usually the parent of educational change: certainly by 1919 events outside the United Kingdom had evidently carried a clear enough message to ministers within it. If there was a breathless hush in the close of Europe, it was not inappropriate that a committee chaired by Sir Henry Newbolt (for it is he) should be urging us, through the study of English language and literature, to “play up, play up, and play the game.”

Members of the Committee were allotted areas of special concern and among those assigned to Dover Wilson, he later tells us, was the one which appears in the report as Sections 232-38, “Literature and the Nation.” The thrust of these pages is that teaching literature to the working class is a kind of “missionary work”, whose aim is to stem the tide of that class’s by then evident disaffection. The missionary to Sunderland clearly sees that workers need to be embraced in the larger way of British life, and he leaves us in no doubt that this is a matter “involving grave national issues” to which the committee has given “much anxious thought.”

Workers, such “thought” urges, ought to feel that there is a national culture to which they can belong, and literature is offered as an instrument for promoting social cohesion in place of division. Its political role is quite clear:

“Literature, in fact, seems to be classed by a large number of thinking working men with anti-macassars, fish-knives and other unintelligible and futile trivialities of ‘middle-class culture,’ and, as a subject of instruction, is suspect as an attempt ‘to side-track the working-class movement.’ We regard the prevalence of such opinions as a serious matter, not merely because it means the alienation of an important section of the population from the ‘confort’ and ‘mirthe’ of literature, but chiefly because it points to a morbid condition of the body politic which if not taken in hand may be followed by lamentable consequences. For if literature be, as we believe, an embodiment of the best thoughts of the best minds, the most direct and lasting communication of experience by man to men, a fellowship which ‘binds together by passion and knowledge

the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time,’ then the nation of which a considerable portion rejects this means of grace, and despises this great spiritual influence, must assuredly be heading to disaster.”

As another member of the Committee put it (George Sampson, in *English for the English*, preface to 1925 edn): “Deny to working class children any common share in the immaterial and presently they will grow into the men who demand with menaces a communism of the material.”

**T**HE SPECTRE OF a working class demanding material goods with menaces, losing its national mind, besmirching its national character, clearly had a growing capacity to disturb after the events of 1917, particularly if that class, as Dover Wilson writes in the Newbolt Report, sees education “mainly as something to equip them to fight their capitalistic enemies. In the words of one young worker, ‘Yes, what you say is all right—but will that sort of stuff bring us more bread and cheese?’.”

To Dover Wilson—and to many others subsequently—the solution lay quite clearly in the sort of nourishment that English Literature offered: the snap, crackle and pop of its roughage a purgative force of considerable political power—not because it has a direct influence on what Dover Wilson (and others) called “the social problem”, but because of its indirect influence on what they certainly did not call ideology, but which is clearly signalled as such in the report’s references to a general, indeed a national, “state of mind.” If the “state of mind” is orientated wholly towards the “social problem”, the result is an unhealthy imbalance:

“This state of mind is not a new thing in history, and even goes back as far as Plato. It finds a parallel in the contempt for ‘poets, pipers, players, jesters and such-like caterpillars of the commonwealth’ expressed by puritans of the 16th and 17th centuries, and in the hostility towards the ‘culture of capitalism’ now prevalent in Bolshevik Russia.”

That hostility, that Bolshevism, is apparently best met by strengthening the character, through massive doses of poetry administered by a solicitous education system:

“... we believe that, if rightly presented, poetry will be recognized by the most ardent social reformers as of value, because while it contributes no specific solution of the social problem it endows the mind with power and sanity; because, in a word, it enriches personality.”

Personality! The very word is like a bell. The ideological position this signals—the commitment to individualism as a long-term solution to the social

problem—is a familiar one, and it remains the long-term position from which most teaching of literature is still mounted. Its political, economic and social implications are clearly spelled out in the Newbolt Report, and most clearly in those parts of the report that we know were written by Dover Wilson. The impulse generating that position, the stimulus to which it is a considered response, lies in the events which took place in Russia in November 1917, and the subsequent sense of betrayal experienced by the Allies in the face of the consequent German spring offensive of 1918 which nearly won the war for the Kaiser.

**M**Y POINT IS a simple one. Dover Wilson's response to Greg's article on that train to Sunderland in 1917 is an excellent example of the sort of interaction between literary interpretation and political and social concerns that always pertains, but which normally remains covert in our culture. To make it overt is to draw attention to the genuinely subversive nature of Greg's observation. For he indicates nothing less than a disquieting absence of coherence and stability at a key point in what, for English-speaking culture, ranks as a central and monumental text.

In this vein, a broader look at the play is hardly reassuring. We inherit, after all, a particular notion of *Hamlet* as a coherent story which runs a satisfactory, linear, sequential course from a firmly established and well-defined beginning, through a clearly placed and signalled middle, to a causally related and logically determined end which, planted in the beginning, develops or grows organically out of it. Yet those certainties crumble at a touch.

An opposite recursive movement, a looking backwards, a sense of revision or re-interpretation, the running of events over again, out of their time-sequence, ranks, in fact, as a fundamental aspect of *Hamlet*. *Subsequence, posteriority*: these are the effective modes even of the opening. It is that which generates phrases like "has this thing appeared *again* tonight", and more explicitly Marcellus's "Thus *twice before* and jump at this dead hour hath he gone by our watch", which eventually provoke the great retailing of past events offered by Horatio as preface to the Ghost's second appearance. Then, as a sort of climax of this revising, there is Claudius's great revisionary proposal, his reinterpretation of the past which leads up to his own present position:

Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death  
The memory be green, and that it us befitted  
To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole  
kingdom

To be contracted in one brow of woe . . . .

## HEINEMANN FICTION

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A TIGER FOR  
MALGUDI

**Anthony Oliver**

THE PROPERTY  
OF A LADY

**Lina Wertmüller**

THE HEAD OF  
ALVISE

**Lee Langley**

THE DYING ART

**William Garner**

THINK BIG,  
THINK DIRTY

  
**Heinemann**



Throughout, it seems to me, the audience of *Hamlet* might legitimately feel that it is being buttonholed, cajoled, persuaded by participants in the play to look back, to “revise”, to “see” things again in particular ways, to “read” or interpret them along specific lines and to the exclusion of others. It is a procedure notoriously mocked by Hamlet himself at the expense of Polonius in a famously deconstructive moment:

HAMLET: Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in the shape of a camel?

POLONIUS: By the mass, and ’tis like a camel indeed.

HAMLET: Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS: It is backed like a weasel.

HAMLET: Or like a whale.

POLONIUS: Very like a whale.

—and easily its most memorable manifestation occurs when the Ghost buttonholes the Prince with a peculiarly insistent version of the murder:

Brief let me be. Sleeping within my orchard,  
My custom always of the afternoon,  
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole  
With juice of cursed hebona in a vial,  
And in the porches of my ears did pour  
The leperous distilment. . . .

These slow-motion “action-replays” of past events become a feature of the play. It seems constantly to “revise” itself in this way, and this serves to pull back against any progressive movement which it might otherwise appear to instigate. The result is that the sense of straight, purposive, linear motion forward through the play finally evaporates as we sense an opposing movement, a circularity, an iterative, cyclical current.

IN SO FAR AS that current seeks to roll the play backwards, reinforcing its recursive mode, making it move only unwillingly and haltingly forward, constantly, even as it does so, looking over its own shoulder, then I propose to recognise it and, for the sake of convenience and argument to name it in relation to *Hamlet*. I call it *Telmah: Hamlet* backwards.

The most obvious backward-looking action-replay occurs right in the middle of *Hamlet* where, of course, we find another play and the moment upon which Greg’s article focuses. *The Mousetrap* marks *Hamlet*’s most recursive point. More than a play-within-a-play, it offers a replay-of-a-replay. It replays in its action (truly an action-replay) the Ghost’s replay of its own murder.

If it looks backwards for this purpose, it also looks forward towards the future. It functions, as Hamlet himself says, “tropically”: that is, as both trope or metaphor, and as the “tropic” or turning-point of *Hamlet*. The play’s linear progression, its

designation of Claudius as villain, depends on its ability to bolt a particular version of the past firmly to the present and the future. Hamlet himself is confident: he has written part of the play and he is “as good as a chorus” in interpreting it. He seems committed, purposive, moving inexorably to a pre-determined end. *The Mousetrap* begins pointedly enough, with the brutal clarity of the dumb-show. And then, as Greg notices, the Prince’s plans suddenly all go wrong. *The Mousetrap* becomes “tropical” indeed. *Hamlet* “turns” decisively. It turns, for the moment, into *Telmah*.

I am not suggesting that we can approach *Hamlet* by recognising *Telmah*, or that *Telmah* is the real play, obscured by *Hamlet*. That would be to try to reconcile, to bring to peace, to *appease* a text whose vitality resides precisely in its plurality: in the fact that it frequently, and here evidently, contradicts itself and strenuously resists our attempts to resolve, to domesticate that contradiction. I am trying to suggest that its contradiction has positive value: not least in that a pondering of some of the attempts that have been made to resolve it, to make the play speak coherently, reveals the political, economic and social forces to which all such “interpretation” is respondent and in whose name it is inevitably, if covertly, made. I am not suggesting an “alternative” reading of *Hamlet*, because that would be to fall into the same trap. I offer the title of *Telmah* as what it is: a sense of an ever-present potential challenge and contradiction *within* and *implied* by the text that we name *Hamlet*.

In this sense, *Telmah* coexists with, is coterminous with *Hamlet*, in a way that must strike us as, finally, impossible. A thing, we are taught, cannot be both what it is and another thing. But that is precisely the principle challenged by *Telmah*. Our notion that it cannot coexist with *Hamlet* marks the limit, I suggest, of our historically determined, Eurocentric ideas of “sense”, of “order”, and of “point of view.” That Eurocentricity lies behind and validates a limited notion of “interpretation” which will allow us to have *Hamlet* in various guises, and will also, as an alternative, allow clever and sophisticated interpreters to have, say, *Telmah*. But it will not allow us to have both, because that would explode our notion of the single and unified “point of view” whose “authority” as that term suggests, derives from its source, the author.

And yet we only have to step beyond the shores of Europe to encounter a quite different notion of interpretation which will allow exactly what I propose: the sense of the text as a site, or an arena of conflicting and often contradictory potential interpretations, no one or group of which can claim “intrinsic” primacy or “inherent” authority, and all of which are always ideological in nature and subject to extrinsic political and economic determinants.

THE ABSTRACT MODEL I reach for is that of jazz music: that black American challenge to the Eurocentric idea of the author's or the composer's authority. For the jazz musician, the "text" of a melody is a means, not an end. Interpretation in that context is not parasitic but symbiotic in its relationship with its object. Its role is not limited to the service, or the revelation, or the celebration of the author's/composer's art. Quite the reverse: interpretation *constitutes* the art of the jazz musician.

The same unservile principle seems to me to be appropriate to the critic's activity.<sup>3</sup> Criticism is the major, in its largest sense it is the *only*, native American art. Complaints about America's lack of original creativity in the arts miss this point. Responding to, improvising on, "playing" with, recreating, synthesising and interpreting "given" structures of all kinds, political, social, aesthetic—these have historically constituted the transatlantic mode in our century and before it, to an extent that might now force us to recognise that criticism makes Americans of us all.

CONFRONTED BY a manifestation of *Telmah*, by disruption and contradiction in the normally smooth and explainable surface of a text that our society has appropriated as a manifestation of great (and thus reassuring) art, we have seen that Dover Wilson responds with a vigour and an emotionally charged nervous energy appropriate to it as what it must have seemed to him to be: an attack on the structure of civilisation as we know it—an attack on our ideology. His sensitivity to overt political offensives—manifested in his articles on revolutionary Russia—fuels his response to *Telmah*, which he rightly senses as potentially revolutionary in ideological terms. Today *Hamlet*, tomorrow the world!

As a member of the Newbolt Committee, Dover Wilson insists on the proper, controlled study of literature as essential to a society wishing to avoid the alien barbarities of Bolshevism and to preserve the "national mind and character"—i.e. the integral and coherent structures of a British way of life. Years later, writing on the work of the Workers Educational Association, he comments that, but for its classes, "the abysmal disillusion that followed the end of the First World War . . . might well have resulted in revolution." *Telmah's* proposed reversal, its up-turning, topsy-turvy mode (in which the ghosts of one's fathers are not to be trusted) would undoubtedly have come hard to one whose very name invokes the clear, defining boundaries of an

established island culture. Any threatened incursion would therefore have to face the determined opposition of those impregnable white cliffs, and the forces assembled—indeed, symbolised by—the figure of Sir Henry Newbolt.

Names, after all, are invested with potency. Dover Wilson's autobiography is entitled *Milestones on the Dover Road* and thus half-humorously hints at his own eponymic standing while memorialising his role as a defender of our national mind, character and culture. His article of 1914, in favour of Czardom, is naturally anonymous. His earlier piece of 1906, with its efforts to bury Bolshevism, nevertheless offers an appealing recognition of the literally topsy-turvy function of revolution which I have tried weakly to hint at in my formulation of the name *Telmah*. Confronting Bolshevism, Dover Wilson unwittingly becomes its Greg. For what does that article do but argue that the spectre which is haunting Europe is certainly one not to be trusted? It would be pleasant to report that an intimate and deeply personal sense of revolution and reversal accompanied these efforts to heap oblivion on Bolshevism. I can, and do. The article is signed, not John Dover Wilson, but Wildover Johnson.

It would also be pleasant to conclude by turning back now to the play. But in a very serious sense, which I hope to have made clear, we cannot do so.

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<sup>3</sup> This point has recently been brilliantly made and developed by Geoffrey Hartman in *Criticism in the Wilderness* (Yale University Press, 1980).

There is no unitary, self-presenting play for us to turn back to, and I have no intention of turning myself inside out like Wildover Johnson in pursuit of a smoothed-over (or smooth Dover) interpretation of it that can then be offered gift-wrapped, as the truth. That kind of "appeasement" of the text can be said to have its own political analogues. And indeed . . . "Dear Dr Dover Wilson", begins a misive from Birmingham dated 7 June 1936:

"I expect you will be rather surprised to get a letter from me as we have not been 'introduced'.

But as we are both public characters perhaps we may dispense with formalities <sup>6</sup> . . . I can't help telling you what immense pleasure I have had out of *What Happens in Hamlet*. I had asked for it as a Christmas present, and when it duly appeared I sat up several nights into the small hours reading it . . . When I had finished it, I did what I don't think I have ever done before with any book: I immediately read it all over again! And that won't be the last time of reading. . . ."

The letter was signed "Neville Chamberlain."

## Square Tales from Languedoc

### *On Le Roy Ladurie—By JOHN BOSSY*

WITH HIS NEW BOOK,<sup>1</sup> after the evergreen *Montaillou* and the worthy *Carnival*, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie has taken to structuralism: that is to say, if I may risk a description, to the interpretation of works of culture by reference to sequential units, interior oppositions, motivic diagrams, and the concepts of homology (something being on the face of it in some respect the same as something else) and transformation (something which is not on the face of it the same as something else being treated as really the same as something else, since its present form may be regarded as a substitute for an underlying form which it has replaced). The gist of the matter seems to be a growing respect for culture in the Braudelian tradition to which Le Roy Ladurie belongs: an arrival at the idea that the proper description neither of, in this case, works of literature nor of social or other environments is advanced by treating the first as if they were products, as it were *esparto grass*, of the second.

Le Roy Ladurie makes rather heavy weather of this point in the course of criticising the achievements of his predecessors in the interpretation of the literature of Languedoc. Since most of them seem to have been unambitious *érudits de province*, this hammering of "village realism" seems un-called-for; unless, that is, like the grandmother in his story, they are some sort of transformational version of his master Fernand Braudel. Anyway, since he is in the habit of referring to himself as just another *érudit de province, égaré* in the corridors of the *Collège de France*, perhaps one ought to call him an exponent of village structuralism; which, it

seems, may take historical form in two modes. The first claims to lay bare the deep structure of a work, and to relate it with reasonable directness to deep structures claimed to be present in the historical environment in which it appears; you might call this structural realism. It was represented in *Montaillou*, where the deep structure of the *domus* perceived in the religious feelings and practice of Cathars was fairly directly related to the deep structure of the ecology of settlement in the region: it is to some extent represented in part one of *Love, Death and Money in the Pays d'Oc*. The second, what you might call structural idealism, relates the observed structure to similar pre-existent structures in other cultural artefacts, to which it is usually related by the process of transformation: it appears here in Part Two. At the end an attempt is made to relate them, but I did not find it awfully convincing, and I rather doubt if many readers will anyway have had the strength to get that far. For the book, while having somewhat different virtues from its predecessors, has rather a heavy dose of their vices: it is far too long, repeats the same information several times, and seems to bother little about art. The problem is worse here because the book is thick with structural diagrams, the text heavy with lists, inverted commas, underlinings and the rest. The story, however agreeable and evocative, palls at the *n*th repetition.

THAT SAID, it is a worthy effort, and ought to provoke a good deal of constructive thought. It is about three cultural items of different provenance, and about their connection. The first is a piece of popular fiction called *Jean-l'ont-Pris* (literally *Jean-they've-taken-him-away*) written in the *langue d'oc* in 1756 by a literary priest, Jean-Baptiste

<sup>1</sup> *Love, Death and Money in the Pays d'Oc*. By EMMANUEL LE ROY LADURIE. Translated by ALAN SHERIDAN. Scholar Press, £17.50.