



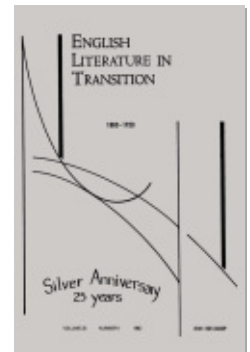
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The Lost Paradise of Childhood: The Fiction of Forrest Reid

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English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 25, Number 1,
1982, pp. 50-52 (Review)

Published by ELT Press



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REVIEWS

1. The Lost Paradise of Childhood: The Fiction of Forrest Reid

Brian Taylor. The Green Avenue: The Life and Writings of Forrest Reid, 1875-1947 (Lond and NY: Cambridge UP, 1980). £12.50

Forrest Reid is largely a neglected writer today. Author of an early study of W. B. Yeats (1915), friend of both Walter de la Mare and E. M. Forster, and recipient of the James Tait Black Award for his novel Young Tom (1944), Reid's current obscurity is as much due to the facts of his life as to his aesthetic convictions. "The subject of all of Reid's novels," Brian Taylor argues, "was his own mode of awareness of the life about him, and inevitably, all of his fiction took on the mould of autobiography. Literary motifs in his fiction always related to personal themes in his private life" (p. 183). In The Green Avenue Taylor undertakes to trace the interrelationship of the Ulster-born novelist's life and art, but in the process he has produced a book which may not satisfy a reader's interest in either Reid's life or his fiction. This is not to quarrel with Taylor's hypothesis; it may well be, however, to fault some aspects of his demonstration of it.

Forrest Reid was born in Belfast in 1875, and aside from three years at Cambridge (1905-1908), during which time he came into contact with both Ronald Firbank and Rupert Brooke, he spent most of his life there. Reid's family was solidly middle-class, but it had suffered economic reverses. His elder brothers entered banking and the linen trade, and Reid himself was apprenticed to a tea merchant. By the time he went up to Cambridge in his thirties, he had written two novels, The Kingdom of Twilight (1904) and The Garden God (1905), and had attracted the attention of Arthur Symons, Edmund Gosse, and Henry James. Indeed, James had been sufficiently impressed by Reid's first novel to accept the dedication of the second, only to be panicked by its open, if idealized, treatment of one boy's homosexual attraction to another. Taylor notes that "in The Garden God, the twin themes of nostalgia for the past and a heavy, subdued eroticism are entwined. The nostalgia serves as a pointer for Reid's later literary preoccupations; the eroticism is an indicator of deeper, more personal, concerns" (pp. 41-42).

In The Green Avenue Taylor treats the development of both themes, but he voices reservations about the propriety of exploring Reid's personal life too thoroughly. "The temptation to 'reveal all' for revelation's sake alone is one that is best resisted," he observes. "However, those aspects of Reid's 'work' which repeatedly find corresponding themes in areas of the 'life' do require linking and this calls for honest biographical exploration" (p. xi). As a statement of principle, this remark is unexceptionable. As a guide to actual biographical practice, however, it causes Taylor to fall between two stools. He draws back from certain aspects of Reid's adult personality, failing to characterize, for example, something like the novelist's periods of rage and depression at the marriages of his

friends James Rutherford and Stephen Gilbert as anything more than evidence of Reid's selfish, adolescent preoccupation with personal loyalty. At the same time Taylor disclaims the intention of writing "a 'purely' literary study" (p. xi) and refers readers interested in the novelist's style to Russell Burlingham's Forrest Reid: A Portrait and a Study (1953). Significantly, while he lists Mary Bryan's Forrest Reid (1976) in his bibliography, he makes no overt reference to it, perhaps because Bryan tends to see Reid's novels less as expressions of his personality than as dramatizations, at times ironic, of viewpoints of their protagonists. If Bryan's book lacks the sophistication of Taylor's reading of the novelist, it is the most detailed textual examination yet available of Reid's individual books.

The strengths of The Green Avenue develop from Taylor's ability to render a convincing portrait of Reid as a child and adolescent. Drawing on the novelist's own autobiographical volumes - Apostate (1926) and Private Road (1940) - he brings to life young Reid's preoccupation with an internal landscape in which "'it was always summer, always a little after noon, and always the sun was shining.'" Into this visionary world emerges an imaginary playmate, the ideal friend of Reid's emotional needs. "Beautiful boys in beautiful landscapes," Taylor remarks: "for the rest of his life, Forrest Reid never quite managed to separate the two. And, as Reid wrote to Andre Raffalovich in 1920, his books were always 'really an attempt to get back to my mysterious garden'" (p. 17). The attempt is largely unsatisfactory. Taylor demonstrates that underlying nearly all of Reid's novels is the search for the ideal friend, a story which is characterized by the presence of social and psychological factors which inhibit its fulfillment, and he cites as characteristic of the novelist's early development of the subject both The Bracknells (1911) and Following Darkness (1912). Interestingly, Reid rewrote both books, the former as Denis Bracknel (1947) and the latter as Peter Waring (1937).

Following Darkness was dedicated to E. M. Forster, a writer with a mysterious garden of his own and a man for whom Reid felt personal affinity. Unlike Forster, however, he was impelled to deal openly with his visionary landscape. "Reid returned again and again to the years of his boyhood in his books," Taylor observes. "He returned to revise, to correct, to go over again the problems which he knew from his own boyhood, and to find somehow the answers which he never found there" (pp. 176-177). In the process of these visions and revisions, Reid touched upon the subject of spiritualism in At the Door of the Gate (1915), drew upon his knowledge of Greek literature for Demophon (1927), and experimented with internal monologue in the writing of Brian Westby (1934). "This method of presenting and exploring the problem of co-existing and often differently stressed points of view represents" for Taylor "a distillation of Reid's central literary task" (p. 147). The novelist's concern is with the apprehension of experience, and in Brian Westby, his most realistic portrait of a father and son, Reid achieves something of a technical tour de force.

Despite the narrowness of his thematic range, Reid handles his material in a variety of modes and styles. His early books betray debts

to Pater, D'Annunzio, and James. Taylor finds in them something of the morbid melancholy of Gerard de Nerval and Ernest Dowson. As Reid's pioneer study of Yeats indicates, he saw no necessary connection between politics and literature. His enthusiasm for the Abbey Theatre and friendship with poet Padraic Colum did not translate into real involvement with the Irish Literary Renaissance. Taylor notes that as Reid matured as a writer, his books "show a steadily advancing ability to deal with the complexities of his recurring theme at the same time as his method of treating it entails - and evokes - a greater and greater simplicity" (p. 154). This achievement is best illustrated by Uncle Stephen (1931), The Retreat (1936), and Young Tom, three novels dealing with the childhood of a single protagonist. Reprinted in a single volume entitled Tom Barber (1955), the trilogy is "the story of experience breaking into innocence, a universal event which, after we have grown up, we tend to forget" (p. 185). Unlike the treatment of children in the work of Walter de la Mare, a writer with whom Reid exchanged proofs and advice about work in progress, the focus throughout Tom Barber is upon that moment of self-understanding at which the boy becomes a man. It is the moment at which he recognizes that the paradise of childhood is beyond his reach.

Taylor's The Green Avenue traces with real skill the interrelationship of the life and art of Forrest Reid. It suggests the origin in Reid's childhood of the quest for the ideal friend which pre-occupies most of the focal characters of his books. Taylor's portrait of the novelist accounts for the creative vision at the center of his work, but in failing to anchor his study more explicitly in either the facts of Reid's life or the texts of his novels, Taylor provides at best a partial portrait, if admittedly a highly plausible one. In the process of developing his hypothesis about the novelist's creative imagination, Taylor cites Reid's critical essays about Ernest Dowson, Arthur Machen, and Stella Benson and his books about Yeats and de la Mare. He reminds us of Reid's Illustrators of the Sixties (1928), that authoritative monograph reprinted by Dover in 1975. Above all, Taylor singles out the very best of Reid's novels and provides us with reasons for turning back to them. In the introduction to The Green Avenue, he voices the hope that his biography of Forrest Reid will revive interest in a writer who is currently largely ignored. With at least this reader, Taylor has succeeded admirably.

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2. On the Victorian Theatre

Michael R. Booth. The Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850-1910 (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981). \$29.50

Spectacle, scenery and lighting became important features of the English stage beginning with the Restoration. Richard Flecknoe, in his "A Discourse of the English Stage," gives contemporary testimony of what was happening: