



WEST WORDS

THE INTERNATIONAL REBECCA WEST SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

As I write this, we stand at the threshold of a new era in Rebecca West's literary reception. The change has come quietly, and it may not be immediately noticed, but it is as important as anything that has happened since our writer's death. I am referring to the transformations that bring West's oeuvre into the digital age. To be left behind by the digital revolution would almost certainly spell the beginning of the end of a writer's afterlife. As texts are increasingly accessed and processed in an electronic environment, literary corpses have to keep up with the development or risk gradual extinction.

In our case, there were small signs of this technological, cultural, and artistic shift ever since 2004: the creation of a functional and useful website for the Rebecca West Society was probably the opening gambit in this transformation. In late 2010, this website received its first major overhaul and design facelift. The site now also sports a blog that users can access to post queries, make comments, or simply throw out ideas related to Rebecca West. And speaking of blogs: Rebecca West's work is also the subject of blogging activity outside the circle of the Society. Recently, a lengthy post about West on pagesturned.com sparked some lively comments.

The revised Society website also boasts the now-functional bibliography, with a link available to all interested parties. This digital resource exceeds in completeness and scope any previous bibliography of works by or about Rebecca West. Plus, the electronic format has the great advantage of allowing us to update or correct it at a moment's notice. It is indeed an amazing and indispensable tool for researchers of West's work. Another milestone in the digital transformation of West studies was the creation of an elaborate entry about Rebecca West on Wikipedia. This open-forum encyclopedia is for many people the first line of defense or entry portal—whichever metaphor you prefer—to gather

Continued on page 4

2011 CONFERENCE GRADUATE STUDENT PRIZES

The Board of the Rebecca West Society invites applicants for the Graduate Student 2011 Conference prizes. We can offer two \$750 awards to defray the cost of travel to the West Society conference at Baruch College in New York City, September 16-17. Winners will be chosen competitively from submitted abstracts of 250 to 400 words, sent to Professor Debra Rae Cohen by April 15, 2011, atcohendr@mailbox.sc.edu .

TEACHING CORNER

Copies of the new edition of *The Return of the Soldier* were still almost warm from the press when they arrived at the campus bookstore of Long Island University. I had spent three and a half years preparing this contextual Broadview edition, and in a fit of utter optimism, I had scheduled the discussion of West's novel in a graduate class one week from the projected publication date. I'm glad to say that I got away with it—my students got the text just in the nick of time.

The Return of the Soldier was the second major reading assignment in a course about twentieth-century British War Literature. It followed directly after Pat Barker's *Regeneration*. First of all, that is a really great combo. Barker's text primed my students about the political history of the Great War and introduced them to the diagnosis and treatment practices of victims of shell shock. Armed with that background, my students perceived the similarities in the two writers' focus on social constructions of masculinity, social class, and the influence of Freud. But they also soon realized that West came to this thematic complex from a different angle, and they duly noted that this was a psychological drama of a different kind, with the women at the home front taking center stage rather than the soldier's trauma featuring foremost.

Continued on page 4

INSPIRED BY WEST

This poem, written by one of my graduate students, was inspired by reading *The Return of the Soldier*. If you look very closely, you can find phrases and snippets from West's novel. It's really an ingenious little riff on West's characteristic phrasing. It can almost be treated as a game of "how many West phrases do you find?" I hope West fans will enjoy this. My thanks to John Casquarelli for letting us publish his work.—Bernard Schweizer

MADE OF SOUND AND SILENCE

For Bernard

I learned a thousand stories
before I took my first steps
threw myself into wild waste places
under tossed branches of cedar
bright buds on black boughs
in blue valley distances
realized my origins
my cross roots

old gardeners raise statues on lawns
mossy Tritons held the eyes still
craft cathedrals made of ether
only to lick the earth
when a new song plays

delicate moths scratch their bellies on
ballroom screens flutter as they listen
to hyperborean booms
of magic circles
its palpitations move with currents of
ambient sound to poplars by the ferryside
where we fail to resolve our opposites

who will weep when our world shatters
damp marshes and doubts
that trivial toy of happiness
spontaneity energy privacy
the mutter of modern transportation

I ran until I couldn't breathe
ran until the pond fringed with amber
ran until I stood in a deserted parking lot
hoping to receive a blessing of fierce rays

—John Casquarelli (2010)

Bernard Schweizer's excellent article about misotheism—well-timed to publicize his new book *Hating God: The Untold Story of Misotheism*, Oxford University Press, 2010—appeared in the December 5, 2010, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. He asks the question, "So who are these people? Obscure, cranky, immoral, unproductive, and criminal loners? Not quite. Try William Blake, William Empson, Zora Neale Hurston, Philip Pullman, Percy Shelley, Mark Twain, Rebecca West, and Elie Wiesel, among other writers who have enriched our literary and philosophical heritage over the last two centuries. As this list of famous, but mostly closeted, misotheists indicates, creative writers are the mainstay of this tradition. In fact, literature is the principal conduit for expressions of animosity against the Almighty." Concluding that "the problem of evil" led these writers to misotheism, he quotes West ruminating on World War I: "[T]he hurt that God has done to the world is too great for any forgiveness... One hates our fathers for having committed themselves to such a worship and wonders how they could have fancied God was kind." He claims that it "is a deeply rooted humanism that propels Wiesel and others into misotheism. A similar impulse inspired the 19th-century anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon to denounce God in the pursuit of socioeconomic liberation, and it is what prompted Rebecca West to seek the divine in artistic and emancipatory endeavors. They all experienced crises and calamities that deepened their sympathy for man and undermined their admiration for God." *The Chronicle Review*, Opinion & Ideas.

Please see also Bernard's dispatch about misotheism on CNN's "Belief Blog" at <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/08/my-take-why-some-people-hate-god/>.

Jake Kerridge reviews Geoff Dyer's *Working the Room: Essays and Reviews 1999-2010* in the November 27, 2010, issue of *The Daily Telegraph*. Kerridge points out a "thematic coherence" in Dyer's "repeated praise of artists who shy away from underlying themes in search of whatever might take their fancy... He collects literary grasshoppers, hunts loose baggy monsters: it's these unschematic, undogmatic artists who are best able to delineate human experience." For instance, "In the work of Rebecca West, 'tone...takes over some of the load-bearing work of structure.'" *Review*; Features, Pg. 25.

Nigel Fardale writes in the February 6, 2011, fiftieth-anniversary issue of *The Sunday Telegraph* that Rebecca West was among the "star names" to grace its first editions, as well as Sir Compton Mackenzie, JB Priestley, and Graham Greene. Page 1.

Jane Slade reports in the November 7, 2010, edition of the U.K. *Sunday Express* that Lord Beaverbrook's twice-restored historic former estate Cherkley Court, set in 400 acres in Surrey, was for sale for the first time since 1911. It "was bought by the newspaper magnate and politician in 1911, the year after he entered Parliament, and was his home until his death in 1964... The imposing four-storey mansion was the focus of British and social life for decades in the 1900s, with writers H.G. Wells, Rebecca West and Rudyard Kipling among the regular guests." She goes on to note that its "walls were privy to political pow-wows between Lord Asquith, Harold Macmillan and Winston Churchill, especially during the Second World War when Beaverbrook was a member of Churchill's Cabinet. In the Sixties Cherkley Court was home to a heady party scene with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton taking centre stage." Features, p. 94.

In the September 11, 2010, edition of *The Guardian*, London resident Hugo Barnacle, in a letter to the editor, takes issue with Tom McCarthy's question and answer, "[C]an anyone, now, name the successful middlebrow writers of 1932 or 1915? Of course not" (from McCarthy's article "Ancient and modernist," 4 September, 2010). Barnacle retorts, "That seems a little hard on such writers as Arnold Bennett, HG Wells, John Galsworthy, Mary Webb, John Buchan, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rebecca West, Somerset Maugham, Sir Hugh Walpole, EF Benson and Sir Compton Mackenzie." *Guardian Review Pages*, Pg. 15.

There were several reviews of Lesley McDowell Duckworth's *Between the Sheets: The Famous Literary Liaisons of Nine 20th-Century Women*. Emilie Pine writes in the June 26, 2010, edition of *The Irish Times* that the book "tackles the perennial problem for biographers of writers with difficult private lives, which is how to reconcile the work and the life. The women writers whom Lesley McDowell addresses all had difficult lives, particularly in terms of their relationships. The nine examined here, Katherine Mansfield, HD, Rebecca West, Jean Rhys, Anaïs Nin, Simone de Beauvoir, Martha Gellhorn, Elizabeth Smart and Sylvia Plath, are all notable for their literary achievements. Their associations with men, however, are notoriously less successful, and are often read by critics as destructive at worst, futile at best. McDowell attempts to counter this impression, declaring that these writers made a Faustian pact to put up with emotionally destructive relationships because at the same time they were artistically productive liaisons. In exchange for what benefited their art, they took on board certain behaviours, attitudes, or treatment from their male partners, the

kind they very likely wouldn't have stood for anyone else." *Weekend*; Book Reviews, Pg. 10.

In her review of Duckworth's book, Kate Colquhoun writes in the June 13, 2010, edition of *The Sunday Times* that "West was feisty, independent and a journalist of some note when she began her affair with the much older, married H.G. Wells. Suffering the misery of a secret, destructive affair and the difficulties of single motherhood (she bore Wells's illegitimate son when she was 21), she wrote that she couldn't 'conceive of a person who runs about lighting bonfires and yet nourishes a dislike of flame.' Their meeting was initiated by a coruscating review she wrote of his novel *Marriage*; antagonism, McDowell asserts, lay at the heart of their affair. West was willing to barter Wells's quick mind for the humiliation of being a mistress. While she flirted with suicide when he dropped her, her literary ambition was undented." *Culture*; Features, Pg. 34-35.

My favorite take on Duckworth's book comes from Val Hennessy in the May 28, 2010, edition of the *London Daily Mail*. "Pass the smelling salts, Mildred! Mix me a very stiff Bloody Mary, with ice! Lesley McDowell's steamy scrutiny of the sex lives of nine highly acclaimed women writers has left me both shaken and stirred... There's H.G. Wells, at 46 living with his second wife and sons, with a sexual reputation to rival Warren Beatty's, and busy seducing 22-year-old Rebecca West. Various of his many illicit liaisons resulted in pregnancies, including his furtive ten-year on/off secret affair with West, who bore him a son." Hennessy complains that "too often this volume reads more like a *Daily Sport* exclusive than a work of scholarship. Do we really need details about Mansfield's syphilis, miscarriage, infantilism and avoidance of penetrative sex? Or de Beauvoir carrying on like one of the evil, sex-crazed characters in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*? Or HD's bi-sexual affairs, abortion, threesomes, abandonment of her child and years of unconsummated intimacy with Pound? I don't think so." She concludes that the "unsurprising fact is that writing is a solitary activity: all those hours spent sitting alone, tapping or scribbling away, hoping for inspiration, waiting for words... it is surely no wonder that lonely, isolated writers will seek each other out for mutual support. They understand each other, as do artists, politicians, musicians... a writer's liaisons are as likely to be as good or bad, helpful or harmful, sexually satisfying or disappointing as anyone else's... Forget about the sex lives of tormented writers. It is their poetry, prose and ideas that matter and their literary output that should be the focus of our interest, admiration and serious discussion." Brava!

West scholars and fans become rightly indignant when people name her liaison with H.G. Wells as the most famous fact about her. Still, I couldn't resist the title of this article, "Randy Victorian of the Week," from the *Canadian National Post*, May 15, 2010, edition, and I chuckled over their description. So here it is. "H.G. Wells, author of *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The Invisible Man* and *The War of the Worlds*, was quite the Lothario, a new biography reveals. In *The Daily Telegraph's* review of H.G. Wells: *Another Kind of Life* by Michael Sherborne, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst explains that after meeting his second wife, 'Wells clearly decided to push the idea of a "marriage licence" in a wholly new direction. Dorothy Richardson ("most interestingly hairy"), the daughter of a close friend ("insatiable"), an Australian novelist he made love to on top of a hostile review written by Mrs. Humphrey Ward ("when we had dressed again we lit a match and burnt her"), Rebecca West, to whom he was "Your Lord. The Jaguar" . . . the list goes on. Occasionally he tried to justify his behaviour with vague theories about the "efficiency" of individual sexual needs or the "triangular mutuality" of man, wife and mistress, but the truth seems to have been that he was as randy as a goat, and after a dull Bromley childhood, had decided to enjoy whatever and whoever came his way.'" *Weekend Post*, Pg. WP16.

West gets a mention in Sarah Crown's review of Maggie O'Farrell's novel *The Hand that First Held Mine* in the May 29, 2010, edition of *The Guardian*. "With her last novel, *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*, Maggie O'Farrell pulled off a smart step-change. The books that came before it—a trio of intense, elegant relationship novels—had established her as a purveyor of smart, affecting women's fiction, without quite launching her into the arena of capital-L literature. But Esme—which took as its subject a murky little corner of 20th-century history in which 'ungovernable' women were shut away in asylums, and drew on the work of Frances Hodgson Burnett and Charlotte Perkins Gilman—garnered critical approval and earned her glowing comparisons with Rebecca West and Katherine Mansfield." *Guardian Review Pages*, Pg. 10.

Nicholas Clee writes in the May 29, 2010, edition of *The Times*, London, that "Lady Antonia Fraser presented the Lost Man Booker Prize last week to Richard Farrell, who accepted it on behalf of his late brother J. G. Farrell for the novel *Troubles*. Lady Antonia was a Booker judge in 1970 and 1971, a period when a shift in timing of the competition had eliminated from consideration *Troubles*, as well as the five other Lost Booker finalists, by

Nina Bawden, Shirley Hazzard, Mary Renault, Muriel Spark and Patrick White. She told us that she had been warned that her fellow 1970 judge, Dame Rebecca West, was impossible, but had not found her so. The two had shared a taxi one day, and Dame Rebecca had said that she was pleased they were getting along well: 'They told me you were impossible.'" *Saturday Review*; Features, Pg. 12.

Tara Conlan and Stephen Bates report on the takeover of West's London agency Peters, Fraser, and Dunlop in the May 19, 2010, edition of *The Guardian*. "It has had on its books some of the greatest names in English literature over the last century, from VS Pritchett and CS Forester, to Rebecca West and Ivy Compton-Burnett, but yesterday, the name of the venerable 80-year-old literary agency Peters Fraser and Dunlop was poised to disappear in a takeover...PFD will now become part of a new company called The Rights House, owned by the public relations entrepreneur Matthew Freud and a rival agent Michael Foster...Its dead authors list—Edmund Blunden, Benjamin Britten, Hillaire Belloc, Terence Rattigan, Hugh Trevor-Roper and Gavin Lyall—is more distinguished than that of its living authors." *Guardian Home Pages*, Pg. 9.

In a letter to the editor in the March 9, 2010, edition of the London *Guardian*, Neville Grant offers a delicious West quote. "It is interesting to read in your report of the seemingly friendly contacts between Lord Baden-Powell and Von Ribbentrop ('Hitler's secret Britskrieg: the Nazi "spyclists" sent to recce for invasion,' 8 March). 'B-P' was, it seems, dicing with death. His name appeared in the Nazis 'Black Book'—the list of some 2,800 prominent Brits (and others) to be arrested after the Nazi invasion.

Continued on page 4

On December 21, 2010, we at Open Road Integrated Media were thrilled to publish the ebooks of the versatile Dame Rebecca West. As a marketing assistant at Open Road, I was lucky enough to be a part of the publication and launch of this talented writer's collection in the digital world.

Through our research process, and my exposure to her works of fiction and non-fiction, I came to discover that Dame Rebecca West was a revolutionary voice during some of her generation's most extraordinary times, and a renaissance woman in her own right. She's quickly become an ideal literary figure to market to diverse online readers: her non-fiction historical texts range from the early twentieth-century Women's Rights Movement, to World War II, to the apartheid in South Africa. In addition, her works of fiction are written with great detail and aptitude, creating an enjoyable experience for any modern literature bibliophile and inspiring many a candid reviewer.

At Open Road, our goal is to help find and build the digital conversation about West, her works, and her opinions. She's already an active topic in the world of Twitter, YouTube, and the blogosphere, but our hope is to spread those active discussions to a wider and more engaged audience. By offering exciting digital content like videos, archival images, and inspiring promotional opportunities to a lively e-reader community, we hope to see the works of Dame Rebecca West filling the shelves of many an e-library! —*Lara Selavka*

THE FIFTH BIENNIAL REBECCA WEST CONFERENCE.

To be held at CUNY Baruch (Manhattan), September 16-17, 2011.

"Rebecca West and Power"

The main focus of this conference will be the journalism of Rebecca West. We invite papers that analyze any aspect of West's journalistic oeuvre, but encourage especially contributions that investigate the idea of power—state power, patriarchal power, empire, God, and literary authorities. Any approach, including rhetorical analysis, political history, ideological critique, feminism, biography, and intertextuality are welcome. We also plan to organize at least one panel on approaches to the new collection of West's non-fiction prose *The Essential Rebecca West* (2010). Papers on other topics will also be considered, especially those exploring the nexus between West's fiction and non-fiction.

Send abstracts of 250-400 words to Ann Norton at anorton@anselm.edu, by April 15, 2011.

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Join the Society

If you wish to become a member, please send your name, title, institutional affiliation, address, and a check made out to "International Rebecca West Society."

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From the President Continued

information on any given object of knowledge, and to have a solid page dealing with Rebecca West is simply a must.

All of these developments are dwarfed by the biggest transformation in the digitalization of West in recent years: I'm referring to the project spearheaded by Open Road Media to make available the entire corpus of West's major works in electronic format. (See more about this project in the essay contributed by Open Road Media for this newsletter.) This means that anybody with a Kindle, a Nook, or an iPad (or even just a desktop computer) can now instantly gain access to the masterpieces, small and big, written by Rebecca West. At a time when people read increasingly on a screen and expect texts to be available at a moment's notice, anywhere in the world, this transformation is crucial. Now, does this mean that West will only be read on the computer screen from now on? Does it mean that any future print editions are moot? The answer is "no" on both counts. Reading hard copies of books is still for many readers (this one included) the most satisfying and practical way of consuming literature. However, a new generation and new demands for literary transmission are taking place side-by-side with traditional acts of reading and writing. Critical or contextual editions of texts by West which scholars might contemplate, now or in the future, will still have a significant market. A pure, un-edited text of *The Return of the Soldier* in electronic format satisfies some needs, but a Broadview contextual edition (or any critical edition) with accompanying introductions, time-lines, footnotes, and numerous appendices is an entirely different product and one that is not competing with the pure text for teaching purposes.

But, as with so many other things, diversification is the secret to success, and modern means of delivery of content are becoming increasingly as important as the content itself. By opening up the corpus of West's work to users of electronic readers, the estate and the Society are making sure that Rebecca West will not only continue to be relevant to future readers, but that an ever expanding circle of future readers will find her.
—Bernard Schweizer

Teaching Corner Continued

In fact, doubts began to grow about whether Chris really suffers from shell-shock, or whether he is in the clutches of a different kind of trauma or simply a victim of pathological nostalgia. These perspectives were further sharpened by recourse to the appendices following the primary text, notably the treatise by W.H.R. Rivers, "The Repression of War Experience." Students also wrote some inspired short papers working with the visual materials in the edition. Several varying analyses of propaganda posters produced impressive results as well. This was a demonstration of how contemporary cultural documents can give perceptive readers access to a whole complex of ideological and discursive constructions of gender and nationality that, in turn, illuminate the main text under discussion.

The interplay between the appendices, too, took on a life of its own. It was highly gratifying to see students draw connections between Eliot's "Gerontion" and, say, Sassoon's "The Death Bed" or the excerpt from "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley"; or between West's "Hands that War" dispatches and Madeline Ida Bedford's "Munition Wages"; or between Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* and D.H. Lawrence's "With The Guns." Moreover, West's acerbic review of Ellen Key's pacifist idealization of woman helped us to flesh out West's rationalistic view of the war effort, free of cant or high-mindedness.

I have taught *The Return of the Soldier* before, but now I felt for the first time that students were able to grasp the larger implications of this work and could see it in a dialogic relationship with the period's poetry, visual culture, and general climate of opinion.
—Bernard Schweizer

West In the News Continued

Compiled by Walter Schellenberg, the list also included Churchill, Chamberlain, Attlee, JB Priestley, Noel Coward, Rebecca West, Vera Brittain and Bertrand Russell. As Rebecca West said to Noel Coward, 'My dear, the people we should have been seen dead with...'
Guardian Leader Pages, Pg. 31.