Light on the Dark Angel

Lionel Johnson and the literary life of the 1890s

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On Christmas Day, 1977, Adrian Earle was found dead "in mysterious circumstances" in a Madrid hotel. What led him to this end is not known, but his fate was perhaps not surprising. Earle spent time in HM Prison Wormwood Scrubs in the 1950s, having been convicted of the theft of miscellaneous items from the house of Lady Beaumont ("a guitar, a necklace, a recording machine, a quantity of dresses and bedding") and of "demanding with menaces" from her fiancé. The journalist Peter Wildeblood, who was incarcerated at the same time, described Earle as "an amusing raconteur" who was nevertheless "undoubtedly one of the wickedest people I have ever met". The historian Michael Howard knew Earle as an entertaining host at Oxford; but, "charming as he was, Adrian was immoral to the point of psychopathy". In his youth he had shared a house with Peregrine Worsthorne, who remembered him (in *Tricks of Memory*, 1993) as a man of "sublime cheek" and habitual criminality. When he eventually absconded, he "nipped into the kitchen on his way out to his taxi", and, raiding the oven, took Worsthorne's dinner with him. "In terms of law-breaking he was obviously only a minor criminal", judged Worsthorne, "but law-breaking is not the only way to do the devil's work."

Yet Earle does seem to have had one disinterested passion. He claimed, as a graduate student at Oxford in the 1940s, to be writing a biography of the 1890s poet and critic Lionel Johnson (1867–1902), best known for his poems "The Dark Angel" and "By the Statue of King Charles at Charing Cross". The biography never materialized, but Earle did spend at least ten years collecting material. He went about this in much the same way as he did everything else. A sister of Johnson, who survived him into the 1950s, was visited by a student who "borrowed" everything – drafts, correspondence, mementos – that had been left behind on her brother's sudden death at the age of thirty-five. They were never returned, and the student proved impossible to track down.

Earle didn't stop there. Letters between Johnson scholars in the 1940s and 50s are punctuated by expressions of despair. "He seemed to me to have 'worked' the Johnson ground very thoroughly", complained Ian Fletcher, "while most of us were engaged in other places" – referring no doubt to Earle's exemption from serving in the RAF on account of his poor eyesight. It was rumoured that he had collected "all Johnson's papers", including over 300 letters, and that he had been "helped" by Mrs Yeats, Mrs Image (the widow of Selwyn Image, the British artist and poet, and first Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford) and John Murray. The Dominican Library at Edinburgh once possessed a correspondence between Johnson and his fellow poet (and fellow Catholic) John Gray, but it had been missing since Earle's visit. Despite an apparently genuine interest (he seems to have sold very little), Earle's acquisitiveness and death in obscurity effectively wiped Lionel Johnson from the archive.

Johnson scholarship – what there is of it – is littered with failed biographies. The only one to have been published, *Victorian Dark Angel* (*TLS*, October 11, 2013) by Richard Whittington-Egan, frankly acknowledges the dearth of materials. For the most part Johnson remains a patchwork of myths and memories, most of which give the impression of an obscure, eccentric, marginal figure. His death is often said to have been caused by a drunken fall from a bar stool (Ezra Pound has him, in his poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, "falling from a high stool in a pub") or a dash under the hooves of a cab horse, rather than the strokes, admittedly alcohol-related, that actually killed him. His Catholicism is widely assumed to have been a Decadent pose, while the apparent contradictions in his character – his asceticism and his secret drinking, his love of order and his Romanticism – are attributed to loneliness and repressed homosexuality. Above all, the Johnson of 1890s fable is isolated and aloof, disdaining the world of ordinary people.

I have not succeeded in locating Earle's hoard of Johnsoniana. But I have discovered, in Winchester College, where Johnson was a pupil in the 1880s, two books that show just how large a gap he left. These are copies of Johnson's two volumes of verse – *Poems* (1895) and *Ireland, and Other Poems* (1897), which contain interleaved letters bearing the signatures of Edmund Gosse, Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats, among others. Most of Johnson's poems carry dedications. Scholars have conjectured – from sheer lack of evidence – that these dedications were at least partly wishful thinking. But these volumes, rebound with the letters written to Johnson by the majority of his dedicatees – seventy-seven correspondents in all, each one next to the correct poem – disprove that theory. All the letters appear to be unpublished. They include appreciations of Johnson's work; requests or thanks for reviews; literary and spiritual conversations; intimate confidences and professions of friendship. The two books redraw the map of literary relations in the 1890s, putting the supposedly aloof Lionel Johnson front and centre.

The Rhymers' Club looms large. Johnson was apparently an assiduous organizer, arranging meetings and co-editing its publications. For many he was also a friend and confidant. His fellow Rhymer Ernest Dowson wrote in 1893 to complain about a newspaper controversy between "the foolish Robert and the fatuous Richard", referring to both as "low fellows" and the latter as "the gentleman of the hairpins". "Robert" is Robert Buchanan, famous for his invective against Pre-Raphaelitism, "The Fleshly School of Poetry", first published in the *Contemporary Review* in 1871; while "Richard" is Richard Le Gallienne, another Rhymer, known for his bouffant hair. "I miss you considerably", Dowson finished; "you are the only person, to whom I dare unburden myself of my spleen." Arthur Symons, on the other hand, set a brisk and practical tone in 1891. Symons and Johnson thought little of each other's work, whatever they felt about each other as people. In a coy aside, he wonders if Johnson could have penned an anonymous paragraph, in which an article that Symons himself had published anonymously had been criticized. "I wonder if you knew all the time who really wrote it!"

Then there is Yeats. Johnson and Yeats had been close friends in the early 1890s. In the twentieth century, Yeats made of his reserved, ascetic, alcoholic friend a symbol for the "tragic generation" of that decade, too idealistic for its own good. "Lionel Johnson comes the first to mind", he wrote in his poem "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" (1919), "That loved his learning better than mankind". But in 1895, when Yeats wrote the letter bound into this volume, it was evidently the refinement of Johnson's poetry that he admired. "I find the whole book a delight", he wrote on receipt of *Poems*. "There is no better in contemporary verse which is noble as an utterance as well as fine poetry." It has "a note of personal distinction which is so extraordinarily rare in all ages and most of all in this". The only fault was that the book was "not quite durable enough in appearance", because "a book which is so full of delightful indications of careful thought down to the exact comma should be built for the high seas of time". He ends by announcing his own forthcoming *Poems*: "I have dedicated one of the sections to you" (he did).

Many letters contain similar notes of admiration and gratitude. Johnson's *The Art of Thomas Hardy* (1894) was the first book-length study of Hardy's work. "I have not yet thanked you for your thoughtful, generous, & scholarly book on my novels", Hardy wrote just after the book's publication. "You seem to be criticizing the stories as I imagined them before I had written them, & not the executed work – so far short of the intention." Johnson must, he insists, "give my wife & myself the pleasure of a visit". Gosse in 1897 says that Johnson's poetry "is full of beauty, full of elevation & delicate strenuous force", adding with unintended irony (Johnson had only five more years to live), "you have already added to English poetry what, I believe, will never cease to be enjoyed; I hope you will have long years and energies to perfect your service in it". Over and over again there are requests for literary intercession in the shape of reviews, recommendations to editors and comments on drafts. Johnson was clearly felt to have considerably more influence in this line than he has so far been credited with.

Of course the more personal letters are often the most memorable. The Irish writer Katharine Tynan (Hinkson) asks Johnson to send her his opinions on contemporary poets so that she can make them into an article on the subject. These were generously sent, and would eventually be published by Ezra Pound in his edition of Johnson's poetry (1915). Her reason for asking, she reveals here, is that she is struggling to get back to work after the death of her baby son. "No one unless they have had our experience could realize how a baby of six weeks old could leave such a world in ruins."

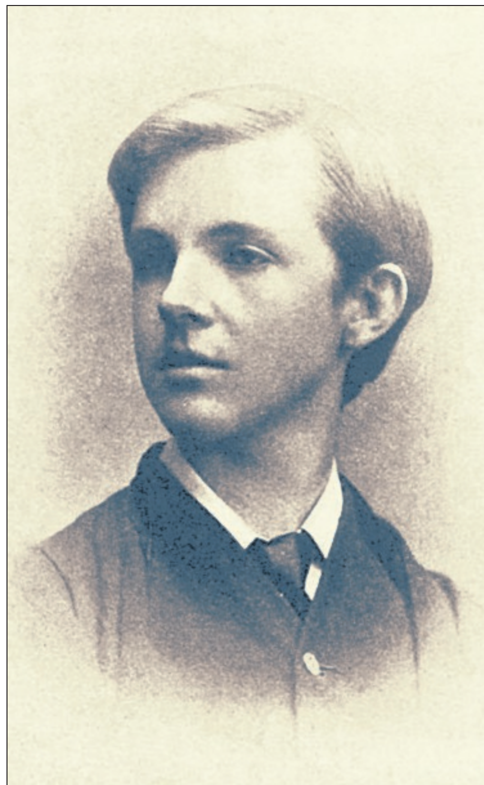
A brighter light shines two years later, when a mutual friend, Louise Imogen Guiney, writes to Johnson asking, "how does Baby Hinkson compare with Paudeen?" Paudeen was the Hinksons' poodle-terrier cross, for whom Johnson had a special predilection. ("Even when we were out of town", Tynan wrote in her memoirs, "Lionel used to come from Lincoln's Inn to the Crescent to visit Paudeen. They understood each other.")

Irish and Catholic friends such as the Hinksons were an important part of Johnson's life in the later 1890s. Johnson was a convert to Roman Catholicism and became increasingly committed to an Irish identity (though he had little by way of actual Irish ancestry). One letter in particular suggests that he was more directly involved in Irish nationalism, as early as 1894, than has previously been supposed. T. W. Rolleston had been both a Rhymer and Secretary of the Irish Literary Society in London, but by '94 was back in Dublin. "I want you to go as soon as you can", Rolleston writes, "to see Dr. Mark Ryan and to tell him that events of a serious character are likely to take place here (I can't write to him direct as his letters are liable to be opened by the authorities)." Ryan was an influential nationalist and committed member of groups such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Rolleston identified the threat as the use of "the organization that has been formed here for directly revolutionary purposes", which he felt would lead to "madness and ruin". (I haven't yet been able to identify "the organization".) He then gives Johnson a detailed account of a cipher, which he "shall require to use occasionally". "Keep a copy yourself", he tells him, "& make one for Ryan."

One notable absence from among Johnson's dedicatees is Walter Pater, a friend and mentor. Although there is nothing here in Pater's hand, he comes up so often in the letters as to feel like a presence. Laurence Binyon writes, "I dined with Pater on Thursday. He was very gracious & charming. He burned several kinds of incense, & gave me some in a little box, to burn 'and remember him'". A young Bernard Berenson (who had recently tried and failed to get Pater's permission to attend his classes in Oxford) thanks Johnson in 1888 for sending him the third edition of Pater's *Renaissance*, which he hadn't seen before. The new essay on Giorgione – famous for the claim that "all art constantly aspires to the condition of music" – he finds "disappointing" and "a bit of merely lazy thinking". He prefers the Goncourts.

Another absence, less easily explained, is Oscar Wilde. After Johnson's death, Alfred Douglas – an Oxford friend whom Johnson had introduced to Wilde in 1891 – would claim that Johnson's poem "The Destroyer of a Soul" (which began "I hate you with a necessary hate") was addressed to Wilde and expressed Johnson's anger at what he saw as the corruption of his innocent friend. It seems unlikely that Johnson would have been quite so naive about Bosie. But one letter here, written by Alfred Ferrand, an actor in the Benson Company, suggests that at least the spirit of the tale may be true. "I know you hate Oscar", it reads.

Johnson may have hated Wilde, but he was willing to indulge his friend's curiosity about the recent scandal. Ferrand wrote from Johannesburg where he was engaged as a war correspondent, much to his dissatisfaction. "I am



Lionel Johnson

only waiting the arrival of the ship to return to you & dear dirty smoky London." He would die at Ladysmith in 1900. "Yours was the first letter", he says, "that gave me any intelligence about Oscar, beyond the papers." And he had good reason to desire more news.

> Do you know we played *Lady Windermere's Fan* here the very night Oscar had Q. [Queensberry] arrested. We heard the news by cable. I wrote on the spur of the moment, congratulating Oscar on his pluck & wishing him well. A careful calculation of dates leads me to believe my letter was found on his person when he [Wilde] was arrested, was one of those handed to the Bench & – praise the Fates – ruled as irrelevant & not read in court.

One wonders quite how well Ferrand knew Wilde, though he claimed he could "hardly believe even now that the worst of his crimes wasn't pose". His anxiety on reading newspaper accounts of the trials is evident. "When I got to the evidence of Thomas Price, porter at St James' Place, who was just going to reel off the names of the young men who visited Oscar there, my brain reeled as the novelists say – I owe Frank Lockwood [lead counsel for the prosecution] a debt of gratitude for stopping him." Ferrand's source was a rag called *Sport, Law & Police*, which he admits reading "with avidity and shame". "I read that bit of evidence", he continues, "when riding out to inspect a gold property, fourteen miles out of town & I was away on the veldt, with not a living thing but my horse & an aasvogel [vulture] in sight."

Ferrand ends with expressions of friendship for Johnson from both himself and his wife. "The missus begs me to repeat her desire to come home – & she adds 'Give him my love & say I want to take care of him.'" Johnson's fragility seemed to bring out maternal instincts in both women and men. A poem in manuscript by Ferrand entitled "To Lionel Johnson" is also bound into the book at this point, and imagines tucking up his weary insomniac friend after a long night of suffering.

> Your eyelids drop & flash & close,
> I lay your little limbs along
> Your couch, & watch by your repose
> And make this little idle song

It has been said that Johnson's claims of illness in the 1890s were merely a cover for alcoholism, but these letters do suggest something more than that. "You mention the horrible word paralysis", writes Selwyn Image, "but that surely it can't be, or you wouldn't have such atrocious pain." Johnson suffered intensely from gout, and expressions of sympathy and concern are frequent.

This is only a small sample of what these volumes contain. There are many other correspondents: minor writers, Catholic and Irish friends, people from Winchester or Oxford. Johnson was not aloof and isolated; he had not, as Yeats claimed, "renounced" the world. The image that emerges is of a man surrounded by friends and admirers, a person to whom other people were vitally important. In fact, there is perhaps something a little too wholesome about this new Lionel Johnson. Who, after all, selected these particular letters, and why? Did Johnson himself put them together in his long nights of pain as a memorial to happier times? Did he construct them as a mark of the success that he was enjoying both as a writer and a friend?

The books themselves offer few clues, and nothing suggests how they got to Winchester College. Their twentieth-century bindings do, however, suggest the involvement of at least one of the two custodians of Johnson's papers before they reached his sister and, subsequently, Earle. When Johnson died, his papers were taken away by Arthur Galton, an Oxford friend who, like so many others, intended to write a biography. When Galton in turn died in 1921 (biography unwritten), the papers were left with Frederic Manning, an Australian writer who had lived with Galton. He too planned, and abandoned, a biography. The books with their burden of letters clearly never went back to Johnson's sister, where Earle would have harvested them along with everything else. Perhaps Galton created them as relics of a friend lost too soon. Or did Manning produce them, as a complex tribute to a man whose memory, he had always felt, was his rival in Galton's eyes?

However the books came into being, they are a deliberate act of memorialization. The Johnson of these volumes is successful and popular, a literary guru and a devout Catholic. But in memorializing Johnson, they also reshape a whole literary period, in which Christian Socialists and Irish journalists are on equal terms with Decadent poets. This picture is so different from that of popular legend – and much current scholarship – that both Johnson and the period surely merit a re-evaluation. "It amply contents me to dream", wrote Johnson, "that some gentle scholar of an hundred years hence, turning over the worn volumes upon bookstalls yet unmade, may give his pence for my book, may read it at his leisure, and may feel kindly towards me."

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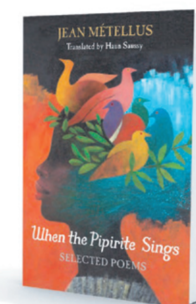

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