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REVIEWS

Margiad Evans, *A Ray of Darkness* (Dinas Powys: Honno, 2021). Pp. 207. £10.99.
Margiad Evans, *The Nightingale Silenced and other late unpublished writings* (Dinas Powys: Honno, 2020). Pp. 217. £9.99.
Margiad Evans, *Autobiography* (Dinas Powys: Honno, 2022). Pp. 234. £10.99.

Margiad Evans's writings deserve to be better known. There has been growing academic interest in her work following the publication of Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan's important study in 1998 and the more recent collection of essays *Rediscovering Margiad Evans* edited by Kirsti Bohata and Katie Gramich in 2013. However she is for the most part held up as an Anglo-Welsh experimentalist: an example of that modernist concern with liminality and the fragile boundaries of selfhood now associated with the work of Virginia Woolf and John Cowper Powys, and the new awareness of the transformative power of landscape demonstrated in the work of contemporaries such as Sylvia Townsend Warner, Mary Butts and Rebecca West. As Diana Wallace makes clear in her illuminating introduction to Evans's *Autobiography,* this awareness of boundaries and their fragility was central to Evans's identity and writing. Living in the Marches with an adopted Welsh name (she had been born Peggy Whistler), Evans saw herself as a border writer; uneasy with any attempt to situate her in a Welsh canon, yet distant from the Home Counties of her birth. Her early novels *Turf or Stone* (1934) and *Creed* (1936) explore the cruel tensions that existed between the interwar culture of progressive and critical individualism and the old world of the rural community rooted in the certainty of religious faith. Likewise, the memoirs now reissued by Honno Press through the careful and dedicated work of Evans's nephew, Jim Pratt, provide an assured meditation on the borders of consciousness and the impossibility of delineating the self from the rich confusion of the natural world.

Although one can locate Evans within the history of modernist literature, she remains a curiously timeless figure. Indeed, her own

life could be understood as an ongoing struggle with time: a struggle that was at once literary and physical. Throughout her writings she maintains a keen poetic commitment to capturing the peculiarity of each moment in minute descriptions. She wrote hurriedly of moonlight, elms and hawthorn hedgerows, their existence quickened by the wind, noting regretfully how she wished to 'write beyond print, show more of moments, days, of life, than paper can take' (*Autobiography*, 91).[1] In May 1950, however, she found this commitment further frustrated by the sudden onset of epilepsy; the fits provoked by a developing brain tumour that would cause her untimely death in 1959. Her final major work, *A Ray of Darkness* (first published in 1952), and the previously unpublished autobiographical fragment, *A Nightingale Silenced*, both tell the story of Evans's struggle to re-find her place in the world after the onset of her illness. Although Evans may have regretted her inability to preserve the moment, it is testament to the timeless quality of her writing that twenty-first-century readers will find in these works an anticipation of many of our contemporary concerns. The *Autobiography* provides a sustained meditation on the nature of creativity, personal agency and our relationship to the landscape; the two illness memoirs explore that moment when bodily autonomy and environment are imperilled. All three works anticipate our contemporary concern with 'being present' or 'in the moment'. For Evans, this was an artistic task that illness, medicine, marriage and maternity all threatened to undermine.

The struggle with temporality is central to *A Ray of Darkness*. Her work circles around a moment in the Spring of 1950, when she was living alone in a tar and pitch cottage in Elkstone, high in the hills above Cheltenham. Her husband Michael Williams was away at teacher training college and Evans was caught up in her familiar routine of daily domestic work and writing late into the evenings. Feeling tired, she glanced at her small enamel alarm clock and saw that it was ten past eleven. Then she found herself in a world that she no longer recognised. The clock hands now stood at twenty-five past twelve and her head was caught between the table and the fireplace. The room was in disarray; her furniture overturned; the poem she had spent the evening working on was slowly disappearing beneath a pool of spilt tea. It soon became clear that she had had no role in this. Her loss of self-regard was shown by her sleeve burnt in the coal fire; her loss of self-control by her clothes soaked in urine. This was not a moment of Evans's own making; it was a moment when the world disowned her.

The cruelty of the moment in which Evans became estranged from the world becomes apparent when one turns again to her earlier writings, in particular to her unconventional *Autobiography* (1943), published seven years before her first epileptic seizure and now reissued by Honno. In this work, the familiar landmarks of life history, such as childhood, marriage or literary career, are abandoned in favour of a more sensuous concentration on the world about her. As the poet P. J. Kavanagh would later note, 'it was the livingness of things, and her response, that were her true preoccupation in this book, so that it stands or falls on her observation and her expression. She banks entirely on description, there's no dialogue, no drama, the greatest event is the passage of a bird across a cloud'.[2]

Throughout *Autobiography*, one can see clearly how Evans strained after a kind of mystical communion with the earth, hungering for a sustained connection that would allow her to

> see as if I were present in some less hostile form than human, the row of silent hives in my neighbour's garden, the ceaseless careless flights of the birds from eaves to branches, when no one is there to make them shy and wary […] learning how things are in the hibernating insect world, discovering the bats behind the cartshed wall, the wild bees and wasps in the banks, the flies, the buried and suspended chrysalises hanging in the corners of workshop windows where dust and frost have made the panes as dull as cowhorn. (*Autobiography*, 89–90)

It was an involvement with the world that she had fleetingly experienced as a child, when even the most everyday objects, from cutlery to cornstalks, seemed like potential companions, but which was now obscured within the humdrum rhythms of twentieth-century life: 'That there *is* a consciousness in all living things I am certain. But as I grew up and began to live, as most of us have to, longer drearier hours indoors, I lost not the sense of it, but the hope that it might be intercepted and partly understood' (91). It is this infant apprehension that provides the grounds for her personal creed:

> I believe the soul to be universal – an element, one element in all things. All things, even inanimate ones, have a kind of life, most of them a separate one as well as the universal and spiritual meaning,

> common to all. The detail of earth and sky, the clouds, stars, winds, birds, animals, all the lists we have to make when writing of the one spontaneous 'aroundness' are living in one living element, one comprehension, ourselves too included, as the detail and pattern of a man's brain is included in his unknown spiritual being. (93)

A Ray of Darkness can be seen as a continuation of the philosophical project Evans embarked upon in *Autobiography*. At many points she pauses to answer criticisms of the earlier book, raised by Derek Savage (1917–2007), an Anglican poet and pacifist whose life in many ways paralleled Evans's own. Savage felt that the earlier work's obsession with nature betrayed a kind of death wish: an insight that Evans found perceptive, believing that her epilepsy might be a manifestation of her death obsessions.[3] She also agreed with Savage that the first work betrayed a kind of 'spiritual incompleteness', but wrote to him insisting that,

> as I was not dead, neither was *Autobiography* spiritually speaking finished, and that I hoped yet to develop. At E-[lkstone] I felt that I was growing both before and after the major attacks began; and I feel now that this story of my brain is in fact the second part of *Autobiography* and belongs to it. (*Ray*, 65)

However, as the poet and mystic Kathleen Raine noted in 1952, placed alongside one another the two books open up an unsettling conversation.[4] In its vivid evocation of the world around us, Evans's *Autobiography* asks how we can reach for that part of ourselves that exists outside of the skin, in the thoughts and feelings sustained by the earth around us. In opposition to this, *A Ray of Darkness* explores the moment when the world resists our grasp, and our connections with that extended self are sundered. For Evans, coming back into being as she lay prone on the floor of her Elkstone cottage, that sense of the earth's refusal was palpable.

A Ray of Darkness may thus be read in two ways. On the one hand it is an illness memoir, exploring the threat to identity posed by epilepsy and the ways that Evans sought to restore herself through friendship, motherhood, phenobarbitone and a renewed relationship with nature. There is a risk in such readings that Evans's philosophical meditation is reduced to a case history: rich fodder for the burgeoning number

of courses in the medical humanities.[5] This risk is apparent in Julie Thompson Dobkin's foreword to the present volume, which suggests that Evans's 'hypergraphical recordings of experiences are perhaps manifestations of her seizure complex' (viii), a description which, I think, undermines the moral seriousness of Evans's poetic task. A different way of reading is to follow Raine and Savage's lead, seeing the works as a sustained poetic meditation on the nature and grounds of the person. Of course, these two readings are in fact intimately connected. Evans's own journey towards some kind of recovery was caught up with a neuropsychiatric attempt to rethink the relationship between the self and the world.

II

After the initial attack, Evans was first treated by the family doctor in Cheltenham, and then sent to the Burden Neurological Institute at Stoke Park outside Bristol (the city which appears as 'Clystowe' in her memoirs). The Burden was an unusual institution. Founded in 1939 by Christian eugenicists who were looking for neuroscientific solutions to the problems of delinquency and the feeble-minded, it quickly developed a reputation for its pioneering and experimental treatments. Soon after its opening it undertook some of the first British experiments in electro-convulsive therapy and, in 1943, the first British leucotomy. All these experiments were carried out under the direction of F. L. Golla ('Professor T' in the memoir), a thoughtful but patrician figure. He had arrived in Bristol from the Maudsley Hospital in London, where he was rumoured to have carried out ward rounds on horseback. Evans felt an immediate attachment to him: 'I liked him immensely and at once trusted him and admired the manner in which he spoke to me of my illness […] He spoke outright, as all strong people do, free of death and life and the body' (107).

At first, this appears an unusual attraction: Evans was forty-one and Golla was approaching his seventy-fourth birthday. Yet it would have seemed all too familiar for Evans. Her apparent infatuation with a medical authority had been prefigured in her remarkable cystitis memoir, *The Wooden Doctor* (1933), published almost two decades earlier.[6] In this novel, a urinary tract infection becomes the vehicle for a young girl's fantasies over a general practitioner thirty years her

senior. It would be wrong, however, to see the friendship between Golla and Evans as some kind of late rehearsal of adolescent desires. Rather, their friendship grew from the shared basis of their philosophical task. The Burden, under Golla's directorship, had become a leading centre of cybernetic research. Although this world of technology, feedback and information might seem alien to the wild earth captured in Evans's writing, it shared with hers the sense that all boundaries between individuals and objects were illusory, and that what changed and endured in the world were just patterns of information. Against our modern association of cybernetics with robots, cyborgs and technology, for Golla and his contemporaries the idea that new forms could arise and be sustained outside of consciousness was often demonstrated in bucolic examples - such as a pothole in a cart track created and perpetuated by the cattle swerving to avoid each other.[7] This is the world that Evans described in her *Autobiography*: a world of evolving patterns that emerged and were sustained through thought and nature. There were no boundaries between the mental and the physical, between outer nature and the inner mind. All were part of a common flow. As Evans noted: 'The brain is the earth, the body is the universe, strung planet to planet by impalpable communicating threads' (*Autobiography*, 146). Everything was part of a common substance taking form and shape through the flow of information.

The second half of *A Ray of Darkness* makes for difficult reading. The communion Evans described in her *Autobiography* was now lost with connections transformed into constraints: 'each impalpable silver thread' she wrote, 'is turned to iron chain - the fields and your feet are in fetters' (188). The birth of Cassandra, her first child, comes with a return of the fits and a growing awareness that she is not the author of her own actions. Evans was haunted by the idea that she might, in a moment of unconsciousness, have somehow harmed or murdered her child. Crowded by medication, fatigue and the threat of new fits, she struggled to find her connection to a past that had grounded her. Time became 'as rotten as worm-eaten wood, the earth under me is full of trap-doors' (125). She had escaped its anchor, slipping 'in and out of its meshes as a sardine through a herring net' (184).

Yet in the midst of this suffering, it was her care of Cassandra that showed her the way forward. At her lowest point, she conjured from memory a half-glimpsed place from her childhood in Benhall, near Ross on Wye. She remembered, 'a high, grassy common where the

bracken grows and the sheep graze, among the branches of our Border hills. I even see the smoke of hidden cottage chimneys scattered among the windy trees' (*Ray*, 192). This half-remembered place, she realised with 'fantastic certainty', was a place she could inhabit with her child. To reach this imaginary point, for it to become a secure reality, demanded some kind of practice, for it was only in practical action that fleeting ideals could be made real ('Forms being actions – the only shapes thoughts can assume outside arts and prayers', 191). Her illness had led her to a point somewhere between nature worship, cybernetics and the Christianity that had been urged upon her by Savage and Raine. Dwelling on the death of a village neighbour who had perished in the snow as she headed out to look after a grandchild, Evans saw in her sacrifice and in the old woman's happiness, the emergence of an enduring ethic that would act as a bulwark against that existential threat made apparent in her epilepsy. Her neighbour had found God, Evans believed, 'in the necessities of others' (190), and it was in the service of these necessities that pattern and identity were created and sustained. Part of Evans's own service, in the final years of her life as she struggled against unconsciousness, was to produce these remarkable volumes that Honno has rescued for a new audience. *Autobiography*, *A Ray of Darkness* and *A Nightingale Silenced* are a testament to the energy and insight that Evans brought to her poetic task. Her writing sustains a presence that still, across these decades, endures.

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Notes

1 Page references are to the Honno edition under review.
2 P. J. Kavanaugh, 'Introduction', in Margiad Evans, *Autobiography* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1974), pp. i–vii (p. v.).
3 D. S. Savage, *The Withered Branch: Six Studies in the Modern Novel* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1950), pp. 125–9.
4 Kathleen Raine, 'On the Borders of Consciousness', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 December 1952, p. 794.
5 I am guilty of this myself: https://www.academia.edu/4279307/.
6 Margiad Evans, *The Wooden Doctor* (Aberystwyth: Honno, 2005).
7 W. Ross Ashby, 'The Self-Reproducing System', in C. A. Muses (ed.), *Aspects of the Theory of Artificial Intelligence* (New York: Plenum Press, 1962), pp. 9–18.