

FESTIVITIES, MASQUERADES AND EPIPHANIES:
THE COMIC WORLD OF E.F. BENSON

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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Festivities, Masquerades and Epiphanies:
the Comic World of E.F. Benson

by

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Abstract

Edward Frederic Benson (1867-1940) lived a long and productive life as a writer. During his career he published more than a hundred books that ranged across several literary genres, as well as contributing innumerable articles and short stories to magazines in England and North America. E.F. Benson is best remembered for his comic novels, but in spite of the fact that these have been frequently republished, they have received virtually no attention from literary critics. In part, this neglect is due to the traditional scepticism of many critics towards the comic genre during E.F. Benson's life-time. It was only after his death that the seminal work in comedy by C.L. Barber (1951), Susanne Langer (1953), Northrop Frye (1957), Moreton Gurewitch (1975), Robert Heilman (1978), Robert Polhemus (1980) and Harry Levin (1987) established the thematic significance and aesthetic structures of comic works. As yet, however, there has been no formal study of the range of E.F. Benson's comic work within the matrix of the comic genre, though some biographical studies of Benson and his family have been published and some biographical information is useful for understanding the background against which Benson created his comedies.

E.F. Benson never detached himself from the human capacity for folly. In fact, he drew extensively on his own experience and the experience of his family, friends and acquaintances, who lived at the centre of the political, social and literary world of his time. Nevertheless, although he keenly observed the malice, greed and self-delusion of unredeemed men and women in closely knit communities, he never lost

sight of the significant and possibly redemptive role the comic artist can play in exposing human irrationality, pettiness and hypocrisy.

This dissertation examines a selection of eleven of E.F. Benson's comic novels, establishing their contemporary reception as well as demonstrating the comic patterns in characterization, structure and themes that distinguish them. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that the enduring appeal of E.F. Benson's work lies not only in these recognizably comic patterns and characters but also in the increasing dexterity of his narrative skill in counterpointing diverse and allusive discourses in order to expose human frailty. The novels are grouped under the headings festivities, masquerades and epiphanies in order to show the versatility of his comic vision and techniques as well as to establish them firmly within the matrix of the comic genre. The "Dodo" novels, Dodo: A Detail of a Day (1893), Dodo's Daughter (1914) and Dodo Wonders (1921), present characters who use their wit, integrity and imagination to overcome worldly limitations. These are E.F. Benson's festive novels. In the "Lucia" novels, Queen Lucia (1920), Miss Mapp (1922), Lucia in London (1927), Mapp and Lucia (1931), Lucia's Progress (1935) and Trouble for Lucia (1939), the characters are devoid of integrity and talent and rely, instead, on disguise and masquerade to control their circumstance. In the final two novels I discuss, Paying Guests (1929) and Secret Lives (1932), the characters initially are no less shallow and self-deceived, but for a brief, epiphanic moment they catch a glimpse of their folly and strive to improve their lives and relationships after these momentary revelations into their fallible condition.

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In many of his works, E.F. Benson affirmed the humane values found in loving communities. I have been fortunate in my friends, and, most of all, in my family for just such a community, which I herein steadfastly acknowledge.

Introduction

A man's capacity for happiness is in great measure
The same as his capacity for wonder and interest.

E.F. Benson, Bensoniana (1912)

My interest in the comic novels of E.F. Benson (1867-1940) began with a chance encounter with his novel, Secret Lives,¹ published when he was sixty-five years old. I was intrigued by this novel which, under the guise of pleasure, elegantly exposed middle-class pretensions about scholarship and literature. After even only a cursory reading, I was conscious of the narrative skill of this author. Here was the sophisticated blend of narrative discourses that Mikhail Bakhtin analysed in his work on the poetics of fiction.² In Secret Lives, E.F. Benson was mixing the voice of the implied author with many other voices of characters who, in turn, borrowed from the quasi-literary discourses of romance novels and Victorian biographies. What a polyphony. Much of the humour in the novel depended on the clash of all those voices as they dissembled, manipulated and changed their views of themselves and others. I wondered who E.F. Benson, the grand-master of this carnival, was, and I wondered what had been written about him. My appreciation of his handling of diverse discourses was informed by the writings of Bakhtin,³ and his lucid and eloquent

¹E.F. Benson, Secret Lives (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932).

²Tzvetan Todorov, Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle, translated by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, edited by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

commentator, David Lodge.⁴ Here, indeed, was an author who was the "prose artist"

Bakhtin described in his book, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics:

....for the prose artist the world is full of other people's words, among which he must orient himself and whose speech characteristics he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear. He must introduce them into the plane of his own discourse, but in such a way that this plane is not destroyed. He works with a very rich verbal palette.⁵

Not only did I admire this writer's "rich verbal palette" but also I was impressed by the maturity of his comic insight into human nature. As I read Secret Lives, I recalled Erasmus' letter to Martin Dorp, defending his enduring comic work, The Praise of Folly. Erasmus said he had acted out his comedy from behind a mask in order

to mock not to attack; to benefit not to wound; to comment on men's manners, not to denounce them.⁶

This same comic spirit permeated Secret Lives and I wondered if E.F. Benson had defined or defended his comic vision, as so many writers of comedies had both before and after Erasmus.⁷

After a winter spent researching E.F. Benson's life and work, I learned what is meant by the paradox that it is folly to be wise. Edward Frederic Benson's published work amounts to well over a hundred books. I had accidentally come across one of

⁴David Lodge, Working with Structuralism (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).
-----, After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁵Bakhtin, Problems, 200-201.

⁶Desiderius Erasmus, The Praise of Folly and Other Writings, edited by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), 231.

⁷The most widely-known of these defenses are: Dante Alighieri's Epistle to Can Grande (c. 1319), Ben Jonson's "Prologue" to Volpone (1606); William Congreve's A Letter to John Dennis, concerning Humour in Comedy (1695); George Meredith's lecture "On the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit" (1877).

his last novels, written towards the end of his extensive career as a "man of letters." His literary career had begun precipitately in 1893 with his best-seller, Dodo: A Detail of a Day, and continued through the 1890s, the Edwardian age, the First World War, the "roaring" twenties and the "dishonest" thirties until his death in 1940, just a few weeks after he had finished his autobiography, ironically titled Final Edition. Throughout all those years he published consistently, sometimes as many as three books appearing in any one year. Not only was E.F. Benson prolific, he was versatile. He wrote comic novels about titled socialites⁸ and newly-affluent social-climbers.⁹ Other more serious books dealt with those familiar *fin de siècle* and Edwardian themes: the aesthetic and moral struggle of artists;¹⁰ the conflict between an individual's emotional imperatives and social convention;¹¹ the plight of intellectual women in a society that offered marriage as the sole career for most women;¹² the clash between the social aspirations of the prosperous mercantile and industrial classes and the landed aristocracy.¹³ His supernatural stories, set in Egypt¹⁴ and the less exotic Home Counties¹⁵ were admired by M.R. James, a master of the genre.¹⁶ His novels

⁸Scarlet and Hyssop (1902); The Relentless City (1903); The Freaks of Mayfair (1916).

⁹The Climber (1908).

¹⁰The Challoners (1906); The Angel of Pain (1906).

¹¹Sheaves (1908).

¹²Juggernaut (1911), Mrs. Ames (1912), The Weaker Vessel (1913), Arundel (1914).

¹³The Osbornes (1910).

¹⁴The Image in the Sand (1904).

¹⁵The Luck of the Vails (1901).

¹⁶Michael Cox, M.R. James: An Informal Portrait (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 150.

about public-school and university life had a wide readership in England and overseas.¹⁷ E.F. Benson even turned his hand to historical romances.¹⁸ In collaboration with his friend Eustace Miles he produced a Monty Pythonish Mad Annual in 1903 as well as a series of books on golf, cricket¹⁹ and a book on darts, badminton and table tennis, called Diversions Day by Day (1905). As well as this formidable output of novels and self-help books, he contributed short stories and articles to literary magazines in England,²⁰ Canada²¹ and the United States²² throughout his career. In addition to his novels, short stories and articles, during the last twenty years of his life, he published highly regarded literary and historical biographies,²³ as well as poignant, but unsentimental memoirs about the lives of his influential family.²⁴ All this, in addition to the six comic novels about the outrageous Mrs. Emmeline Lucas (Lucia) and her indefatigable rival, Miss Mapp, that are his best known legacy.²⁵

¹⁷David Blaize (1916); David of King's (1924).

¹⁸Cansina (1899); Princess Sophia (1900).

¹⁹A Book of Golf (1903); The Cricket of Abel, Hirst and Shrewsbury (1903).

²⁰The following is a selection of these: The Cornhill, The Contemporary Review, The Graphic, Lady's Field, The Illustrated London News, The Monthly Review, The Pall Mall Magazine, The Spectator.

²¹Saturday Night.

²²Book News, Century Magazine, the Cosmopolitan, Lippincott's Magazine, Scribner's.

²³Sir Francis Drake (1927); Alcibiades (1928); Ferdinand Magellan (1929); Charlotte Brontë (1932); Edward VII (1933); Queen Victoria (1935); The Kaiser (1936); Queen Victoria's Daughter (1939).

²⁴Our Family Affairs (1920); Mother (1925); As We Were (1930); As We Are (1932); Final Edition (1940).

²⁵Queen Lucia (1920); Miss Mapp (1922); Lucia in London (1927); Mapp and Lucia (1931); Lucia's Progress (1935); Trouble for Lucia (1939).

Besides this daunting abundance of published material, I found out that there were major collections of correspondence by E.F. Benson and his family, as well as corrected and annotated manuscripts of his published work, together with several unpublished stories, in libraries in England and the United States. What interested me most in this superabundance of material was the persistence of so much of E.F. Benson's work, long after his brothers' works, which had been more highly respected during their lives, had faded. Ann Thwaite, in her study of Edmund Gosse, had noted this surprising persistence.

E.F. Benson was one, who seemed at one time unlikely to fulfil Gosse's prediction that he would 'set his mark on English fiction' but is now far more read than his older brother.²⁶

E.F. Benson's novels, biographies and memoirs had always been regularly and, in general, favourably reviewed in reputable newspapers and magazines, though there was always a tendency to dismiss his comic fiction as trivial, because it appeared to deal with trivial pursuits. E.F. Benson, either shame-facedly or ironically, described his comic fiction as being nothing more than "a game of marbles,"²⁷ though he did take pleasure in the Very Reverend Dean Sheppard's prescient remark about the spiritual and therapeutic effects of comedy:

I wonder why people who say their prayers don't thank God for aspirin, Phillips's patent soles, E.F. Benson, Jane Austen and Charlie Chaplin and other real soul-filling things.²⁸

²⁶Ann Thwaite, Edmund Gosse: A Literary Landscape (London: Secker and Warburg, 1984), 373.

²⁷E.F. Benson, Final Edition (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1940), 184.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 222.

E.F. Benson's self-deprecating remarks about his comic fiction being "small beer"²⁹ accorded with the general critical indifference towards comedy at that time. Despite the continuing interest by publishers and the public in his comic works, the critical commentary on them has been scant. In the earlier part of his career the critical responses to his writing were brief and dismissive. He and his brothers were usually discussed as a group and, though flattering comparisons were made between the Benson brothers and other literary families, the Brontës, the Kingsleys, Rossettis and Thackerays, the critics³⁰ usually preferred the soothing spirituality of Arthur and Hugh to the more diverting worldly books by Edward Frederic. One American critic, James Moffatt, chose to distinguish E.F. Benson's work from his brothers', respecting the sharp tone of his social criticism in Mammon and Co. (1899), Scarlet and Hyssop (1902) and The Climber (1908). He thought E.F. Benson's style was more versatile than his brothers'. He observed that like theirs it rested "on the basis of classical scholarship" but was "broadened by his experience of the world" and "characterized by a vein of diverting humour."³¹ E.H. Lacon Wats,³² who had been two years ahead of E.F. Benson at Cambridge, was the first to see an affinity between his work and George Meredith's. He misquoted Meredith's definition of the comic spirit, but retained the gist:

²⁹Ibid., 163.

³⁰Mary K. Ford, "A Talented Trio," The Forum, October 1908, 400-405.

³¹James Moffatt, "The Three Bensons," The Living Age, 23 December, 1911, 713-719. It is interesting to note that a novel, The Lantern Bearer, by another of E.F. Benson's relations, Mrs. Arthur Sidgwick, was serialized in this magazine that was published in Boston.

³²Lacon, Lectures to Living Authors (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1927), 211-216.

You may estimate your capacity for the comic by being able to detect the ridicule of those you love, without loving them less.³³

Lacon Wats had earlier in his essay called Benson the "last and best authority" on London Society, whether "it was the peeress in Mayfair or the commercial climber starting at Notting Hill and intending to finish in some magnificent mansion in Belgravia."³⁴ Despite Lacon Wats' attention to E.F. Benson in his own right, almost a decade later he was still grouped with his brothers. Cosmo Hamilton in his book, People Worth Talking About,³⁵ surveyed a range of writers, including J.M. Barrie, G.K. Chesterton, Noel Coward, Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells and P.G. Wodehouse. Each of these received a separate chapter, but the three Bensons share one. Admittedly, he gives E.F. Benson more space and makes astute comments about his development and values.

Every one of his novels has marked his steady ascent — Vintage, The Princess Sophia, Scarlet and Hyssop, The Relentless City, The Challoners, The Image on the Sand, The Angel of Pain, The House of Defence, The Climber, The Osbornes, Account Rendered, Secret Lives, all show more and more the true craftsman's touch. Neither rancour nor bitterness have ever been found in his pen and although, of course, he has looked at life with a sharply satirical eye and with the accumulating irony of a philosophic mind life has held its zest, its comedy, its adventure and its pain. He is merciless to vulgarity and all its ugliness, to charlatanism and subterfuge in all its numerous forms, but for beauty and for kindness, for chivalry and for sentiment he has an inherited love. They are his tradition and do honour to his craft.³⁶

³³*ibid.*, 213.

³⁴*ibid.*, 211.

³⁵Cosmo Hamilton, People Worth Talking About (London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1934), 56.

³⁶*ibid.*, 56.

Nevertheless, these few essays gleaned from foreign magazines and out-of-print books hardly represent a critical canon during E.F. Benson's lifetime. It was not until the mid-1970s that there was the beginning of a critical interest in E.F. Benson's work, particularly his comic work, an interest that has been sustained and has grown through the 1980s. The republishing of the six novels about Mrs. Emmeline Lucas and Elizabeth Mapp prompted V.S. Pritchett's seminal essay, "The Pleasures of Malice" in the New York Review of Books.³⁷ This essay was retitled "Fairy Tales" and republished in V.S. Pritchett's collection of literary essays, The Tale-Bearers.³⁸ Pritchett admired the accomplished elegance of the society novelists who published between 1880-1914 and wondered at their critical neglect:

I have often thought that professors of English Lit. should take time off from the central glooms of genius and consider those lesser entertainers who are deeply suggestive.³⁹

He categorized E.F. Benson's "Lucia" comedies as fairy tales for adults in which the primitive drives for power and attention are endlessly satisfied. In the Clark Lectures at Cambridge University in 1969, V.S. Pritchett had explicated the comic tradition and vision of George Meredith, attempting to redress the critical imbalance between comic and "serious" writers. He did this in full knowledge of the resistance in some academic circles towards taking comedy seriously. He recently commented wryly on this:

³⁷V.S. Pritchett, The Tale Bearers: Literary Essays (New York: Random House, 1980), 18-24.

³⁸....., "Pleasures of Malice," New York Review of Books, 23 June 1977, 8-10.

³⁹Pritchett, The Tale Bearers, 19.

I do remember the groans that went up when I was allowed to talk about Meredith at Cambridge in a Clark Lecture.⁴⁰

Despite this denigration of the comic genre in academic circles, E.F. Benson's first novel, Dodo: The Detail of a Day, was discussed in a thesis "The Aesthetic Tradition in the English Comic Novel"⁴¹ by Neil Frances Brennan in 1981. He puts E.F. Benson in the rather crowded company of Robert Hichens, Anthony Hope, Ada Leverson, Max Beerbohm, H.H. Munro, Ronald Firbank, Norman Douglas, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Powell, but nonetheless points out E.F. Benson's place in a broad literary tradition. At least he is no longer being compared only to his brothers. In 1989 an article that, in part, discussed E.F. Benson's work appeared in the prestigious journal, The Proceedings of the Modern Languages Association.⁴² Susan J. Leonardi, in "Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster à la Riseholme," analysed the narrative frame and social meanings implicit in the giving and withholding of information about recipes by referring to Irma S. Rombaeur's Joy of Cooking, Nora Ephron's Heartburn and E.F. Benson's Queen Lucia. By the end of the decade, though, E.F. Benson was still not being given attention in the singular. He was included in a book that examined six masters of the camp novel.⁴³ Once more E.F. Benson was in distinguished company. This time his "Lucia" works were considered along with the

⁴⁰This is taken from a letter to the author written in July, 1991.

⁴¹Brennan, Neil Frances, "The Aesthetic Tradition in the English Comic Novel," Diss., University of Illinois, 1981.

⁴²Susan J. Leonardi, "Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster à la Riseholme and Key Lime Pie," Proceedings for the Modern Languages Association, 104 (May, 1989): 340-347.

⁴³Robert F. Kiernan, Frivolity Unbound (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1990), 66-94.

comedies of Thomas Love Peacock, Max Beerbohm, Ronald Firbank, P.G. Wodehouse and Ivy Compton Burnett.

Having surveyed E.F. Benson's published works, I was intrigued by the paradox that while his output was prodigious, the critical analysis of his work was slight. The easy answer was that his work was well-forgotten, but that did not account for the fact that it had been generally well-reviewed when it appeared and that it cropped up generation after generation. While I have no intention of over-estimating his work, because it has endured, I think it deserves to be examined critically and in the context of comedy. This study, then, examines a representative selection of his comic work from the point of view that there may be two major reasons why it has not, as yet, received much critical attention: I argue that his comic work was published before the seminal contemporary critical theories on comedy appeared and that it is only recently that critics of narrative fiction⁴⁴ have attended more to the poetics of narrative, particularly the distinction between monologic and dialogic or polyphonic discourses, than to the Aristotelian focus on plot and character.⁴⁵ E.F. Benson's best work may have been overlooked by literary critics because he was working in a genre that was not only not considered respectable but was also ill-defined. Even the favourable reviewers sometimes seemed to feel a little self-conscious that they delighted in work

⁴⁴The work of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan outlined in his book Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics (London: Methuen, 1983) is a useful synopsis of characterization, focalization, levels and voices and patterns of speech representation.

⁴⁵I am indebted to David Lodge for this insight. It occurs in his discussion of how Bakhtin's theories may be used to put the novel "at the centre instead of the margins of poetics" in Lodge, After Bakhtin, 90.

in which there was little plot and even less moral development in the characters. E.F. Benson's family clearly thought he was wasting his time and his talents and so, at times, did he. During his lifetime the literary commendations went to his brother Arthur, whose dull works of high-seriousness no-one ever reads now, whereas E.F. Benson's inconclusive, dialogic discourses exposing human absurdity in character and action are pleasing to the post-modern ear and were always popular with the literate classes he pilloried.⁴⁶

The theories of comedy set out by C.L. Barber,⁴⁷ Northrop Frye,⁴⁸ Susanne Langer,⁴⁹ Morton Gurewitch,⁵⁰ Robert Heilman,⁵¹ Robert M. Polhemus⁵² and Harry Levin⁵³ have done much to counter the caveats of both Samuel Johnson who said comedy was "particularly unpropitious to definers,"⁵⁴ and L.C. Knights that

⁴⁶A.C. Benson wrote in his Diary (Vol. XII, p. 63) that Scarlet and Hyssop (1902) was the only book Edward VII had read in six months.

⁴⁷C.L. Barber, "The Saturnalian Pattern in Shakespeare's Comedy," The Sewanee Review, LIX (Autumn, 1951): 593-611.

⁴⁸Northrop Frye, "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy" in Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

⁴⁹Susanne K. Langer, "The Great Dramatic Forms: The Comic Rhythm" in Feeling and Form (New York: Scribners, 1953), 326-50.

⁵⁰Morton Gurewitch, Comedy: The Irrational Vision (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975).

⁵¹Robert Bechtold Heilman, The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978).

⁵²Robert M. Polhemus, Comic Faith (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).

⁵³Harry Levin, Playboys and Kill-joys: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Comedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁵⁴Samuel Johnson, quoted in The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society by Robert Bechtold Heilman (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), 254.

"profitless generalizations are more frequent in criticism of comedy than in criticism of other forms of literature."⁵⁵ I think Morton Gurewitch comes closest to respecting the polymorphous nature of comedy when he concludes that:

comedy itself is too diverse to subserve a single, exclusive quality or function....comedy has to be recognized as a matrix term that embraces miscellaneous impulses....⁵⁶

These contemporary comic theorists discuss comedy from three different positions: some claim that it celebrates the fecund, regenerative forces that ensure the survival of human society; others concentrate on the moral and didactic function of comedy in holding up to public ridicule man's self-deluded and trivial preoccupations; still more regard comedy as having the salutary, cathartic effect of releasing, in legitimate forms, the subversive forces that would otherwise destroy the self and society. All are united, though, in celebrating an art form that has a long history and a continuing vitality in spite of, or perhaps because of, the puritans, the sentimentalists and the grave. I think it is possible to discern all three patterns in E.F. Benson's comic works. The following is a study of eleven of his comic novels, which I have categorized under the three headings, festivities, masquerades and epiphanies, to distinguish the kinds of comic worlds and characters he creates, as well as the comic techniques he employs.

While taking into account contemporary comic theory that goes a long way to legitimise outrageous characters, never-ending plots, apparently meaningless prattle, and other distinctly comic techniques, I do not intend to put E.F. Benson in a critical

⁵⁵L.C. Knights, "Notes on Comedy" in The Importance of Scrutiny, edited by Eric Bentley (New York: New York University Press, 1964).

⁵⁶Gurewitch, Comedy: The Irrational Vision, 48.

straight-jacket or to make grandiose claims for his comedies. That would be the ultimate absurdity. What I do intend is to show that the enduring and endearing appeal of E.F. Benson's comic work is consistent with long-established paradigms in classical and English comedy as well as having its own distinct patterns. Firstly, I think that the festive and positive element of comedy that C.L. Barber, Northrop Frye and Susanne K. Langer explored in the 1950s is a useful frame of reference for the three novels about Dodo, *Lady Chesterford*.⁵⁷ Secondly, the work by Morton Gurewitch that points to the prevalence of masquerade, disguise and deception in comedy offers a structural framework for the six novels dealing with Lucia's pretences and pretensions.⁵⁸ Harry Levin's original analysis of a main feature in comedy, the role of the kill-joys and comic butts who try to repress vitality and individual freedom, offers insights into the rivalries in *Mayfair* and *Tilling*. In E.F. Benson's comic fiction, society is revitalized by controlling the hide-bound kill-joys, while simultaneously containing the excesses of intuitive individualism. A third pattern, I think, can be found in two of Benson's novels that celebrate and affirm human life in all its infirmity and imperfection. They are *Paying Guests* (1929) and the one that began my inquiry into E.F. Benson, *Secret Lives* (1932). In these novels the characters achieve moments of self-recognition through comic action and although it is clear they cannot escape their fallible condition, they achieve a measure of contentment after that self-awareness. Both novels are in praise of the folly of mortal humanity striving for dignity

⁵⁷E.F. Benson, *Dodo: A Detail of a Day* (1893), *Dodo the Second* (1914), *Dodo Wonders* (1921).

⁵⁸E.F. Benson, *Queen Lucia* (1920), *Miss Mapp* (1922), *Lucia in London* (1927), *Mapp and Lucia* (1931), *Lucia's Progress* (1935), *Trouble for Lucia* (1939).

and happiness and both show that affinity between the genre of comedy and the ideal Christian tolerance of all things "counter, original, spare and strange" that Robert Polhemus analyses in his book Comic Faith.⁵⁹ This third phase of E.F. Benson's comedy is the one in which he comes closest to the view of that other writer rooted in a classical and humanist tradition, who wrote:

No society, no cohabitation can be pleasant or lasting without folly; so much so, that a people could not stand its prince, nor the master his man, nor the maid her mistress, nor the tutor his pupil, nor the friend his friend, nor the wife her husband for a moment longer, if they did not now and then err together, now flatter each other; now sensibly conniving at things, now smearing themselves with some honey of folly.⁶⁰

My study begins with a brief overview of E.F. Benson's life and work. As he is not a well-known figure it is important for readers to be able to locate his work in the context of his family background, upbringing, education, relationships and experience. Before my discussion of the three categories of his comic fiction, I have included a short section on the comic matrix of his work. This term, used by Gurewitch, I think is more appropriate than "tradition" because E.F. Benson's comedy grows out of any number of interconnected comic patterns rather than an established, formal line. Then, I discuss in detail the major comic sequences in E.F. Benson's work which I have called festivities, masquerades and epiphanies, for I think those terms define the mood of these works, establish their context in the comic matrix, and point to the complexity of this enigmatic and underestimated writer.

⁵⁹Robert M. Polhemus, Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁶⁰Johann Huizinga, "The Comedy of Life" in The Praise of Folly: A Collection of Critical Essays edited by Kathleen Williams (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1969), 82.

CHAPTER ONE

The Making of a Man of Letters

It is a precarious affair to make your livelihood
by contracting to amuse and interest people.

H.B. Elliott, Thoughts from E.F. Benson (1916)

Edward Frederic Benson, known affectionately as Fred, the fifth child of Edward White Benson and Mary Sidgwick Benson, died on February 29th, 1940, shortly after he had completed the last version of his life, appropriately and ironically titled Final Edition.¹ For more than fifty years, he had pursued a career as a man of letters and lived at "the centre of things."² His legacy is a substantial body of published work, including articles, reviews, short stories, plays, novels, historical biographies and autobiographies³ as well as a considerable number of unpublished essays, stories and plays.⁴ Final Edition is a distillation of his earlier autobiographical narratives about his remarkable family. In Our Family Affairs,⁵ published twenty years earlier, he had described his family life from the time of his birth, on July 24, 1867 until his father's untimely death in the church near William Ewart Gladstone's home at Hawarden on October 11th, 1896. In his characteristically self-deprecating style, E.F. Benson, in Our Family Affairs, recounts his childhood first at Wellington College, where his father

¹E.F. Benson, Final Edition (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1940).

²Max Beerbohm, "Last and Best," The Spectator, 1 November, 1940, 446.

³A bibliography of his published works is attached to this study.

⁴Papers pertaining to E.F. Benson and his family are located in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, the University of California Library, Los Angeles and in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, the University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

⁵E.F. Benson, Our Family Affairs (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1920).

was the first Headmaster, and then at Lincoln, where his family lived when his father became Canon and Chancellor from 1873 to 1876. As Edward White Benson moved up the ecclesiastical hierarchy, his family accompanied him, first to Truro, Cornwall, when he became the first Bishop of that newly created diocese (1876-1882) and, finally, to Lambeth Palace when he was appointed Primate of All England, the Archbishop of Canterbury (1882-1896). The emphasis in this autobiography, as in subsequent ones, *Mother*⁶ and *As We Were*,⁷ was not on the position and influence of the family, but on the relationships and values that developed in this lively group of energetic and, at times, incompatible individuals bound together by an affection, respect and loyalty that would withstand physical and mental illness and death. E.F. Benson is best-known as the author of novels that portray the social comedy of human existence, but his comic vision is grounded in an essentially serious understanding of human folly and fallibility that was as much apparent in his own life and the lives of his brothers and sisters as it was in the social, literary and episcopal world he grew up in. Having admired Oscar Wilde's perspective on life,⁸ E.F. Benson in his own work echoed Lord Darlington's view that "Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it."⁹

⁶-----, *Mother* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925).

⁷-----, *As We Were* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930).

⁸Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), 392.

⁹Oscar Wilde, *"The Importance of Being Earnest" and Other Plays* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 19.

Though he was a modest man, E.F. Benson would probably have been pleased by the eloquent testaments of friendship written by his contemporary, Max Beerbohm,¹⁰ and his more youthful friend, Francis Yeats-Brown,¹¹ for they highlighted what he valued most: his literary endeavours, his family and friends and his contribution to civic life. Both Beerbohm and Yeats-Brown remarked how unpretentious E.F. Benson was, despite his social prominence. Beerbohm put it this way:

He had lived in the centre of things, he had a keenly discriminating eye, he knew intimately many people worth knowing, he had a very clear memory for anything that mattered, anything characteristic, or illuminating or amusing.¹²

And in the course of this assessment Beerbohm implicitly points out a parallel between his own visual art of caricature and Benson's literary skills in isolating, exaggerating and representing the "peculiarities of a human being, at his most characteristic moment."¹³ Francis Yeats-Brown¹⁴ gives us a glimpse of E.F. Benson's social life that, paradoxically, informed as well as distracted him from his literary career:

Except for dancing, he threw himself hungrily and happily into all the pleasures of his friends. He rarely lunched or dined alone (when he did,

¹⁰Beerbohm, "Last and Best," 446.

¹¹Francis Yeats-Brown, "E.F. Benson," The Spectator, 8 March 1940, 334.

¹²Beerbohm, "Last and Best," 446.

¹³David Cecil, Max: A Biography of Max Beerbohm (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 191.

¹⁴Francis Yeats-Brown, the author of the best-seller Bengal Lancer, had first met E.F. Benson in 1909 at his uncle Lord Stanmore's house in Portofino, Italy. Francis Yeats-Brown was the son of Montagu Yeats-Brown, the former British consul at Genoa.

he gulped a meal on a tray with the greatest rapidity, and then returned to his work), and during the summer season he would rarely be in bed before dawn. He was quite ready to dine, go to a theatre, and afterwards to supper, in the typical Edwardian way, and then to a reception, or a ball, where he would play cards, and at the end of such an evening he would sit down at his table at 102 Oakley Street, with a whisky and soda and a box of cigarettes, for another hour or two at his current novel.¹⁵

In this short essay in The Spectator, Francis Yeats-Brown speaks unreservedly about E.F. Benson's lack of conceit, despite his literary and social success, and his considerable athletic prowess, in skating, tennis and golf. He notes that Benson inherited his charm and tact from his mother, and his shrewd business and administrative sense from his father. Yeats-Brown is less secure in assessing Benson's place in literature, though like Beerbohm, he judges him "a more considerable artist"¹⁶ than his two brothers, A.C. and R.H. Benson. Beerbohm, perhaps, was more qualified¹⁷ to comment on the art of a man who, like him, enjoyed the company of wealthy, talented and powerful people, but was not taken in by their masks and disguises. Beerbohm, who had come into prominence in the early 1890s in as sensational a way as E.F. Benson,¹⁸ fully understood Benson's perspective and respected his style.

¹⁵Francis Yeats-Brown, "E.F. Benson," 334.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷David Cecil points out Max Beerbohm's ironic detachment from the society he enjoyed by quoting from an article Max wrote for the Daily Mail in the spring of 1898. Max defined society in the following way: "All social life is founded on certain carefully fostered illusions. Let us respect them. It is through them alone that men can keep out of mischief" (Cecil, Max, 140).

¹⁸Max Beerbohm's essay, "A Defence of Cosmetics" published in the illustrated quarterly The Yellow Book elicited at least as much attention as E.F. Benson's first novel Dodo, published in 1893.

And he could write: he had become, in course of time, master of lucid, concise, light, flexible prose that exactly fulfilled his purposes; a prose abundant in natural felicities; a prose greatly superior to that of either of his brothers, who were never able to curb or chasten their immense facility.¹⁹

For much of E.F. Benson's life he was overshadowed by his family's achievements, especially those of his brother, Arthur Christopher, who taught at Eton before becoming, in 1915, Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. Arthur had little respect for his brother's early literary abilities. In 1900, when A.C. Benson's friend M.R. James (Monty), who later became Provost of King's College, Cambridge, was between positions, the College appointed him as lecturer in Palaeography in order to allow him to keep his Fellowship. Arthur commented on this sinecure by comparing it disparagingly to his brother's literary work:

It was 'a mere name,' noted Arthur Benson, 'no lectures — not even a syllabus. I suggested that one should be founded of Neography and conferred on me. I could discourse critically about Fred's [his brother's] novels.'²⁰

In his autobiographies, E.F. Benson accepts with comic resignation his place in the pecking order of the family, at one point referring to himself as a "poor ugly duckling"²¹ in a "family of swans, who, dazzlingly white, cut circles in the air above it on the pinions of their various accomplishments."²² Nevertheless, his claim that

¹⁹Beerbohm, "Last and Best," 446.

²⁰Michael Cox, M.R. James: An Informal Portrait (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 119.

²¹Benson, Our Family Affairs, 125.

²²*ibid.*

he had not the "smallest intellectual distinction"²³ is only relative to the prodigious achievements of his family at that time, and was not borne out by his subsequent career or the continuous and continuing attention his work has received since then. In 1940, the obituary in The Times²⁴ saluted E.F. Benson's heritage and scholarship as well as his versatility:

Nurtured in tradition, he showed in his work its more salutary influences — a quiet, urbane style, balance, a secure foundation of scholarship, and humanity.

The author also remarked, percipiently, on the quality of E.F. Benson's work that made it more enduring than anything his brothers wrote:

...he had spirit and a charming and graceful humour, which preserved him from too extravagant a reverence for established things, and made him a novelist who could speak appealingly to a wide public.²⁵

Much of that preservation from "too extravagant a reverence for things" came from a balanced, good-humoured temperament which he shared with his mother and his sister Mary Eleanor (Nellie).²⁶ Although E.F. Benson loved and respected his father and his brother Arthur, who both achieved such pre-eminent positions in life, he did not share their driving ambition. Even while he was a boy, E.F. Benson chose

²³Ibid., 126.

²⁴"Mr. E.F. Benson, Man of Letters," The Times, 1 March 1940, 14.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Mary Eleanor Benson's two-volume novel, At Sundry Times and In Divers Manners (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., Ltd., 1891) was published by her family a year after her death. It includes a memoir that describes her character and talents. Like her brothers she wrote from an early age. She contributed articles to magazines and had two other novels in preparation at the time of her death. She also enjoyed an active social life, played cricket, rode, as well as working in the East End of London. She died of diphtheria in 1890, aged 27 years.

what interested him rather than accepting the prescriptions of others. At Temple Grove, his preparatory school, he preferred games, music and English literature to the mysteries of Latin and Greek, even though a knowledge of English poetry was not the way to win scholarships to Eton.²⁷ When he was a youth he took pleasure in friendships rather than prizes and delighted in devising pranks that exposed the inherent absurdities of attempts to impose rigid rules and limits on human behaviour. He also rebelled against the relentless conformity of his family's observance of the Sabbath by turning topsy-turvy the ritual reading from the Lives of the Saints.²⁸ Much to the surprise of his family he graduated from Cambridge in 1889 with a First and decided, against the advice of his father, on the precarious pleasures of a career as a writer, rather than a more secure, and socially acceptable, profession in either the University or the Anglican Church.

Given Edward White Benson's early experiences it is not surprising that he sought security for his sons. To understand the family and the society E.F. Benson grew up in, and how much it shaped the themes, characters and style of his work, it is necessary to recount, briefly, the circumstances of his life. Much of the following information is drawn from numerous memoirs and reminiscences published by individual members of the Benson family, as well as other biographies and commentaries, contemporary and more recent.²⁹

²⁷Benson, Our Family Affairs, 119.

²⁸Ibid., 187-188.

²⁹These are listed in item 16 in the Bibliography appended to this work.

E.F. Benson's father, Edward White Benson, was a classic example of how an ambitious young man with talent, careful management, good fortune, and some influential friends could move from relative obscurity to the centre of political and social life in Victorian England. Able to trace its heritage from about the fourteenth century, the Benson family had led prosperous, but uneventful lives, as tenant farmers in Yorkshire. In the eighteenth century two brothers, Edward and Christopher, were quite wealthy and even moved in minor aristocratic and literary circles, though much of their fortune was dissipated as a consequence.³⁰ By the early nineteenth century the Bensons had only tenuous connections with those circles. One distant relative married the "natural" son of the Earl of Sandwich, another hired William Wordsworth as a tutor, and another employed Charlotte Brontë for a short time. As yet, the contribution of the Benson family to literature was only indirect.

E.F. Benson's grandfather, another Edward White Benson (1800-1843), was more interested in science than the arts, and, hoping to recoup the family fortunes, patented the chemical processes for making cobalt and white lead. Unfortunately, he died before making a success of his inventions, leaving a widow, Harriet, and seven children. At the age of thirteen, his son, Edward White Benson, E.F. Benson's father, became head of the household and assumed that responsibility earnestly and devoutly. His mother proposed to supplement the family's small income by putting him to work in his father's manufacturing business in Birmingham, but he opposed this plan, afraid that the taint of trade would affect his chances for a career in the

³⁰E.F. Benson, "Family History" in As We Were (London: The Hogarth Press), 40-66.

church and prevent his sisters from making socially advantageous marriages. Commenting on these events, Fred admires his father's uncompromising resolution and piety.³¹ Others have thought him unusually precocious, and imperious.³² His attitudes, though, were not unrealistic or unusual for an ambitious young man in Victorian England. Mrs. Gaskell's novel North and South (1855) and Samuel Butler's The Way of All Flesh (1903) are only two of many novels that clearly delineate the inalienable class divisions between those in trade, and those educated in the professions or with inherited wealth. To overcome these divisions, E.F. Benson's father persisted in his education at King Edward's School in Birmingham under the tutelage of James Prince Lee, an inspiring teacher, and justified his decision by winning a place as a subsizar scholar at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1848. While at Cambridge, Edward White was befriended by Francis Martin, bursar of Trinity, who, after the sudden death of Edward's mother in 1840 and the subsequent loss of her small annuity, supported Edward financially. He also provided dowries for Edward's sisters. E.F. Benson described Francis Martin's relationship with his father as "half lover-like, half paternal adoration"³³ but deduces it was unselfish and innocent. Whatever the motivation for his patronage of Edward White, Martin's support was rewarded when he graduated in 1852, winning the Senior Chancellor's medal.

³¹*Ibid.*, 55.

³²David Newsome, "Benson's Early Years" in A History of Wellington College, 1859-1959 (London: John Murray, 1959), 84-176.

³³Benson, As We Were, 59.

After University, Edward White took a position as a classics master at Rugby School, where, for seven years, he was an inspiring teacher.³⁴ He lodged with his cousins, the Sidgwicks, and decided, in his characteristically single-minded way, that young Mary Sidgwick would make a suitable wife. At the time he was twenty-three and she only eleven. Even in an age when a girl's only aspiration was to be married, and when there are many instances of ambitious young men³⁵ designing their careers and their relationships in such a calculating way, Edward White's determination to choose a young girl he could train to his own purposes is extraordinary. Mary's mother was apprehensive about the intensity of his affection for her daughter, but she did allow him to speak to Mary about his feelings the next year. E.F. Benson, who adored his mother and was in awe of his father, though he tried to justify his father's behaviour in a society that regarded men as the "superior and supreme sex,"³⁶ expressed regrets about the effects on a bright, spontaneous girl of being groomed and controlled by such a dominating young man and came to

³⁴A. Sidgwick and E.M.S. Sidgwick, Henry Sidgwick: A Memoir (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1906), 9-10.

³⁵Nigel Hamilton, Monty: The Making of a General, 1887-1942 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), 25. Lord Montgomery's father Henry, one of Dean Farrar's curates, was thirty-one years old when he began his romance with fourteen-year-old Maud, the Dean's younger daughter. They were married in 1881 when she was sixteen, by no less a person than Archbishop Tait, who was Edward White Benson's predecessor and father of Lucy Tait, Mary Benson's friend and intimate companion after Edward White Benson's death in 1896.

³⁶Benson, As We Were, 62.

understand why, in later life, her emotional needs were met by women, and not men.³⁷

After a lengthy courtship, during which Mary prepared herself for marriage to Edward, they were married in June 1859 when Mary was nineteen and Edward, thirty-two. Six months before his marriage, Edward had accepted a prestigious appointment as the first Headmaster of the newly established Wellington College. This was an onerous charge for a relatively young and inexperienced man, but he had the ambition, energy and idealism to make a success of this venture. At times his autocratic behaviour caused problems with the staff and the Governors,³⁸ but he is, nonetheless, credited with turning what was essentially a charity school for the sons of officers into a great public school, all within a mere fifteen years.³⁹

During their time at Wellington, Mary bore six children⁴⁰ in eleven years and supported her husband through his periodic bouts of depression, brought on by overwork, excessive sensitivity and self-doubt. She kept diaries through this period, which Arthur and Fred read but then destroyed, leaving, unfortunately for posterity, only a filtered version of their parents' courtship and early married years. The strain of those years on Mary could not be as easily disguised. In 1871, when Fred was four years old, and Robert Hugh an infant, Mary suffered a major breakdown and

³⁷Benson, *Mother*, 10-33.

³⁸Newsome, *A History of Wellington College, 1859-1959*, 90.

³⁹*Dictionary of National Biography*, Supplement edition, 172.

⁴⁰Martin White was born in 1860, Arthur Christopher in 1862, Mary Eleanor (Nellie) in 1863, Margaret (Maggie) in 1865, Edward Frederic in 1867 and, after a four year respite, Robert Hugh in 1871.

spent the next year away from the family, convalescing in Scotland, and Wiesbaden, Germany. For the children, her place was taken by their beloved nanny, Beth Cooper, who had been Mary's nursery-maid, but the strain of separation, as well as his increasing difficulties with the Board of Governors, probably contributed to Edward White's decision to change direction in his career. In 1873 he resigned as Headmaster of Wellington. Although in his letter to the Prince of Wales he cited reasons of health and a desire for a church appointment,⁴¹ he had been disappointed over the Board of Governors' opposition to his decision to expel boys guilty of sexual misdemeanours. The next year Edward White and the family moved to the Chancery house in Lincoln where, as Chancellor and Canon of Lincoln, he worked with his friend, Christopher Wordsworth, who was the Bishop. Although in some respects this was a demotion, Edward had always wanted to re-enter the theological community. He could not foresee that he would advance to become the Archbishop of Canterbury.

E.F. Benson, secure in a world circumscribed by his brothers and sisters and the faithful nanny, Beth Cooper, was unaware of the effects of illness and change on his parents. He remembered his childhood in the fourteenth century Chancery house, and in the fields of Lis Escop in Cornwall, as idyllic. Time and again in his writing he describes these years, giving us in autobiography⁴² and fiction⁴³ one of the rare

⁴¹Newsome, *A History of Wellington College*, 171.

⁴²Benson, *Our Family Affairs*, 27-75 and Benson, *As We Were*, 67-84.

⁴³E.F. Benson, *David Blaise* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916).

pictures of a happy Victorian childhood. Growing up in a large, close-knit family that loved books, games, collecting, rambles and story-telling, Fred learned early the pleasures of learning and companionship. The old house at Lincoln, with its attics and winding staircases, was perfect for hide-and-seek, and there was even an extra room that was used as a museum for the children's collections of treasured rocks, butterflies and fossils. In this loving environment, where aesthetic and imaginative pleasures, not competitive and material pursuits, were cultivated, Fred learned the moral values that were to permeate his comic fiction.

It was at Lincoln that Mary Benson, strengthened by her time away from the family, experienced a renewal of her Christian faith as she worked with her husband in establishing night-schools for working men and a local musical society. By this time her older sons, Martin and Arthur, were attending a private preparatory school, Temple Grove, in East Sheen, Surrey, and Mary Benson, with the assistance of a governess, Miss Mary Bramston,⁴⁴ taught the younger children. E.F. Benson claimed he fell in love with Miss Bramston who had the distinction of being a published author, even though she wrote only sentimental moral tales for the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge. During this time, Fred became more aware of his father's influence. He always respected his father's genuine piety, but, nonetheless, thought his reproofs too stern. In his treatment of his children Edward White was not untypical of other middle-class Victorian fathers. In fact he appears to have tried to be more affectionate than most. Despite the demands of his work at

⁴⁴Richard Dalby, "Mary Bramston," The Dodo 4 (December 1988): 15-16. The Benson children were very impressed that their governess had published a novel, The Apples of Sodom.

Wellington, he papered the children's nursery with pictures they had cut out of magazines.⁴⁵ He countered the disappointment of a small boy who had lost his favourite toy by hiding a shilling in the bottom of a glass of milk E.F. Benson drank before bedtime.⁴⁶ Despite his father's occasional acts of kindness, during his boyhood, E.F. Benson felt constrained and unresponsive in his presence.⁴⁷ Conscious of his own struggle to achieve a secure and noteworthy place in society, Edward White rigorously disciplined his children's upbringing. As a child, Fred could not appreciate the adjustments his father was making to the less influential, and less satisfying, position as Chancellor, or the emotional adjustments necessary to accept his wife as a mature, though vulnerable, partner rather than a self-effacing subordinate. Years later when the brothers discussed their parents' marriage, probably in preparation for E.F. Benson's book about Mary Benson, *Mother*, published in 1925, Arthur Christopher gave his opinion of his parents' relationship in a letter to his brother in August, 1923. He was more affected by his parent's apparent incompatibility than Fred and he neatly points out their differences. He wrote:

I have been present at talks at Addington, when Papa's hard displeasure about some trifle was intolerable. On the other hand, I used to think at the Addington meals that Mamma was not always as dexterous in reverting to subjects which always rubbed papa up the wrong way... Mamma was an instinctive pagan — hence her charm — with the most beautiful perceptions and ways. Papa was an instinctive Puritan, with a rebellious love of art. Papa on the whole hated and mistrusted people

⁴⁵Benson, *Our Family Affairs*, 17-18.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 39-40.

he didn't wholly approve of. Mamma saw their faults and loved them.⁴⁸

In his private diary Arthur shows he could be as intolerant, as difficult to please as his father. Unlike Fred he was not amused by others' weaknesses, nor as aware of his own limitations. Fred understood the strain of living with overbearing individuals and later examined these strains in his serious fiction.⁴⁹ While the Bensons lived in Lincoln, Fred was unaware of his parents' difficulties and later remembered only his infatuation for one of the choir-boys and his love for May Copeland, his sister's friend. Summer holidays were spent at Torquay, and there were frequent outings to the home of Christopher Wordsworth, the Bishop of Lincoln, and holidays with his family. The Bishop's daughter, Elizabeth, would later become Principal of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, where Maggie and Nellie were students.

In the Spring of 1877,⁵⁰ the Benson family left Lincoln for Cornwall. Edward White, having refused an appointment to the Bishopric of Calcutta because he did not want to be separated from his young family, accepted the more attractive opportunity of becoming Bishop of the new See of Truro, Cornwall. With characteristic enthusiasm and energy, Edward White responded to the challenge of creating a new

⁴⁸Benson Deposit, 3, 65-70.

⁴⁹A harsher treatment of the conflict between an autocratic father and an imaginative, spontaneous son is portrayed in E.F. Benson's novel, The Challoners (1904).

⁵⁰Benson, Our Family Affairs, 59-75.

diocese that would drive back the forces of ignorance and superstition,⁵¹ that had made inroads into the neglected Anglican parishes of Cornwall. His wife and the children adjusted easily to the transition. Lis Escop, meaning Bishop's Court in Cornish, was not as old as the Chancery house but the huge garden more than compensated for the house's lack of mystery. In this paradisiacal world where fuchsias, magnolias, roses and japonica bloomed in gardens cleared from the gorse-covered Cornish moors, Fred, Hugh and their sisters competed for botanical prizes offered by their father. Like many other Victorian children and adults, they were fascinated by natural history, dredging ponds for sticklebacks, collecting bird's eggs and keeping an aquarium. Unselfconsciously, Fred writes about falling in love again, this time with his sister's music teacher, Mrs. Carter, and then his father's curate, the Rev. J.A. Reeve.

The edenic serenity at Lis Escop ended on February 8th, 1878, when Fred's elder brother Martin died suddenly of meningitis at Winchester College. The epitome of piety and scholarship, Martin had been especially loved by his father. A decade later, on September 16th, 1889, Edward White Benson commemorated the death of his first-born in a poignant verse:

THE MARTIN

The Martins are back to cornice and eaves,
 Fresh from the glassy sea;
 The Martins my soul bereaves,
 Flying no more to me!

⁵¹E.F. Benson set his novel Raven's Blood (1934) in Cornwall, taking his theme from the superstitious beliefs of the Cornish people. This novel is quite unlike anything else Benson wrote. The treatment of female sexuality is clumsy and the characterization crude but he does manage to recreate the distinctive nature of the Cornish landscape.

One of them clung to the window-side,
 And twittered a note to me:
 'There's a Martin beyond or wind and tide
 Whom you know better than we.

His next is hid in a clustered rose,
 On the Prince's own roof-tree;
 When the Prince incomes, when the Prince outgoes,
 The Prince looks up to see.

Calls him hither or sends him there
 To the friends of the Holy Three,
 With a word of love, or a touch of care;—
 Why was he sent to thee?⁵²

Ironically, Mary Benson found religion more of a consolation than her husband, who never reconciled himself to this act of God.

Later that year, 1878, E.F. Benson was sent to Temple Grove, the school his brothers had attended. He remembers how the children "cowered like partridges below a kite"⁵³ when they were punished by the Head, Mr. Ottiwell Waterfield. The school, with its odd assortment of masters, seems to have been no worse than other schools where young boys were trained to take their places as leaders in Victorian society, but after the freedom he had experienced at the Chancery House in Lincoln, the austerity and loneliness of school-life was bound to make E.F. Benson unhappy. Temple Grove had a good record of their boys' winning scholarships to Eton and Marlborough, but E.F. Benson was unsuccessful in gaining any. He claimed to have devoted himself to music, English literature, games and friendships, predilections that were to continue throughout his life, not to Greek and Latin. Benson emphasizes the

⁵²Newsome, A History of Wellington College, 1859-1959, 194.

⁵³Benson, Our Family Affairs, 76-106.

innocent nature of his boyhood friendships, referring to his incomprehension when two boys were publicly chastised then expelled for a "filthy and contaminating"⁵⁴ act. Nevertheless, the emotional and moral dangers of a physical relationship between boys made a lasting impression on him. It is central to his bildungsroman David Blaize, a novel in which Maddox, an older boy, befriends David, protecting him from the corrupting influence of Hughes. When Maddox discovers that he is also attracted to David, he is ashamed of his sexual feelings, calling himself a "damned beast" who "deserves to be shot."⁵⁵ The friendship between David and Maddox continues, but it is more Biblical than Hellenic. In this novel, and in many others, as well as in his autobiographies, Benson advocates platonic male friendships. He is conscious of the physical attractions of his own sex, but his upbringing and the prevailing social attitudes militated against any advocacy of homosexual relationships. In Our Family Affairs he acknowledges the intensity of friendships in all-male schools, but the tone of his comment clearly indicates his attitude.

Naturally there is danger about it (for what emotion worth having is not encompassed by perils?) and this strong beat of affection may easily explode into fragments of mere sensuality, be dissipated into mere "smut".... But promiscuous immorality was, as far as I am aware, quite foreign to the school.⁵⁶

Even while they were children the Benson family found writing easy. E.F. Benson collaborated with Arthur, Nellie, Maggie and Hugh in the first of many

⁵⁴Ibid., 85-89.

⁵⁵Benson, David Blaize, 149.

⁵⁶Benson, Our Family Affairs, 153.

publications. Their publication, The Saturday Magazine, included dialogues, tales of adventure, essays, poems and satirical sketches. Each child had to produce four pages of prose and one of verse. In their writing, they made fun of their parents, family life and church ritual. E.F. Benson also wrote his first distinctly comic piece, a parody of Thomas Hood's Song of a Shirt.⁵⁷ During their time in Cornwall, their father's prodigious energies were spent organizing the diocese and building the new cathedral. The demands of his position took their toll. For several days at a time Edward White would suffer from severe depression and the family had to avoid any action that might upset him. Even when he was well, he made no allowances for ordinary human frailties — forgetfulness, clumsiness or unpunctuality. Frequently in E.F. Benson's serious fiction⁵⁸ there are scenes where unreasonable egocentric fathers impose their wills and values on their sons. The ensuing quarrels are arbitrated by a tactful, compassionate mother who, predictably, counsels self-abnegation. This pattern of family relationships is a familiar one in much Victorian and post-Victorian fiction. It is often treated comically, for example in Samuel Butler's novel, The Way of All Flesh. In Benson's comic fiction the egoist who tries to control the feelings, actions and thoughts of others is always an absurd figure. Easy-going, imaginative and compassionate, E.F. Benson always saw the funny side of all human conduct. For most of his life he seemed to escape the neurasthenic malaise that oppressed his father, Maggie and Arthur. When E.F. Benson left Temple Grove,

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 89-90. Benson wrote parodies throughout his life. In 1911 he mocked Browning's yearning to be in England in springtime in a poem "Abroad Thoughts from Home" (Benson Deposit, 3, 65-70).

⁵⁸E.F. Benson, The Challoners (London: William Heinemann, 1904).

having failed to win the prestigious scholarships that his brothers had won, he felt like an ugly duckling. Many years later, though, he prided himself on being "in some queer manner of his own quite as independent as any of the swans."⁵⁹

At the end of his first term at Marlborough College, E.F. Benson redeemed himself somewhat by obtaining a foundation scholarship for sons of the clergy, though the competition was not keen. Gregarious, good at games, and inspired by the teaching of A.H. Beesly, Fred was popular and happy at Marlborough. In 1885, he was Head of House and co-editor of The Marlburian. He stayed at Marlborough an extra year to prepare for entrance examinations to Cambridge University, and in that year won prizes for racquets, fives, gymnastics, football and singing. Life at Marlborough showed Fred the value of community life that was conducted according to certain accepted codes of conduct. The code was unwritten, but tolerance, courtesy, decency and respect were paramount. If a boy tried to be condescending or superior, he was ridiculed into conformity. Years later, in his comic novels, Benson often parodied the community codes that kept an elite group safe from outsiders and parvenus and that restrained the egoists who threatened to disrupt the good order of the society. He was amused by the ways small societies function, but he also respected their force. His time at Marlborough was also inspiration for a semi-autobiographical book, David Blaize. Written in 1916 when Benson was almost fifty, it fits into the tradition of public school reminiscences, exemplified by Thomas Hughes' Tom Brown's Schooldays, Horace Annesley Vachell's The Hill and A.C.

⁵⁹Benson, Our Family Affairs, 126.

Benson's Memoirs of Arthur Hamilton, B.A., of Trinity College, Cambridge. David Blaize⁶⁰ offers a nostalgic vision of a time when the next cricket match was the only major conflict, and where boyhood loyalties, passions and joys were thought to be enduring. A.L. Gathorne-Hardy, an expert on public-school life, thought David Blaize "by far the best school book since Tom Brown."⁶¹

On December 22, 1882, acting on the advice of William Ewart Gladstone, Queen Victoria wrote to Edward White Benson, offering him the position of Archbishop of Canterbury. He accepted, after some hesitation, on December 28th, 1882, and the Benson family moved once more, this time to Lambeth Palace. E.F. Benson lived at Lambeth and the summer residence at Addington for the next thirteen years during which he completed his education at Marlborough and King's College, Cambridge. Both he and his mother enjoyed being at the centre of things. Mary relished the "froth, the bustle, the movement"⁶² of life as wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury, engaging in witty conversation with celebrities and enjoying Gladstone's assessment of her as the "cleverest woman in Europe."⁶³ The family were proud of this epithet, though it accords with the casual courtesies public men frequently use. There is no doubt that Mary Benson provided the unpretentious and generous kindness that her more austere, orthodox husband could not. Ethel Smyth, the

⁶⁰Ibid., 141-144.

⁶¹Christopher Hawtree, review of David Blaize, by E.F. Benson, Spectator, 22 July 1989, 32.

⁶²Benson, Our Family Affairs, 169.

⁶³Ethel Smyth, Impressions that Remained, Vol. II (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1919), 188. This epithet is repeated in Francis Yeats-Brown's essay on E.F. Benson.

renowned musician, author and feminist, was enthusiastic about Mary's moral counsel⁸⁴ and even Elizabeth Wordsworth, Principal of Lady Margaret Hall, who, possibly, had once been a rival for Edward White's affection during the troubled years of the Benson's marriage, recognized Mary's qualities. Elizabeth, whose great-uncle was William Wordsworth and whose father was the Bishop of Lincoln, was familiar with the difficulties a woman faced living in those powerful clerical and literary worlds. In a memorial address she noted the difficulty of preserving religious faith in the world where even Christians could be petty and malicious:

The women who belong to a bishop's family cannot fail to see a good deal of the weaker side of ecclesiastical life, the little rivalries, intrigues, personal feelings, the gossip and mutual criticism, the small ambitions and misunderstandings which will always exist. And when a woman is exceptionally shrewd and has a dangerous sense of humour, and keen critical power, the temptation to her cannot but be strong to forget the pricelessness of the treasure which, after all, is really hid in some of the poorest earthen vessels. It would have been difficult for a woman of such a temperament to have lived through this particular form of trial and to have gone on being religious, in spite of what one might have called "religiosity."⁸⁵

Mary Benson's "dangerous" sense of humour sustained her through the innumerable dinners, and conferences, synods, and meetings that consumed the Archbishop's time and energies. Life at Lambeth provided Fred with invaluable insight into the petty rivalries and gossip that characterize so much of human behaviour and which he examined so frequently in his comic novels. Fred inherited his sense of humour from

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

⁸⁵Georgina Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer, a Life of Elizabeth Wordsworth* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1978), 27.

his mother, as well as both his parents' understanding of fragile and imperfect humanity. Ethel Smyth remembers Fred at this time,

Among the boys the one I knew best was Fred, of whom I was always fond because he was such a dear at home, not to speak of his intense funniness and proficiency in games.⁶⁶

Although Edward White Benson held one of the most prominent and powerful positions in England, and was called on by royalty, peers, statesmen and politicians for advice,⁶⁷ he and his family were by their birth and upbringing essentially outsiders. A duchess once remarked on Mary Benson's "lack of precedence"⁶⁸ as she was only the wife of an Archbishop. At times, the rest of the family found their identification with the Primate of All England a source of both pride and embarrassment.⁶⁹

During the holidays spent at the Archbishop's summer residence at Addington Park, the family continued to produce the Saturday Magazine. In 1884, they jointly wrote a satirical attack on mediums in a play called "The Spiritualist,"⁷⁰ and E.F. Benson and Maggie continued the draft they had begun in 1882 of a novel, Dodo,

⁶⁶Smyth, Impressions that Remained, 190.

⁶⁷A.C. Benson, The Life of Edward White Benson, Vol. II (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1900).

⁶⁸Smyth, Impressions that Remained, 189.

⁶⁹In David Blaize, E.F. Benson describes the mortification his hero feels when his father, a bishop, visits the school in clerical dress. David's reputation is restored only when his father authorizes a school holiday.

⁷⁰Benson seemed ambivalent about the existence of a spirit world. On the one hand, he admits to having psychic experiences (Final Edition, and Up and Down), while, on the other hand, he mercilessly ridicules people who take spiritualism seriously and are prey to charlatans (Queen Lucia, and Secret Lives). He exposes the power of uncritical belief in spiritual forces in The Image in the Sand and The Luck of the Vails. In the 1890s his mother, sisters and uncle, Henry Sidgwick, all belonged to the prestigious Society for Psychical Research.

which ten years later would set E.F. Benson on his literary career. Edward White still exerted a strong influence over his family, though both Nellie and Maggie were now undergraduates at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and Arthur was at Cambridge. Fred always found rigid discipline and relentless organization by others tiring and occasionally would try to subvert them. Looking back on his youth, though, he saw the family tensions as a paradigm for later experiences.

There is scarcely anything which in later life I have loved or hated or striven for or avoided that is not derivable from some spring of delight or distaste planted during those seasons of first growth.⁷¹

On October 4, 1887, after a disastrous summer holiday in the small rectory at Easedale, in the Lake District, where Nellie contracted pleurodynia and E.F. Benson got jaundice, he went up to King's College, Cambridge. While at Cambridge he was influenced intellectually by A.A. Leigh, J.E. Nixon and Oscar Browning,⁷² though he was also amused by the eccentricities that could be cultivated in that secure community. Later he was more censorious of Oscar Browning's erratic behaviour.

Had he had a little more wisdom to leaven the dough of his colossal cleverness, a little more principled belief to give ballast to his friskiness, he would have been as essentially great as he was superficially grotesque.⁷³

⁷¹Benson, Our Family Affairs, 191.

⁷²These men are characterized in E.F. Benson's engaging portrayal of undergraduate life at Cambridge in the 1880s in The Babe B.A. (1897). Oscar Browning offers a different slant on his life at Cambridge in his autobiography, Memories of Sixty Years (London: John Lane, 1910).

⁷³Benson, Our Family Affairs, 230.

A more lasting influence was Montague Rhodes (Monty) James,⁷⁴ whom the Archbishop also admired. E.F. Benson belonged to the Pitt Club, the T.A.F. (Twice a Fortnight) Club and the Decemviri Debating Society, though he hated public speaking. He also joined the Chit-Chat literary society where Monty James read some of his ghost stories. This genre became increasingly popular in the later years of the century and throughout his career E.F. Benson contributed significantly to it. At the end of his first term, E.F. Benson won an exhibition and began a magazine, The Cambridge Fortnightly, with Roger Fry.⁷⁵ At the same time, he was writing Sketches from Marlborough, published privately in 1888. Despite his father's remonstrances that he should be spending time on his Latin and Greek, E.F. Benson knew

what entrancing occupation I had really determined to devote my life, and though I might have made a better choice, I could not, my choice being nearly made, have been better occupied in practising for it.⁷⁶

During his final year at Cambridge he determined to study hard and to his surprise, and no doubt his father's, he received a First. This success encouraged him to stay up for a further year, deciding on archaeology, not theology, for a second Tripos.

⁷⁴The relationship between the Benson family and James is touched on in M.R. James, Eton and King's: Recollections, Mostly Trivial, 1875-1925 (1926) and discussed more extensively in Michael Cox's book, M.R. James: An Informal Portrait (1986).

⁷⁵Roger Fry (1866-1934) was later associated with the Bloomsbury Group. He organized the controversial Post-Impressionist exhibitions at the Grafton Galleries in 1910 and 1912.

⁷⁶Benson, Our Family Affairs, 238.

During the long vacation he worked on the unfinished Dodo, intent on creating a character who revealed herself through "oceans of nonsensical speech."⁷⁷

By October, 1890, Hugh was in his first year at Cambridge, Arthur was a schoolmaster at Eton and E.F. Benson spent some time at home with Nellie before he returned to Cambridge. Nellie had gained a second class in Modern Languages from Lady Margaret Hall and was helping her mother with the social duties associated with the Archbishop's life.⁷⁸ Soon after E.F. Benson went back to Cambridge, Nellie, who helped at the Women's University Settlement in Nelson Square, London,⁷⁹ contracted diphtheria and died, aged only 27. She had been the only one of the Benson children who was at ease with her father⁸⁰ and not over-awed by him. She had been athletic, like Fred, playing cricket for the White Heather Club, founded by Edward and Alfred Lyttleton and Jack Talbot.⁸¹ A lively, attractive girl with a keen sense of humour, if she had lived she might have been the one to help E.F. Benson when Arthur and Maggie needed emotional help. Ethel Smyth has left an invaluable portrait of the high-spirited, articulate individualism of the Benson family before the sorrows of death and mental illness impinged on their lives. Although the Archbishop

⁷⁷ibid., 256.

⁷⁸Elizabeth Wordsworth, Glimpses of the Past (London: A.R. Mowbray and Co. Ltd., 1912), 177.

⁷⁹Battiscombe, Reluctant Pioneer: A Life of Elizabeth Wordsworth, 92.

⁸⁰Smyth, Impressions That Remained, 193.

⁸¹ibid., 194-5. Alfred Lyttleton married Laura Tennant, the sister of Margot who was thought to be the prototype of Dodo. Edward Lyttleton became Headmaster of Eton, after A.C. Benson had decided against allowing his name to go forward for the position.

was uneasy in the presence of this out-spoken, flamboyant woman, Ethel was full of admiration for him and his "unpermissibly gifted family":⁸²

....to write the word 'humour' is instantly to think of a Benson. I never met a family in whose existence that blessed element played a greater part, whose domestic wrangles made you long so intensely for a pocket gramophone recorder, especially if you have a bad memory for verbal felicities; in short one's prevailing state of mind in their company was: 'What made you so awfully clever?'⁸³

While he was at Cambridge, E.F. Benson's interest in archaeology had been stimulated by two teachers, Dr. Waldstein and Professor Middleton, and this interest continued after he gained his degree. He was given an open scholarship at King's and applied for a grant to excavate the town-walls at Chester in search of Roman tombstones, hoping to use this research as a basis for his thesis. He was able to overcome the suspicions of the Chester Corporation by using the influence of the Duke of Westminster. Although he was never over-awed by title and rank, valuing a person's intellectual and moral worth, not his worldly reputation, E.F. Benson was not unaware of the advantage of being well-known and well-connected, and was pleased when the Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone, took an interest in his research and invited him to Hawarden to discuss his discoveries. Benson returned to Cambridge to write his dissertation and, in an idle moment, took up the unfinished manuscript of Dodo, determined once again to finish it. Through his family connections, the aspiring writer was able to seek guidance from friends at both ends

⁸²*Ibid.*, 188.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 191.

of the literary spectrum. Lucas Malet,⁸⁴ who was his godmother and the daughter of Charles Kingsley, and another family friend, Henry James,⁸⁵ provided useful advice, but it was still unfinished when he accompanied his parents on their travels.

In December 1891, Fred joined his parents on a visit to North Africa. The family journeyed to Algiers, then Constantine, Tebessa, Timeghad, Fort National, Biskra and Carthage. This journey was the culmination of Edward White's scholarly interests in the life and work of St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage.⁸⁶ At Tunis, Fred left the family and went to Athens by way of Malta and Brindisi. He was on his way to take up a position in Athens working for the British School of Archaeology. At this stage in his life he was undecided about whether to become a scholar or a novelist. In Greece, he mixed with Greek royalty and the upper ranks of Greek society, noting the comedy of manners that prevailed in that society as well as at the British Legation. Three later novels drew on his experiences there: a novel about the Greek Revolution, The Vintage,⁸⁷ published in 1898 and dedicated to Queen Olga of the Hellenes; Princess Sophia, published in 1900, a cautionary romance about a Princess in a small kingdom in the Elysian days before the destruction of such fragile monarchies in the

⁸⁴Lucas Malet was the pseudonym for Mrs. Mary St. Leger Harrison (1852-1931). She was the daughter of Charles Kingsley, a close friend of the Benson family during their early days at Wellington College. Her second novel Colonel Enderby's Wife (1885) won her public attention and The History of Sir Richard Calmady (1901) established her reputation as a writer of popular modern romances. By 1901 her first novel Wages of Sin had run to thirteen editions.

⁸⁵Henry James, a friend of A.C. Benson, was well-known to the Benson family. E.F. Benson visited him in Rye and after Henry James's death, in 1916, took over the lease of Lamb House.

⁸⁶E.F. Benson mocked the assiduous but purposeless scholarship of clerical men in his novel Secret Lives (1932).

⁸⁷-----, The Vintage (London: Methuen and Co., 1898).

aftermath of the First World War, and affectionately dedicated to Margaret, his "dear friend, critic and sister"⁸⁸ who spent time with him in Greece; and The Capsina.⁸⁹ Lucas Malet had offered more detailed advice than Henry James on how to revise Dodo and he finished it in 1893, sending it off to Methuen. That same year he was also preparing a small volume of short stories, Six Common Things.⁹⁰

E.F. Benson returned from Athens to London in 1893 to find that his first novel, Dodo, was an overnight success and he was a celebrity. His second published novel, though, The Rubicon,⁹¹ was excessively criticized. Although Fred claimed he was unaffected by the adverse reviews, he kept and even reprinted them in Our Family Affairs.⁹² In his novels, in particular in one of his favourite ones, Sheaves,⁹³ he condemns the critics and reviewers who stifle youthful, creative talent, and there is no doubt he was hurt by the maliciousness of some of the reviewers. Nevertheless, he was undaunted by the adverse reception of The Rubicon and prepared The Babe B.A.⁹⁴ for publication.

⁸⁸E.F. Benson, Princess Sophia (London: William Heinemann and Sons, 1900).

⁸⁹....., The Capsina (London: Methuen and Co., 1899).

⁹⁰....., Six Common Things (London: Osgoode, McIlvaine and Co., 1893).

⁹¹....., The Rubicon (London: Methuen and Co., 1894).

⁹²....., Our Family Affairs, 303-308.

⁹³....., Sheaves (London: S. Paul, 1907).

⁹⁴....., The Babe B.A. (London: G.P. Putnam's, 1897). A character in Norman Douglas's novel South Wind (1917) called Mr. Ernest Eames B.A. was modelled on John Ellingham Brooks who shared the Villa Cercola with E.F. Benson. Perhaps Douglas is parodying them both in his character's name and qualification.

In 1894, accompanied by his sister, Maggie, he returned to Athens and delighted Greek society with a farcical play, The Duchess of Bayswater. An inventive raconteur, Fred was popular with the members of the British Legation as well as Greek royalty. He was one of a group of well-educated and well-connected young men working in Athens and Cairo at this time. Reggie Lister, Secretary to the British Legation in Athens, and Alfred Lyttelton⁹⁵ were his friends in Athens. In Cairo in 1894 he took a boat trip up the Nile to Luxor with Lord Alfred Douglas, who was a guest of Lord and Lady Cromer at the British Agency, and Reginald Turner and Robert Hichens. Hichens's roman à clef, The Green Carnation,⁹⁶ was probably begun at this time, though he did not meet Oscar Wilde until later.⁹⁷ In the early 1890s, E.F. Benson was part of the circle who admired Wilde's brilliant repartee and artistic originality. At the opening night of Lady Windermere's Fan, Benson, together with Max Beerbohm and Reginald Turner, sported green carnations in their button holes,⁹⁸ matching the one worn by the leading man, and Wilde himself. At that time it was fashionable to play at being decadent young dandies. On a jaunt up the Nile to Luxor, Fred and his friends quoted extensively from Dorian Gray.⁹⁹ After the debacle of the

⁹⁵Alfred Lyttelton (1857-1913), the son of the 4th Baron Lyttelton, was educated at Eton and Cambridge. He was one of the group of intellectual and social leaders of that period who were dubbed "The Souls." Angela Lambert's book Unquiet Souls: The Indian Summer of the British Aristocracy (London: Macmillan, 1984) provides a vivid picture of this group.

⁹⁶Robert Hichens, The Green Carnation (London: William Heinemann and Sons, 1894).

⁹⁷Hesketh Pearson, The Life of Oscar Wilde (London: Methuen, 1946), 277.

⁹⁸Philippe Jullian, Oscar Wilde (London: Constable and Co., Ltd., 1969), 296.

⁹⁹Richard Ellman, Oscar Wilde (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), 392.

Wilde trial in 1895, Fred was one of the few friends who continued to respect Wilde's genius. He "knew what lay below his follies and his vice" and "never failed to stand by him."¹⁰⁰ In his book of reminiscences, As We Were, Benson writes compassionately about Wilde's literary career. His own style was influenced by Wilde's use of epigram and paradox as well as his finely constructed dialogue and dramatically crafted scenes. One of Benson's early novels, The Judgement Books (1895), is directly modelled on Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, and Dodo Chesterford in Dodo has the same maiden name, Vane, as Sybil the female character in Wilde's story. In As We Were, E.F. Benson is full of praise for Wilde's more serious works and his critical essays, but he shows as little regard for Wilde's comedies as he does for his own:

Yet had not this landslide of ruin buried him, it is more than possible that by now he would have been forgotten.... They [his plays] have aged rapidly and become out of date, their wit to us seems tight-roped and acrobatic, and no-one in England will listen to them.¹⁰¹

During the next three winters, from 1893-6, E.F. Benson worked in Greece and Egypt, preferring the "sunny love-spell of Greece,"¹⁰² to Egypt where he felt there was something "old, and evil there and as tired as Ecclesiastes."¹⁰³ For Benson, the Greek works of art celebrated the ideal in humanity, whereas he thought the Egyptian

¹⁰⁰Marquis of Queensberry, Oscar Wilde and the Black Douglas (London: Folcroft Library Editions, 1977), 155.

¹⁰¹Benson, As We Were, 225.

¹⁰²Benson, Our Family Affairs, 318.

¹⁰³ibid.

images "a monstrous menagerie." He worked through his sense of the alien, atavistic presence of evil in his novel set partly in Egypt, The Image in the Sand, published in 1905. During the winter of 1895-96, Maggie was excavating the Temple of Mut, at Karnak. Despite occasional attacks of depression and rheumatism, she worked efficiently, enjoying the unaccustomed opportunity to be in command. She was also working on her philosophic treatise, The Venture of Rational Faith, eventually published in 1908. A collection of animal stories, Subject to Vanity, had been published in 1895. Maggie and Fred had always been good friends and he was the one member of the family who visited her frequently when she was disabled in later life by mental illness. In his life and his writing, he was sympathetic towards women who could find no permanent, professional outlet for their education and intelligence.¹⁰⁴

In September, 1896, the Archbishop and Mrs. Benson left for an official tour of Ireland. On their return, Archbishop Benson died suddenly, on October 11, 1896, at Hawarden. Grief and shock at their father's death was exacerbated by the fact that the family also had to find somewhere else to live. As was the case then, and later, E.F. Benson was the one who took charge during times of emotional crisis in the family. After organizing his father's papers and removing the family's possessions from Lambeth Palace, Fred joined the rest of the family who were recuperating at

¹⁰⁴Ibid. E.F. Benson had many female friends: he respected the work of the writer, Mary Cholmondeley, and the musician, Ethel Smythe; he invited the widow of his old friend, Jacob-Hood to be his Lady Mayoress; he generously helped the wife of his old school-friend, Eustace Miles, when they were in financial trouble.

Luxor. Maggie was excavating, Mary Benson and Lucy Tait¹⁰⁶ were observing, Hugh and Fred were writing. The family, though, was plagued with severe illnesses and near-fatal accidents: Maggie was ill with pleurisy, and nearly died; Fred and Lucy caught typhoid. When they recovered, the family retreated to England, but not before Fred had nearly stepped on a cobra in the billiard room of their Egyptian hotel. Even during a time of crisis, E.F. Benson was able to comment wryly on the accidents, incongruities and ironies of everyday life.¹⁰⁸

The next three years, 1896-99, were difficult for the family. E.F. Benson had promised his father to care for his mother and sister, but also wanted to live an independent, literary life in London. In England, the family stayed with Archbishop Davidson and his wife's sister, Lucy Tait, until they found a suitable house in Winchester. Excluded now from the active life at Lambeth Palace, no longer needed by her children, Mary Benson became increasingly dissatisfied. Maggie, also, was depressed and purposeless. She was working on her father's papers and became increasingly like him, impatient, authoritarian and inflexible. She resented Lucy Tait's influence on her mother. A close friendship grew up between Mary and Lucy that went beyond the usual demonstrations of affection.¹⁰⁷ In Final Edition, E.F. Benson notes, dryly, that after his father's death his mother and Lucy shared the same bed

¹⁰⁶Lucy Tait, the daughter of Archbishop Tait, moved in with the Benson family after the death of Nellie in 1890. She stayed with the family until Mary Benson's death in 1918.

¹⁰⁸Benson, Mother, 34-57.

¹⁰⁷Charlie Tomlin, one of the servants at Tremans, thought that the two women referred to each other in "terms of excessive endearment" that were "unusual" (Cynthia and Tony Reavell, E.F. Benson and the World of Tilling, 34).

her six children had been born in.¹⁰⁸ There is little doubt that jealous tensions as well as lack of intellectual stimulation contributed to Maggie's later breakdown and subsequent homicidal attack on either her mother or Lucy Tait, which resulted in her hospitalization in an asylum. Ethel Smyth had great respect for Maggie's scholarship, but little understanding of Maggie's intellectual and emotional frustrations:

There was a pure, aloof dignity of spirit about her which reminded one of Alpine peaks and all things majestic and not easily accessible, yet....there were distinctly passionate possibilities too. No storms are more terrible than those that rage in high altitudes, and I often wonder exactly what inner conflicts brought about the final clouding of that wonderful brain.¹⁰⁹

By 1898, E.F. Benson found the atmosphere in Winchester increasingly claustrophobic. Fortunately, at this time he was administering a fund begun by the Duke of Westminster to distribute food and medical supplies to Greek refugees, so he was able to escape. On his way back to England he stayed in Capri, sharing a villa

¹⁰⁸In Final Edition (10-18), Benson records the tensions between Maggie and her mother over the influence of Lucy Tait on Ben, as she called Mary. Undoubtedly these tensions exacerbated Maggie's mental problems. On the other hand, Lucy contributed to the upkeep of Tremans as well as maintaining a small house in Westminster. Benson notes "Lucy slept with my mother in the vast Victorian bed where her six children had been born in Wellington days." It was not unusual for women to sleep together in Victorian times, or express openly their tenderness for each other. Gifford Lewis indicates this when analysing the relationship between Edith Somerville and Martin Ross in Somerville and Ross (London: Viking, 1985), 195-200. Hilary Spurling makes a similar point in Ivy When Young, 1884-1919 (London: Allison and Busby, 1983). Nonetheless, whether the relationship between Lucy Tait and Mary Benson was physically intimate or not Mary's children felt that Lucy had usurped some of their mother's affection.

¹⁰⁹Smyth, The Impressions that Remained, Vol. II, 190.

with John Ellingham Brooks.¹¹⁰ E.F. Benson was a loyal friend to Ellingham Brooks, even though he gradually realized Brooks would never fulfil his literary promise or publish his translation of the sonnets of Heredia.

Between 1900-1914 Fred spent most of his summers in Capri, describing some aspects of his life there in his semi-autobiographical novel, Up and Down.¹¹¹ Fred loved the freedom of living in Capri. The swimming, sun-bathing, the opportunity to write, the lack of formality and disregard for convention in the lives of the miscellaneous expatriate English, European and American writers, artists, and dilettantes appealed to him.¹¹² In the years before the First World War, many writers spent time in Capri. Axel Munthe, Maxim Gorky had villas there, and visitors to the island included Somerset Maugham, D.H. Lawrence, Scott Fitzgerald, Joseph Conrad, and Norman Douglas.¹¹³ Compton MacKenzie based his satirical novels, Vestal Fire (1927), and Extraordinary Women (1928), on well-known characters and experiences in Capri.

¹¹⁰John Ellingham Brooks had lived permanently in Capri since 1895. He was a member of the expatriate homosexual community that settled in Capri after the trials of Oscar Wilde. Ted Morgan, in his biography of Somerset Maugham, credits Brooks with seducing Maugham. There is, as yet, no evidence of a homosexual relationship between Brooks and Benson. In 1903, Brooks, to the astonishment of his friends, married Romaine Goodard, an American artist. The marriage was short-lived, but Romaine provided Brooks with £300 per annum, on the condition he did not come near her. From 1913, Brooks, E.F. Benson and Maugham took the lease of the Villa Cercola. Brooks lived there all the year round, and Benson and Maugham stayed when they visited Capri.

¹¹¹E.F. Benson, Up and Down (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1918).

¹¹²The following book gives a vivid picture of life in Capri at this time: James Murney, Capri: Island of Pleasure (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), 51-131. Faith Compton Mackenzie's autobiography, As Much As I Dare (London: Collins, 1938) also describes life in pre-war Capri. She gives more anecdotes about J.E. Brooks than E.F. Benson.

¹¹³Sally Beauvian, Introduction, Vestal Fire by Compton MacKenzie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985).

In April 1899, Mary Benson, Lucy and Maggie moved from their home in Winchester to a more spacious house in Essex, "Tremans," near Horsted Keynes. The family were much happier there, but E.F. Benson needed the stimulation of other society. His mother released him from the promise he had made his father that he would stay with her and he took a small flat in London, at No. 395 Oxford Street. Fred entered enthusiastically the fashionable life of Edwardian London. He lived an ideal bachelor existence, spending winter and spring in Switzerland and Capri and autumn in Scotland. He was popular with the fashionable hostesses of the day, Helen, Countess of Radnor, and Lady Beresford¹¹⁴ being his favourites, but he never lost his critical faculty and recorded in his novels the foibles and follies of the menagerie of egoists, social climbers, parvenus,¹¹⁵ and financiers that made up part of Edwardian society life.

As well as observing the ironies and incongruities of human behaviour, Fred was reading widely in order to improve his own craft. In light of his own work, it is interesting to note his preferences. The vitality of Dickens' characters appealed to him and, though he criticized Dickens' sentimental treatment of emotion, many of Benson's serious novels are also flawed by mawkish descriptions of love and death. He admired Jane Austen's "elusive"¹¹⁶ and "impeccable"¹¹⁷ art. Other Victorian

¹¹⁴Lord Charles Beresford and Lady Beresford belonged to "The Souls" and the "Marlborough House Set" attached to the Prince of Wales.

¹¹⁶Three of his early novels depict this world: Mammon and Co. (1899), Scarlet and Hysson (1902) and The Relentless City (1903).

¹¹⁶Benson, Mother, 153.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

writers he respected were Elizabeth Gaskell, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot and especially Emily Brontë. Robert Louis Stevenson fascinated him, as did George Moore.¹¹⁸ He admired H.G. Wells's style, but not his ideals. He also read Hardy and Meredith. Musically, he was sustained by the Henry Wood concerts and by the Wagnerian festivals in Bayreuth. The works of Fauré, Debussy and Stravinski appealed to him. At the theatre, he watched Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, Sarah Bernhardt and Mrs. Patrick Campbell and fell in love with Mary Anderson.¹¹⁹ In the Edwardian music halls Dan Leno and Herbert Campbell were supreme. From these eclectic and cultivated tastes, Benson worked to establish his own style and voice, remembering Henry James's advice that he should hew out his own style.

Benson's account of his life in London at the turn of the century suggests that it was bliss to be alive then, and young, and to have the artistic objectivity to be able to assess the "cliques, coteries and climbers"¹²⁰ who mistook "priggishness for profundity and gabbing for genius."¹²¹ He is astute in his analysis of the styles, codes and behaviour of English Society at the turn of the century. The titled, established English aristocracy, in public, was reticent and restrained, knew anyone worth knowing, and had no need to be pushy and opportunist. He acknowledged that the present aristocrats were the parvenus in previous centuries, but his attitude was

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 151-174.

¹¹⁹He kept letters from this well-known actress whose married name was Mary de Navarro (Benson Deposit, 3, 65-70). She was enchanted by his book, *Our Family Affairs*.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 135.

¹²¹*Ibid.*

ambivalent. He never quite shed the "middle-class taint,"¹²² the respect for place and title that was accompanied by courtesy and style. Like other Edwardians, he never understood, or else he chose to ignore, the economic correlation between the lavish parties in the homes of the hostesses he admired and the poverty of the servants, and factory and mine workers. His attitude towards wealth was simplistic. He never questioned the source of wealth, unless it was from trade.¹²³ All he asked was that those with money should use it responsibly. In his novels he castigated those who had no social conscience, and acquired money for its own sake.

During this period, E.F. Benson's active social life was balanced by an equally vigorous literary output: social comedies, The Money Market (1898), Mammon and Co. (1899), Scarlet and Hyssop (1902), The Relentless City (1903), The Challoners (1904), Sheaves (1908), The Climber (1908), The Osbornes (1910); works of fantasy and mystery, The Luck of the Vails (1901) and The Image in the Sand (1905), The Room in the Tower; nostalgic essays, The Book of Months (1903), A Reaping (1909); serious novels, The Angel of Pain (1906), Paul (1906), Mrs. Ames (1912); and plays, Dinner for Eight (1915). In addition, he edited Dickens's works, and turned his winter sports to advantage by writing guides to figure skating, Winter Sports in Switzerland.

Throughout these prolific and prosperous years he took full responsibility for his family, though his life diverged from Arthur's and Hugh's. In 1903, Arthur had

¹²²Ann Thwaite, Edward Gosse: A Literary Landscape, 1849-1928 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1984), 372.

¹²³In his novel The Osbornes (1910) he is sympathetic to the attitudes and feelings of the central characters, the family of a wealthy tradesman.

resigned from Eton and was working on Queen Victoria's correspondence. In 1904, Arthur was elected to Magdalene College and in 1915 became Master until his death in 1925. Hugh was preparing to leave the Anglican Church and become a Roman Catholic. Like his brothers, Hugh wrote easily and his output was prodigious. By 1908, he was able to buy independently a small manor house at Hare Street in Buntingford in Hertfordshire. Between 1905 and 1907, Hugh was involved in a disastrous friendship and collaboration with Frederick Rolfe.¹²⁴ About this time Maggie's depressions intensified and, after brief periods of recovery, she lapsed into severe mental illness. For the next decade she was hospitalized, experiencing only brief periods of remission, and died in 1916, after being reunited, briefly, with her mother. Hugh's health had deteriorated in 1914 and he died in October of that year. Fred grieved over Maggie's mental deterioration and death, but he had never been close to Robert Hugh. Nevertheless he honored his brother's wish that the property in Hare Street be turned over to the Roman Catholic Church, even though the will was not clear on that bequest.

E.F. Benson was in Capri in 1914¹²⁵ when Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated. He returned to England and offered to do diplomatic work as part of his war effort. Working for the foreign office, he assessed materials that related to German relationships with Turkey, and he was part of a mission to assess whether the Pope was pro-German, or pro-British. From Rome, he travelled to Capri to write

¹²⁴Benson, Final Edition, 41-49. Another insight into this relationship is given in A.J.A. Symons' book, The Quest for Corvo (London: Cassell, 1934).

¹²⁵E.F. Benson, The Outbreak of War, 1914 (London: Peter Davies, 1933), 1-34.

up his work. The result was Deutschland über Allah (1917), later published as Crescent and Iron Cross (1918), later part of the longer White Eagle of Poland (1918). The war work, for which he was not remunerated, was only part of his literary output: 1914 saw the publication of Arundel and the sequel to Dodo, Dodo the Second, the American edition being titled Dodo's Daughter; The Oakleyites appeared in 1915, and a play, Dinner for Eight, was performed in London; David Blaize, The Freaks of Mayfair and Mike came out in 1916; An Autumn Sowing, Mr. Teddy in 1917; Up and Down and David Blaize and the Blue Door in 1918. E.F. Benson also, apparently, had time to work as Honorary Secretary for Lady Sclater's Fund for Wounded Soldiers and Sailors, work for which he received the MBE in 1920.

His mother's death on June 18, 1918, marked the end of his connection with Tremans. From 1917 Arthur had become increasingly depressed, haunted by hallucinations and nightmares as Maggie had been. When his mother died, Arthur lost all interest in Tremans and E.F. Benson decided to dismantle the home. In Final Edition¹²⁶ he details the sad task of dispatching family memorabilia either to the sale-room or the bonfire, although it was only after he was physically and emotionally separated from his family that he was able to produce the works that have out-lived those of Arthur and Hugh: the family memoirs, Our Family Affairs (1920), Mother (1925); the impressionistic recollections of the Victorian and Edwardian ages, As We Were: A Victorian Peep-show (1930) and As We Are: A Modern Revue (1932); the

¹²⁶Benson, Final Edition, 139-148.

six "Lucia" novels, published between 1920 and 1929, as well as his numerous biographies, and nostalgic reminiscences about boyhood and undergraduate life.

E.F. Benson acquired a sub-lease for Lamb House in Rye in 1919, and having divested himself of the Villa Cercola in Capri was able, with his brother, Arthur, to take the full lease on Lamb House, where he lived until his death. E.F. Benson led a happy and productive life in Rye. An operation for the removal of a tumour from his kidney in 1913, and then the onset of arthritis, had curtailed his athletic life, but in Rye he was able to play golf, go bird-watching and ramble over the dunes. Rye also provided him with the setting for his comic novels, as well as many of the characters and situations.

In 1925 Arthur died of a heart attack and E.F. Benson was faced once more with the unhappy task of sifting through the possessions of his family. Arthur had died a wealthy man, though he had never been wholly satisfied emotionally.¹²⁷ E.F. Benson wrote in Final Edition that he felt no real sense of bereavement at Arthur's death. He had always been loyal to him, and had helped him to recover from his breakdowns, but their tastes and values had been quite distinct. Arthur had devoted himself to a life of education and scholarship in the course of which he had repressed many of his emotions and instincts. E.F. Benson, by contrast, had enjoyed the social life of London, Switzerland, Capri and spent his time writing novels that examined, humorously, the diversity and complexity of human existence. Despite the onset of age, and the crippling effects of arthritis, Fred never despaired, indeed he made fun

¹²⁷David Newsome, On the Edge of Paradise: A.C. Benson: The Diarist (London: John Murray, 1980).

of himself. He continued to see his friends, though now he avoided large social gatherings that had so entertained him in his youth. Old friends visited him: some were welcome, for example Sir Steven Runciman, Francis Yeats-Brown and Dame Ethel Smyth; others were not so, for example, Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge.¹²⁸ Fred entered into municipal life in Rye, serving as a magistrate in 1933 and then as Mayor in 1934. He was so successful that he was re-elected Mayor in 1935 and in 1936. Enjoying the opportunity for pomp and ceremony the office gave him, as well as the further insight into the absurdities of human behaviour it provided, he was proud of the honours the town bestowed on him. He was awarded the Freedom of the Borough in 1938, the same year that Magdalene College, Cambridge, made him an honorary fellow.

He died on February 29, 1940, and was buried in Playden Cemetery, a short distance from Rye. On his grave is a simple modest inscription that encompasses his life and indicates what he valued.

Here lies
Edward Frederic Benson, M.B.E.
5th child of Edward White, Archbishop of Canterbury
and Mary Benson
who died 29 February 1940
Aged 72 years
Author, scholar and historian
Freeman of Rye
Three times Mayor of Rye
Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge.

¹²⁸Michael Barker, Our Three Selves: A Life of Radclyffe Hall (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985), 279.

He had made a prosperous living in the precarious trade of letters, but more than this he had sustained a belief in humane values despite the obvious folly of humanity. His grave is marked with an unpretentious stone; his living monuments are his versatile and popular work, in which his urbane, humane and unpretentious spirit lives on.

CHAPTER TWO

E.F. Benson and the Comic Matrix

It helps one to remain cheerful if one preserves a sense of the ridiculous

E.F. Benson, Paul (1906)

When E.F. Benson began writing novels and short stories in the early 1890s he was drawing on the rich resources of classical and English comic literature, provided by his formal education and his informal reading. His education at Marlborough¹ and Cambridge had provided him with an extensive understanding of Greek and Roman authors, including the great comic dramatists, Aristophanes,² Plautus and Terence. As a young man, he had worked and studied in Athens and throughout his life he admired classical Greek art and literature,³ claiming it was drawn from the "essence not the mere accidents of life."⁴ As he became more convinced that he wanted to become an author rather than a classical scholar or an archaeologist, he read as voraciously and as indiscriminately in Italian and English literature as he had once

¹I am indebted to the following books for information about the intellectual, moral and aesthetic principles that informed the curriculum of the influential public schools in Victorian England: David Newsome's two books, A History of Wellington College (London: John Murray, 1959) and Godliness and Good Learning (London: John Murray, 1961); J.A. Mangan's book Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1986).

²E.F. Benson mentions re-reading Aristophanes when he was preparing his biography of Alcibiades (1928). The interest in Aristophanes' plays was a long-standing one in Benson's family. His uncle Henry Sidgwick describes how E.W. Benson acted out The Birds to the delight of the sixth-form class at Rugby. This anecdote is in A. Sidgwick and E.M. Sidgwick Henry Sidgwick: A Memoir (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1906), 10.

³E.F. Benson's intellectual interest in classical studies had been stimulated by A.H. Beesly, one of the most gifted teachers at Marlborough College.

⁴E.F. Benson, Mother (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925), 215.

"browsed at will in Attic and Roman pastures."⁶ His preferences are recorded in his autobiographies, Mother (1920), Our Family Affairs (1920) and As We Were (1939) and it is interesting to note how frequently he refers to comic writers. He particularly admired Jane Austen's skill in rendering credible characters, calling her art "elusive and impeccable."⁶ He was familiar with Dante's Divine Comedy, categorizing it as one of the "blasting masterpieces of literature."⁷ At one point he claimed he did not read George Meredith because he "defied analysis."⁸ Nevertheless, at a later date he admitted that his sister Maggie had studied Meredith's writings⁹ during the time they spent in Egypt when Maggie was in charge of the excavations at the Temple of Mut in Karnak.¹⁰ It is unlikely that they did not discuss this contemporary practitioner and theorist of comedy.¹¹ Benson was certainly familiar with the temperamental relationships between Meredith and the Pre-Raphaelites. In As We Were he provides an amusing picture of the less than fraternal relationship between

⁶....., Our Family Affairs, 1867-1892 (London: Cassell and Company Ltd.), 201.

⁶Benson, Mother, 153.

⁷E.F. Benson, As We Were: A Victorian Peep-show (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930), 199.

⁸Benson, Mother, 159.

⁹Benson, Our Family Affairs, 322-24.

¹⁰George Meredith's comic novel, The Egoist had appeared in 1879, two years after his influential lecture on comic theory, "An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit" had been published in the New Quarterly Magazine, 1877.

¹¹Robert Hichens describes the time he shared with E.F. Benson and his "extraordinarily clever sister" Margaret in Luxor. He thought both were brilliant conversationalists and was especially impressed by Margaret's skill in detecting fallacious arguments (Yesterday, 64-65).

Meredith and Swinburne who for a couple of years lived in Rossetti's Tudor House.¹² And he talks about the "authentic cynical voice" that was occasionally heard from Putney.¹³ It is highly likely that he was familiar with Meredith's view of the comic artist as one who knows men and women "well enough not to expect too much of them"¹⁴ and his comments that the comic spirit is the ability to be "humanely malign"¹⁵ in portraying the affected and self-deceived.

As he prepared himself for a career as a writer, E.F. Benson did not confine himself to comic writers. His reading of contemporary English writers was eclectic. He ranged from Rudyard Kipling to Henry James, from Thomas Hardy to Marie Corelli, and from Mrs. Humphrey Ward to George Moore. His comments about each are crisp and witty, reflecting his own comic spirit. He was sceptical about the promotion of Imperialism and amused at the opprobrium directed at the respectable Mrs. Humphrey Ward after the publication of her novel, Robert Elsmere.

It was in the nineties (with the margin of a year or two on each side) that Mr. Kipling invented India, made poets out of privates, and revealed to the British the empire of their birthright, that Mrs. Humphrey Ward caused Robert Elsmere to undermine the foundations of Christian belief, that the Yellow Book appeared with the finest work which Aubrey Beardsley ever did, and which, when it first appeared, seemed epoch-making, as no doubt for a little while it was.¹⁶

¹²Benson, As We Were, 272-273.

¹³Benson, Mother, 128.

¹⁴George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit in George Meredith, "The Egoist," edited by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1979), 440.

¹⁵Ibid., 446.

¹⁶Benson, Mother, 127.

He delighted in innovation, narrative style and subject matter, noting how fickle public judgment was.

In those lively and experimental days Mr. Henry James was confounding his earlier admirers, who read and re-read *Roderick Hudson* and then *Portrait of a Lady* with unspeakable reverence, and was raising up armies of new readers, who took the place of the old brigades who fell stark and staring beneath the stroke of *The Wings of the Dove*. Stevenson, in Samoa, was fertile with romances of Scotland and the South Seas, and to us then *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was a milestone of modern realism, which earlier Victorians passed with averted gaze and with horror to see how far they had travelled....and a hush would fall on polite circles if mention was made of *Esther Waters*.¹⁷

E.F. Benson had a special regard for the comic style and techniques of Oscar Wilde whose fate he thought a tragic catastrophe. He regretted the loss of Wilde's audacious wit, his capacity to send "audiences reeling into the street intoxicated by epigram and paradox."¹⁸ He also discerned the profundity of some of Wilde's works, particularly *The Importance of Being Earnest*. During the 1890s E.F. Benson was experimenting with various forms in his own writing and gradually recognizing that, while other writers could inspire and even influence him, ultimately he had to draw on his own emotions and experience. In an unexpectedly dark assessment of his own nature, he talks about the abhorrent qualities that he frequently mocked in his comic fiction: the well-disguised capacity for anger, envy, hypocrisy and greed. The writer, he says,

¹⁷*ibid.*, 128.

¹⁸*ibid.*, 128.

draws from himself, from his own unsuspected secret hideousness, his own camouflaged meannesses, and the general objectionableness of his soul a hundred times more often than he draws from anybody else.¹⁹

While E.F. Benson was familiar with a number of classical and English comedies there was not a correspondingly substantial body of comic theory to explain or justify the genre. For a writer whose instinct and talent lay in writing comedies, there was little in the critical tradition to vindicate his comic talent. As he was the son of the Archbishop of Canterbury, E.F. Benson sometimes wished his inclination and talent was in a more respectable genre. Although he shared his mother's and his sister Mary Eleanor's innate sense of the absurdity of human institutions and conduct, he was rarely able to free himself from the feeling that he could only make his mark on English letters by writing sober and serious works. He cherished a letter from Edmund Gosse, a family friend and a literary man of considerable power and influence, in which he told him

The public in the next generation will be what you and one or two others like you choose to make it. Good work in any style gives that style vogue.It's ever when you are most serious you are at your best. Work, work, and live.²⁰

In Final Edition written at the end of his long life he off-handedly dismisses the comic works that would endure far longer than his biographies of Greek and Elizabethan

¹⁹Ibid., 173.

²⁰Benson, Our Family Affairs, 310. Edmund Gosse was appointed the Clark Lecturer in English Literature at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1884. He was a major influence in lives of writers and artists until his death in 1928. His life is vividly recounted in Ann Thwaite's prize-winning biography, Edmund Gosse: a Literary Landscape, 1849-1928 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1985).

heroes. Instead, he takes pride in his taxing, scholarly work on Alcibiades, Drake and Magellan and seems almost ashamed of

pursuing my frivolous way with the preposterous adventures of Lucia and Miss Mapp.²¹

Although by nature modest and reticent about his talents and accomplishments, E.F. Benson was not out of tune with the literary establishment in his attitude towards his comic writing. When Benson died in 1940, The Times²² noted that his memoirs and biographies were the most valuable part of his writing. Dodo received a passing reference, only in the context of the controversy it provoked. There is no mention of any of his other comic works. While the writer of The Times' obituary referred to the "charming and graceful humour of his personality" he showed no interest in the literary expression of Benson's humorous perspective on the human condition. In 1940, comedy was not accorded any respect at his alma mater, Cambridge University. Donald Davie, who later lectured at Cambridge in the 1950s and was a professor of English at Stanford University in the 1970s remembered with amusement that comedy and comic theorists were not taken seriously at Cambridge in the 1940s when he was an undergraduate there.

Everyone was caught still in Matthew Arnold's dilemma: how to find room, in a theory of literature which turned upon 'high seriousness,' for

²¹E.F. Benson, Final Edition (London: Longmans Green and Co. Ltd., 1940), 193.

²²Times, 1 March 1940.

the great masters of the comic vision, for Chaucer and Burns, Dickens and Aristophanes.²³

He regretted that academics at Cambridge failed to accommodate comedy which Davie thought was "one of the two or three canonical modes in which the human imagination has made sense of the human condition."²⁴ If any academic was foolish enough to write a book about the theory and practice of comedy he was thought peculiar, even in an institution that favoured eccentricity. Although L.J. Potts's²⁵ book on comedy was one of the first to note the affirmative spirit of comedy and figures in many subsequent bibliographies, Donald Davie says "in 1940 and for years thereafter one was unmistakably aware that Mr. Potts....was not to be taken seriously."²⁶ Nonetheless, since 1940 there has been a growing and sustained interest by literary critics in formulating theories about comedy. This interest is driven by two impulses: the need to find aesthetic and intellectual reasons for the continuous and continuing appeal of comedy and the desire to defend work of comic writers against the charges that it is at best an escapist pursuit, preoccupied with the self-indulgent trivialities of life, or that at worst, it is a subversive, dehumanizing form of expression.

²³Ronald Hagman, My Cambridge (London: Robson Books, 1977), 78. This book includes reminiscences about life at Cambridge by Muriel Bradbrook, Eleanor Bron, Lord Caradon, Donald Davie, Simon Gray, Thom Gunn, Raymond Leppard, Neville Mott, Piers Paul Read, Arianna Stassinopoulos, John Vaizey, Raymond Williams.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵L.J. Potts, Comedy (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1948).

²⁶Hagman, My Cambridge, 78.

Until relatively recently there has not been any sustained critical interest in the theory of comedy. Perhaps if Aristotle's lost treatise on comedy was found to exist in a remote monastic archive,²⁷ comedy would immediately share the respect accorded tragedy. Until the middle of the twentieth century comic artists had to make do with the occasional dialogues, incidental prologues, and guarded letters and essays in which comic writers valiantly defended their work against the puritanical and the prurient. E.F. Benson in his comic works was drawing on a long history of comic literature, freely taking from it and adapting for his time its familiar themes and techniques, so at this point it is useful to review the developments in the criticism of the protean art of comedy in order to see how firmly rooted E.F. Benson's characters, settings and structures were in that history.

The brief dialogue in Plato's *Philebus*²⁸ (c. 350 B.C.) and the handful of comments in Aristotle's *Poetics*²⁹ (c. 347-322 B.C.) are sufficient to show how ambivalent the attitudes towards comedy have been throughout its history. Through the dialogue between Socrates and Protarchus, Plato points out the disturbingly aggressive and painful elements in comedy. He voices concern about the worth of a genre that focuses on mankind's baser instincts, though he recognizes the educative power of comedy in pointing out the human capacity for ignorance, vanity and self-

²⁷The search for this lost document is the basis for Umberto Eco's best-selling novel, *In the Name of the Rose* (New York: Harcourt, 1983).

²⁸Plato, *Philebus* in *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, edited by D.J. Palmer (London: Macmillan, 1984), 25-27.

²⁹Aristotle, *Poetics* in *Theories of Comedy*, edited by Paul Lauter (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1964), 9-20.

delusion. Plato indicates that mankind is most deluded and therefore most ludicrous when he assumes he is handsomer than he really is or "fancies himself better in point of virtue than he really is"³⁰ or more affluent than others. A person is a comic figure when these conceits are combined "with weakness and an incapacity to be revenged on the scoffer."³¹ However, when the ignorant, vain and self-deluded have actual power over others then the ridiculous are no longer comic, they become hateful and dangerous. It is not surprising that Plato should focus on these two features of comedy: the nexus between pleasure and pain experienced by those watching comedy and the political dangers comic artists are exposed to when they hold up to ridicule the self-delusions of the powerful. He is, after all, formulating these theories after the extremely popular, iconoclastic comedies of Aristophanes (c. 447-380 B.C.) had dominated the Athenian theatre for forty years. During a career that spanned forty years and included forty plays, of which only eleven have survived, Aristophanes was twice prosecuted because his comedies were regarded as subversive and scurrilous. Performed in the competitive arena of Dionysian festivals, successful comedies achieved coveted prizes and national recognition for the poet. Aristophanes won prizes on several occasions. In his plays, theme and structure were integrated, and the language wittily exploited the incongruity between man's dreams and ideals and their ludicrous manifestation in the material world. Aristophanes exposed the vanities, pretensions, appetites of men, and women in all levels and professions in

³⁰Plato, *Philebus*, 26.

³¹*Ibid.*

society. His characters were to become the stock figures of comedy for succeeding generations: the braggart, the pretentious, the self-deluded. They suffer the indignities of mistaken identities, social and sexual frustration and loss of face that also became the traditional basis for action in comedy.³² Immensely popular, the Aristophanic, or Old Comedy as it came to be called, was replaced by the comedies in the manner of Menander (c. 342-292 B.C), which became known as New Comedy.

In E.F. Benson's comic novels, there is no shortage of pretentious self-deceivers, but because they have very little real power or authority over others they are ludicrous not hateful or dangerous. They live within a comic community that diminishes and contains their delusions, though the pervasiveness of hypocrisy and dissembling in individuals and the community is not minimized by Benson. His characters struggle not towards self-knowledge or moral perfection, rather all their striving is to prevent others from discovering their pretences and imperfections. Lucia risks health, friendship and even life itself rather than face public disclosure of her frauds and fantasies. Georgie Pillson uses every hair-dye, wig and fancy costume to avoid the fact that he is old, deaf and short-sighted.

While Benson's comedies are far more elegantly phrased than those of Aristophanes, he had his share of the adverse criticism associated with pillorying public figures, whether intentionally or not. Despite his repeated disclaimers, the accusation that he had deliberately modelled the character of Dodo Chesterford in his first and best-selling novel on Margot Tennant, later Margot Asquith, Countess of

³²The information in this section is drawn from Alan H. Sommerstein, Introduction, Aristophanes (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973), 9-38.

Oxford, followed him for the rest of his life. It did not prevent him from using other celebrated figures, for example Marie Corelli, Howard Sturgis, Sybil Colefax, as comic models, though he did show some caution in waiting until some of them were without influence, or dead.

Just as Plato's analysis of comedy was based on Aristophanes' comedies, Aristotle's brief remarks about comedy may have been influenced by Menander's. In contrast to Aristophanes' comedies, Menander's plays were more didactic than scurrilous; the characters were character-types rather than actual public figures. Aristotle's comments are incidental to his fuller analysis of tragedy, though it is clear that he intended to consider comedy at a later date. Aristotle noted that comedy "has had no history because it was not at first treated seriously"³³ and that it had assumed certain forms before it became recognized as a distinctive genre. In addressing comedy in The Poetics, Aristotle establishes both the vitality and pervasiveness of this form of human expression. He includes comedy in his list of the modes of imitation that constitute man's literary and musical expression: "epic poetry and tragedy, comedy also and dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms."³⁴ Although he lists these in order, he is not necessarily establishing a hierarchy. What he does indicate is that they differ from one another "in these respects: the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of

³³Aristotle, Poetics, 14.

³⁴Ibid., 9.

imitation, being in each case distinct."³⁵ Though most of The Poetics deals with the other forms, Aristotle in Chapter VI announces that he intends to speak later of hexameter verse and comedy. Regrettably this discourse was either unwritten or lost. What does emerge from the comments is that Aristotle took comedy seriously. In Chapter V of The Poetics he defines comedy as:

an imitation of characters of lower type; it does not, however, involve the full range of villainy, but only the ludicrous, a subdivision of the ugly or base. The ludicrous consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted but does not give pain.³⁶

Although later writers interpret the phrase "of lower type" to refer to the social status of the characters in comedy, there is an argument to be made that Aristotle was here referring to their moral status rather than their social. In this brief, but pithy statement Aristotle identifies the objects of comedy: those who are laughably absurd. He sets boundaries, though, on the ludicrous, removing it from the darker realities of actual suffering and death. The idea that comic artists, while deriding human failings, exercise restraint in selecting the objects of ridicule, is pervasive in later critics and writers of comedies.

There was little in the way of comic theory during Roman times. During the third and second century B.C. the comedies of Plautus and Terence showed an indebtedness to the comedies of the Greek dramatist Menander (c. 342-292 B.C.), the less controversial comic artist whose works displaced Aristophanes. Menander

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., 13-14.

also set the pattern of presenting human foolishness in a sympathetic light. The twenty plays of Plautus (c. 254-184 B.C.) and Terence's six plays (c. 190-159 B.C.), were indebted to the New Comedy of Menander. New Comedy was more decorous in its targets and language, the intention being more to instruct than lampoon and shock. Apparently, the characters were no longer caricatures of recognizable, prominent individuals as they were frequently in Aristophanes' plays. The characters in the Roman comedies were more generalized human types: irascible, middle-aged men and greedy, middle-aged women, young passionate lovers, boastful soldiers, parasites, generous prostitutes, and wily slaves and servants. Terence, in his plays, humanized many of the stock characters, putting them in comic situations that were plausible, not outrageous, and treating them with greater sympathy. Terence is also credited with introducing duality in characterization and plot structure that became standard in comic plays, sometimes to the point of absurdity, as well as creating the serious or problem comedy. In writing a prologue to his plays, Terence was not the first or last writer who felt he had to justify his work. Although he wrote only six plays, Terence influenced English comedy in the sixteenth century and French comedy in the seventeenth. His compassionate identification with human frailty is summed up in the familiar aphorism, "Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto,"³⁷ (I am a man: I count nothing human indifferent to me) was to influence the perspective and tone of many comic authors, including Benson.

³⁷The information in this section is drawn from Betty Radice, Introduction, *Terence: The Comedies* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1976), 11-29.

Benson's comic world set in early twentieth century England seems to have as many kill-joys, hypocrites, social climbers, braggarts, pedants and cunning parvenus as Rome in the second century B.C. Benson's earlier comedies deal with the errors and follies of young love while his later comedies chart the follies of middle-age, rather than the errors of youth. Consequently, his characters in these comedies are more preoccupied with financial rather than sexual gain. Nonetheless, like Terence, he treats his fallible characters benignly, always rescuing them from ultimate ruin, while never losing sight of the threat to humane, moral values posed by their greed, self-deception and malice. He, like Terence, fully identified with the all too human capacity for selfishness and hypocrisy and mocked himself as well as those he knew. In Paying Guests and Secret Lives he makes fun of his own ridiculous attempts to be forever agile and celebrated as much as he mocks others.

The sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England are significant periods in the history of comedy and comic theory. Nicholas Udall's boisterous play, Shakespeare's romantic, pastoral comedies, and Ben Jonson's comedies of humours displayed the range and appeal of comedy. Nicholas Udall, Sir Thomas Elyot, Sir Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson defend the genre in their introductions, essays and commentaries. The Elizabethan dramatists grafted a didactic purpose onto the festive, irreverent elements in classical comedy. Nicholas Udall's prologue to his play, Ralph Roister Doister (1553), introduces the novel idea that comedy had a salutary effect, so long as it operates within certain limits of taste. This delightful prologue reminds us of the therapeutic effects of laughter, a concept that was noted by E.F. Benson's

yonge myndes, the disceipte of servantes, the chaunces of fortune contrary to mennes expectation, they being therof warned may prepare them selfe to resist or prevent occasion.... by comedies good counsaile is ministred.⁴¹

Udall's and Elyot's defences of the cathartic and moral function of comedy are preludes to the definitive Renaissance statement about the didactic purpose of comedy, included in Sir Philip Sidney's An Apology for Poetry, published in 1595.

Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which be representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be so; so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one.⁴²

Despite this solemn defense of comedy detailed critical scrutiny of Elizabethan comedies had to wait until the twentieth century. F.M. Cornford's syncretic work on Attic Comedy⁴³ (1914), and the seminal studies of Northrop Frye (1949)⁴⁴, C.L. Barber (1951, 1959),⁴⁵ and Susanne Langer (1953) provided a solid basis for subsequent scholarship in comedy.⁴⁶ Cornford's work, a synthesis of four areas of study — classical literature and history, comparative religion and anthropology —

⁴¹Ibid., 18.

⁴²Sir Philip Sidney, A Defence of Poetry, edited with an introduction and notes by Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 44.

⁴³Francis Macdonald Cornford, The Origin of Attic Comedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914).

⁴⁴Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," The English Institute Essays 1948, edited by D.A. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 58-73.

⁴⁵C.L. Barber, "The Saturnalian Pattern in Shakespeare's Comedy," in Comedy: Meaning and Form, edited by R.W. Corrigan (New York: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965), 363-377.
-----, Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1959).

⁴⁶Susanne K. Langer, "The Comic Rhythm" in Comedy: Meaning and Form, edited by Robert Corrigan (New York: Chandler Publishing Company, 1966), 119-140.

showed the connections between the evolution of Greek drama and ancient folk rituals and festivals and the forms and structures in Renaissance drama. Ancient rituals were performed to affirm the life-giving forces in existence, and the songs and plays incorporated in those rituals celebrated life rather than castigating the ridiculous. Cornford pointed out the etymological connection between the word comedy and "komos," meaning village, firmly placing comedy in the rural festivities that marked the return of spring. C.L. Barber's highly original and influential essay, "The Saturnalian Pattern in Shakespeare's comedy," in 1951 laid down in general terms the arguments he developed in full in his book Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic form and its Relation to Social Custom, published in 1959. This book not only expressed his faith in the comic form as a valid means of cultural expression, it also pointed out the configuration of festivity, release and regeneration that is the aesthetic pattern of so many comedies. Drawing his examples from Shakespearean comedies, Barber offered significant justifications for the continuing appeal of the genre: the celebration of beneficial natural impulses that free people from constricting conventions while, simultaneously, reminding them of the transient nature of those pleasurable impulses.

It is indeed the present mirth and laughter of the festive plays — the immediate experience they give of nature's beneficence — which reconciles feeling, without recourse to sentimentality or cynicism, to the knowledge they convey of nature's limitations.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Barber, "The Saturnalian Pattern," 369.

Barber pointed out the moral judgements implicit in humour, showing how often social outsiders, the clowns and fools and the outcasts, reveal how irrational and stultifying social codes and customs may be to individual development and happiness. As well as examining the thematic interrelationship of the characters in Shakespearean comedies, Barber also discerned the aesthetic patterns that were rooted in traditional festivities that promoted pleasure and release from mundane constraints. During the holiday feasts, dances, games and pageants the characters in Shakespeare's comedies had the time and occasion to consider their feelings about love, fortune and nature. They were free to deride the tyrannous, avoid the cynical and turn away from the sentimental, while simultaneously engaging in the pursuit of love which, paradoxically marked their transience and transformation. Barber also drew attention to the witty, verbal patterns of invocation and abuse so prevalent in Attic comedy and so much a part of Shakespeare's comedy.

In his brilliant essay, "The Argument of Comedy,"⁴⁸ Northrop Frye examined at length the view that Shakespearean comedy celebrates the life-force and is marked by conflicts that are resolved in the establishment of a re-invigorated society. He pointed out the continuity in themes, plots and characterization between Shakespeare's comedies and the New Comedies of Menander, Plautus and Terence. In the typical comic plot of these plays, young lovers are thwarted initially by obstacles arising from envy, greed, vanity, hypocrisy or self-delusion, either in themselves or in the adult society that opposes their union. After the obstacles are

⁴⁸Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 163-186.

overcome, a new society coalesces around the married lovers. Conflict is central to comedy, but the conflict is resolved through self-knowledge, social reconciliation and spiritual grace. At least, the conflicts are resolved for most of the characters. Some do not enter the charmed circle, reminding the audience that anarchic, subversive and ungovernable forces are always present in the self and in society. The realities of the effects of change, suffering and death are only briefly dispelled in the comic world. In his longer essay, "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy" in The Anatomy of Criticism, Frye by placing comedy between the romantic and ironic modes offers reasons for the broad range of tone, style, structure in comic literature. Many of the points examined in "The Argument of Comedy" are reiterated, and in his emphasis on the festive aspects of comedy, rather than the ridiculous, Frye is clearly in the school of Cornford and Langer. What he adds is an interpretation of the darker aspects in comedy, the exclusion of those who keep themselves separate, those who are not accommodated in the world where love, youth and energy reign. The inclusion of the scapegoat figure in comic ritual and drama, Frye says "makes for pathos, even tragedy."⁴⁹ The other stock figures in comedy, the senex iratus, miles gloriosus, the pedants, prostitutes, fops, shrews, parasites, gluttons and churls — variations on the three types found in New Comedy — the alazon (imposter), eiron (self-deprecator) and buffoon — all represent humanity's continual struggle to reconcile its ideal, spiritual impulses with the actuality of its animal, instinctual nature. The comic writer exploits

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 165.

this discrepancy, presenting life as irrational, illusory and complex, in which order only occasionally prevails.

Frye divides comedy into six phases on a continuum that extends from irony and satire at one end, to romance at the other. While these divisions are rather mechanical, they have the virtue of recognizing the polymorphous nature of comic literature that can include Terence, Austen, Shaw and Waugh in the same mode. In the first phase, ironic comedy, "the demonic world is never far away,"⁵⁰ even when society has triumphed or remained undefeated, redeemed by the skin of its teeth, or by divine intervention. Frye offers as examples of ironic comedies, Jonson's The Alchemist, John Gay's The Beggar's Opera, Shaw's Heartbreak House, Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, and Fielding's Tom Jones. Frye characterizes the second phase of comedy as one where the hero escapes from society, making no attempt to redeem or change it. The third phase of comedy is the kind that has evolved from New Comedy. Frye establishes this as the norm for comedy. Comedies categorized in the fourth phase are those that move from the world of experience to the world of innocence and romance. These comedies are set in a "green world,"⁵¹ an imaginative as well as physical location where self-awareness and love are analogous with ancient rituals and the wish-fulfilment fantasies of dreams. Frye identifies Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It, The Winter's Tale and The Merchant of Venice as comedies "of the green world." In the fifth phase "we

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 178.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 182-183.

move into a world that is still more romantic, less Utopian and more Arcadian, less festive and more pensive,"⁵² and Frye cites the plays The Tempest, The Comedy of Errors, Twelfth Night, and Pericles. The sixth phase marks the "collapse and disintegration of the comic society."⁵³ The social units become smaller, limited to a handful of initiates or even to one person. At this end of the continuum comedies merge into other genres where private detached places, and the supernatural and fantastic are more significant. Frye's representation of comedy as being on a continuum accommodates the variety and flexibility of comic literature. He extends the boundaries of the comic, showing that an author may work at any, or all, stages in the scale of what may be defined as comic. Frye's theories go a long way in establishing comedy as a worthwhile genre that is far from being trivial or escapist.

The polymorphous, rather than amorphous, nature of comedy is a noticeable aspect of E.F. Benson's comic fiction. The Dodo trilogy is closer in tone and setting to the festive, pastoral comedies Frye classified as belonging to the third phase of comedy. In those novels the wealthy characters are free to discover their true feelings through conversation, game-playing and role-playing. The novels are structured in patterns of symmetry and contrast as order is restored. The main characters find pleasure and fulfilment in marriage, though there are always the melancholy outsiders, the obsessive managers and the cynics who are not changed by their sojourn in the "green world." The characters in the "Lucia" series are closer

⁵²Ibid., 184.

⁵³Ibid., 185.

to those in the New Comedies, but their enclosed comic world, that is always on the verge of disintegration, is closer to Frye's sixth phase. In the "Lucia" series the baser human instincts and passions are kept in check, but only just, and the community that prevails is not renewed or revived. It merely goes on as before, devoid of charity.

Susanne Langer's essay on comedy in Feeling and Form emphasized the importance of the comic hero and further advanced the notion that comedy emphasizes life's regenerative qualities. She wrote of

the essential comic feeling which is the sentient aspect of organic unity, growth and self-preservation.⁵⁴

She delineates the aesthetic pattern of comedy, emphasizing its vitalist and positive aspects, believing that of all aesthetic forms it is closest to the biological rhythms of existence. She downplays the moral struggle in comedy, the exposure and castigation of vice and foibles, focusing instead on its structural rhythms and the personality of the comic hero.

This human life-feeling is the essence of comedy. It is at once religious and ribald, knowing and defiant, social and freakishly individual. The illusion of life which the comic poet creates is the oncoming future fraught with dangers and opportunities, that is with physical or social events occurring by chance and building up the coincidences with which individuals cope according to their rights.⁵⁵

The comic artist represents the comic hero as able to survive the assault on himself or, as in the case of Benson's comedies, herself, of uncontrollable and unforeseen forces by the use of intelligence, energy and will. Langer presents the comic hero as

⁵⁴Langer, The Comic Rhythm, 140.

⁵⁵Ibid., 123.

vital, amoral and opportunistic. Unlike the tragic hero, the comic protagonist rarely reflects on his inner nature, nor seeks to improve or develop his character. He is content to hold his own in the world in the face of surprises, errors and coincidences. The embodiment of the *élan vital*, the comic hero interacts with other comic figures, the buffoons, simpletons and clowns who are not as confident, nor as indestructible as he. Langer suggests that comic writers, while they are not moralists, do not disapprove of morality and moral lessons can be discerned in their works. She accepts that the conflicts in comedy are inevitably petty, because the extremes of poverty and suffering are not at issue. Loss of social prestige and public embarrassment are the disasters of comedy, not illness and death. Langer summarizes the tone, structure and characters of comedy, clearly differentiating it from its sister art, tragedy:

The feeling of comedy is a feeling of heightened vitality, challenged wit and will, engaged in the great game of chance. The real antagonist is the World. Since the personal antagonist in the play is really the great challenger, he is rarely a complete victim, he is interesting, entertaining, his defeat is a hilarious success, but not his destruction.⁶⁶

In all of E.F. Benson's comedies the central figures are women whose energies both vitalize and threaten the communities in which they live. They frequently challenge the "status quo" and are only defeated if their egoism is too monstrous or unredeemed by at least some accommodation to the needs of others. Frequently they court social disaster or public embarrassment but are never destroyed by it. Dodo Chesterford and Edith Staines in the "Dodo" trilogy free themselves from the

⁶⁶*ibid.*, 139.

repressive world of late Victorian society. Both survive unscathed and find worthwhile uses for their beauty, intelligence and talent. Lucia's appetite for power and Elizabeth Mapp's greed disrupt the social life of Tilling but neither they nor the community are injured beyond repair. They even escape death off the coast of Newfoundland and disaster in the council-chamber of Tilling. Many of the beautiful, intellectual and artistic women E.F. Benson knew in real-life were not so fortunate.⁵⁷

Before the theories of comedy propounded by Barber, Frye and Langer which emphasized the festive, ritualistic, rhythmic patterns in comedy, other writers had focused on the intellectual and didactic functions of the genre. In the late nineteenth century George Meredith, the novelist, and Henri Bergson, the philosopher, had already made significant contributions to these areas. Meredith's "An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit,"⁵⁸ published in 1879, stresses both the intellectual and the educative function of comedy. The intention of the comic work is to arouse people to "honourable laughter"⁵⁹ showing the "sunlight of the mind,

⁵⁷Lady Charles Beresford and Lady Edward Speyer were ostracised for the sins of the former's husband and the race of the latter's. Margot Asquith had to endure her husband's passionate attractions to a number of younger women. At this height of his political career he carried on an extensive correspondence with Venetia Stanley, whose portrait was painted by Philip Burne-Jones. Isabel, Lady Somerset also faced public disgrace because of her husband's preference for boys. E.F. Benson helped financially the wife of his friend Eustace Miles when their business ventures failed. He regretted the lack of critical attention for the work of his friend Mary Cholmondeley and documented the intellectual and emotional frustrations of his sister, Margaret.

⁵⁸George Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit*.

⁵⁹George Meredith, *Prelude to The Egoist* in George Meredith "The Egoist," edited by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1979), 3.

mental richness rather than noisy enormity."⁶⁰ The following is Meredith's classification of comic figures who invite derision by the comic spirit:

Whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk — the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter.⁶¹

Self-deluded egoists were clearly as prevalent in nineteenth-century England as in Athens in the fifth century B.C. In the "Prelude" to his novel The Egoist Meredith firmly places comedy in upper-middle class drawing rooms not because he is a snob, a "silver-spoon" novelist, but because in this financially secure world, his characters, untrammelled by physical and material anxieties, can give free reign to their egoism and eccentricity.

Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-room of civilized men and women, where we have no doubt of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent clashes — to make the correctness of the representation convincing.⁶²

By exposing the human vanity, folly and irrationality that thrives in civilized drawing-rooms, comedy has the educative function of restoring equilibrium and common sense in human behaviour. E.F. Benson's fascination with wealthy titled people was rooted

⁶⁰Meredith, An Essay on Comedy, 446.

⁶¹Ibid., 446.

⁶²Meredith, Prelude, 3.

in the same delight in watching the absurd and idiosyncratic behaviour humans can indulge when they are free from mundane restraints. His observation of the foolish excesses in others no doubt contributed to the sane equilibrium he maintained throughout his life, in the face of profound suffering. Meredith notes that those who love comedy are neither excessively pessimistic nor optimistic about men and women for they know them "well enough not to expect too much of them, though you may still hope for good."⁶³ The egoists and buffoons may flourish, but are never triumphant, thwarted as they are by the "imps" that "uncover ridiculousness in imposing figures."⁶⁴

In his "Essay" and "Prelude," Meredith's theory of comedy gives prominence to female characters, "the femmes savantes," who are admirably independent. Passivity, self-effacement and self-sacrifice in women, Meredith considers ludicrous even though his generation appeared to encourage these qualities.

The heroines of comedy are like women of the world, not necessarily heartless from being clear-sighted: they seem so to the sentimentally reared only for the reason that they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot.⁶⁵

None of E.F. Benson's comic heroines are "wandering vessels crying for a captain." They are frequently spirited, independently-minded women who chart their own courses through life, offering a clear contrast to their supposedly high-minded, orthodox, but essentially lifeless, counterparts. Benson's "femmes savantes" function

⁶³Meredith, An Essay on Comedy, 440.

⁶⁴Meredith, Prelude, 7.

⁶⁵Meredith, An Essay on Comedy, 433.

in the secure, sun-lit drawing-rooms of Edwardian country estates, and Mayfair residences. They are not free from the "sunny malice"⁶⁶ of Benson's comic spirit. He exposes their vanity and folly along with the social hypocrisy of those they try to avoid. Ultimately they are redeemed by their recognition of the need to transcend their essentially material natures. In the "Lucia" comedies, Benson's women, older and less secure financially, strive only to retain their social place and material well-being and appear irredeemable. His female egoists are nearer to Henri Bergson's mechanical puppets than Meredith's spirited heroines.

There are some affinities between Meredith's theories and Henri Bergson's, though Bergson is primarily concerned with defining laughter. In his work, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, published in 1911, Bergson accepts the Renaissance view that, by pointing out human frailty, comedy has a civilizing, corrective effect. Bergson defines the ludicrous as any behaviour that is rigidly obsessive or automatic.

Society will therefore be suspicious of all inelasticity of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as an activity with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates.⁶⁷

His view is that comedy is dependant on our response to this "inelasticity of character." According to his theory laughter is the social gesture against forces in life that emphasize automatic responses and repetitive, mechanical action. Because life

⁶⁶ibid., 446.

⁶⁷Henri Bergson, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic in Comedy, edited by Wylie Sypher (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956), 73.

is not fixed and repetitive, comic action and language frequently are. Instead of the usual progression of events that occurs in life, in comedy action is cyclic and repetitive. In comedy, Bergson claims, the comic hero is a type rather than an individual, is inflexible, self-deluded and out of touch with society.

Many of the characters in the "Lucia" series, as well as in Paying Guests and Secret Lives, are rigidly obsessive and act like automatons. The community of egoists in Tilling, Wentworth and Durham Square obsessively pursue attention, information and comfort. Fixed in their manners, attitudes and habits they are like wind-up toys whirring along, repeating their predictable greetings "Au reservoir," "Qui Hi," "Any News?" Diva Plaistow is even described as a mechanism going round and round.

Miss Plaistow turned the corner below Miss Mapp's window and went bobbing along down the steep hill. She walked with the motion of these mechanical doils sold in the street, which have three legs set as spokes to a circle, so that their feet emerge from their dress with Dutch and rigid regularity, and her figure had a certain squat rotundity that suited her gait.⁶⁸

After the seminal contributions of Meredith, Bergson, Barber, Frye and Langer, comedy has received more attention by literary critics.⁶⁹ Their work has shown the fundamental tensions between the civilizing and liberating functions of comedy, between its redemptive and corrective aspects, between the acceptance of folly, as well as its transcendence through forgiveness. Those tensions have been explored

⁶⁸E.F. Benson, Miss Mapp (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1922), 297.

⁶⁹An extensive bibliography, Comedy: An Annotated Bibliography of Theory and Criticism, was recently published by James E. Evans (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1987).

by three contemporary critics, Morton Gurewitch,⁷⁰ Robert Heilman⁷¹ and Robert M. Polhemus.⁷² In their work they integrate earlier theories and expand them in the light of contemporary comic literature. Gurewitch, while acknowledging the function of comedy in civilizing and censoring society, focuses his discussion on the irrational elements in comedy, the prominence it gives to irrationality, disorder and irreverence. Like Northrop Frye, he tries to come to terms with the broad and flexible nature of the genre by categorizing it. He chooses four, rather than six categories: including satire, which includes both demonic mockery and mild castigation; humour which either copes with disaster or thrives on whimsy and joy; farce which is innocuous at one extreme and madly outrageous at the other; and irony which reveals a cluster of attitudes centering on the absurd. Gurewitch considers all forms of comedy, but devotes himself especially to farce, because of its quintessential absurdity. He regards comedy as an exhilarating form because one's only defence in an absurd world is to take pleasure in the illogical, bizarre and foolish actions of others.

Robert Heilman in The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society takes a different position. He celebrates the affirmative, conciliatory, rather than the corrective and critical functions of comedy. He considers comedy as

Less given to position-taking than to living with different positions as inevitable rather than improvable, as bearable if not always lovable, as

⁷⁰Morton Gurewitch, Comedy: The Irrational Vision (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975).

⁷¹Robert B. Heilman, The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978).

⁷²Robert M. Polhemus, Comic Faith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

amusing rather than contemptible, as expectably imperfect rather than destructive or fatal.⁷³

This non-judgmental, kindly view of comedy is closer to Terence's. Heilman, like Langer, notes the centrality in comedy of the aggressive drives of the selfish individual. He goes further, though, in examining the comic paradox that society both desires the energy and will of the egotistical individual for growth, but also needs to protect itself from the depredations of excessive individuality. In comedy, Heilman sees the relationship between the individual and society as one of tempered co-existence. In the comic world human diversity and disparity is tolerated. People come to terms with age, suffering and death, preferring always to survive, rather than to be transformed. Heilman's theories about the relationship between the comic protagonists and their society accords with that between Lucia and the cluster of middle-aged survivors from pre-First World War England living in reduced circumstances in Tilling. For all their attempts to disguise the fact, they are a fragmented, bored and disorientated group when Lucia's energy and will is removed. They need her *élan vital*, but need to set controls on it, so that they are not absorbed or destroyed by it.

The idea that comedy offers a vision of life where the non-heroic virtues of tolerance, accommodation, adaptability and reconciliation are worth striving for is examined in Robert M. Polhemus's book Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce. He uses as his epigraph, a line from Christopher Fry,

⁷³Heilman, The Ways of the World, 10.

Comedy is an escape not from truth, but from despair: a narrow escape into faith.⁷⁴

to endorse his view that comedy is a serious not an escapist genre and that it presents positive values, not negative ones. Polhemus examines the comic masterpieces of the nineteenth century and early twentieth from Austen to Joyce,⁷⁵ exploring the historical tension between comedy and religion, emphasizing that the tension arises from their similarity as much as their difference. Both comedy and religion aim, he says,

to honour creation; to provide hope; to reconcile people to their harsh fates; to smooth over social enmity and to defend culture by authoritative moral sanction against selfish and destructive behaviour; to organize and discipline the energies and emotions of people; to make people feel that they are important and part of a "chosen" group; to institutionalize ways of getting rid of guilt; to allow people to identify with righteousness and let loose wrathful indignation and hostility in good conscience; to assure them of the possibility of future well-being; to lift them out of themselves and free the spirit. Consciously or not, these novelists are trying, by means of wit, humour, and satire, to fulfil at one time or another all of these missions of religious faith.⁷⁶

This paragraph idealizes both religion and comedy, though it should be remembered that the roots of comedy and tragedy were within the religious Attic festivals that celebrated the life force by purging the individual and the community of anarchic and defeatist forces. Polhemus distinguishes the comic sense as that which makes us

⁷⁴Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, 1.

⁷⁵Polhemus writes persuasively on Jane Austen's *Emma*, Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*, Charles Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit*, W.M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers*, George Meredith's *The Egoist*, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* and James Joyce's *Finnegan Wake*.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 5.

identifiably human. By combining the comic with the religious, or moral impulse, Polhemus is on the side of the Renaissance theorists who view comedy as having a moral and humane function. By lodging it within a tolerant society, and annexing it to the religious impulse, he offers a view of comedy as offering redemption in this life, not in the hereafter.

Comic vision is also very serious about the joys as well as the sufferings of mankind, more serious in one way than organized religions have often been: growing out of a transitory pleasure, comedy does not disparage or devalue the passing joys and victories of the world. Comic faith seeks something less grandiose and more reasonable than infinite or permanent happiness and blessed immortality: it seeks more joyful life in a lasting world.⁷⁷

By reminding us that transience and imperfection are the conditions of existence, comedy reminds us to seek pleasure in social relationships that are tempered by tolerance and self-knowledge. For the world goes on ad infinitum, though we as individuals do not.

The foregoing discussion of significant theories about comedy is a prelude to a detailed discussion of Benson's comic works. Already it is possible to see that Benson's comedies fit within a matrix of comic theory that gives origin and form to many of the elements in his comic fiction. For although L.C. Knights thought "abstract theories of comedy can only at best amuse"⁷⁸ the recognition that Benson's comedies have correspondences with other comic works in part accounts for his enduring appeal. Thus it is that I discuss Benson's comic work under three

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁷⁸L.C. Knights, "Notes on Comedy," in *Comedy Meaning and Form*, ed. by Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco, California: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965), 186.

headings: festivities, masquerades and epiphanies. I use these terms because they serve to distinguish between the "Dodo" trilogy, the "Lucia" sestet and Paying Guests and Secret Lives, while at the same time indicating that all Benson's comedies are rooted in the comic matrix. The view Benson offers in all his writings is that comedy provides a way to find joy and preserve faith in life in an unjust, unpredictable, fluid world. This makes him closer to the Christian belief that sinful, fallen men could be redeemed, though he, perhaps, thought humour a more potent agent than divine grace. Either way, he was closer to the values his father preached than he knew, though he was never so didactic, nor absolutist.

CHAPTER THREE

Comic Fiction I: Festivities

The first rule of life is to give other people a good time if you can; the second is not to hurt them under any pretext, and the third is to enjoy yourself in every other way.

E.F. Benson, The House of Defence (1906)

Although there was very little in the way of a comprehensive critical framework for comedy when E.F. Benson published his first highly-acclaimed comic novel, Dodo: A Detail of a Day, in 1893, it was becoming increasingly fashionable at the time for writers and artists¹ to use comedy to mock the affectations and hypocrisies of the English upper classes and to turn upside-down respectful attitudes that clung to the institutions of church, state, family and education. The most notable and eventually the most notorious was Oscar Wilde, the flamboyant exponent of Walter Pater's aesthetic philosophy. In an increasingly skilful series of plays, Lady Windermere's Fan (1892), A Woman of No Importance (1893), An Ideal Husband (1895) and The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) he used the comic structures of antithesis, doubling and disguise as well as the comic techniques of epigram and paradox² to deride the upper-class obsession with appearance, rank and wealth and its corresponding indifference to the moral values of fidelity and truth. E.F. Benson had

¹Anthony Hope (1863-1933) achieved great success by using parody and witty repartee to treat lightheartedly the subject of courtship and marriage in Dolly Dialogues, published first in the Westminster Gazette in the early 1890s and then in book form in 1894.

²Several articles appeared during the 1960s and 1970s that explored the intellectual and aesthetic substance of Wilde's comedies. The following are a few significant ones that show the serious themes that underlie the comic style: Arthur Ganz, "The Divided Self in the Society Comedies of Oscar Wilde" in Modern Drama III (1960): 16-23; Richard Foster, "Wilde as Parodist: A Second Look at The Importance of Being Earnest," College English XVIII (Oct. 1956): 18-23; L.A. Poague, "The Importance of Being Earnest: The Texture of Wilde's Irony" in Modern Drama XVI (1973): 251-7.

been introduced to Wilde by Lord Alfred Douglas in 1894, but he had known of his work before that. As mentioned earlier, he had attended the opening night of Lady Windermere's Fan and he knew Wilde's novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, well enough to quote sections of it to his friends, Lord Alfred Douglas, Reggie Turner, Frank Lawson and Robert Hichens, as they sailed up the Nile in 1894.³ He even wrote his own version, The Judgement Books, in 1895. When he wrote about the Wilde scandal in 1930 he did not gloss over Wilde's behaviour, neither did he ignore his artistic influence.⁴

Oscar Wilde was not the only artist to use comedy for a serious purpose, but this activity, though fashionable, was not without attendant risks. The same year as the performance of Lady Windermere's Fan, another of E.F. Benson's friends, Max Beerbohm, had published a set of caricatures, "Club Types,"⁵ in the Strand Magazine which had caused some adverse comment. Beerbohm's essay "A Defence of Cosmetics"⁶ which appeared in the first volume of the Yellow Book in 1894 was called

³Richard Ellman, Oscar Wilde (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), 392.

⁴E.F. Benson recounts his friendship with Wilde and assesses his talent in As We Were (221-248). He calls Wilde's decision to bring a libel action against Lord Queensberry "an act of inconceivable folly." Benson's final comment indicates his loyalty and humanity, "....there was never a man so bitterly mocked and execrated as he, but out of the number of his real friends, who knew what lay below his follies and his vices, there was none who failed to stand by him."

⁵Detailed information about the life, art and writing of Max Beerbohm is contained in David Cecil's book, A Biography of Max Beerbohm (London: Constable, 1964). J.C. Riewald's book, The Surprise of Excellence (New York: Archon Books, 1974), contains a collection of essays that analyse the artistry and wit of the "incomparable Max."

⁶Max Beerbohm, A Defence of Cosmetics (London: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1896).

"the rankest and most nauseous thing in all literature."⁷ Clearly the stock in trade of the comic artist — irony, ambiguity, exaggeration, parody and wit — were readily misunderstood in the 1890s. In an open letter published in the second volume of The Yellow Book, Beerbohm painstakingly pointed out to "the affrighted mob" that his essay was a hoax:

It seems incredible to me that anyone on the face of the earth could fail to see that my essay, so grotesque in subject, in opinion so flippant, in style so wildly affected, was meant for a burlesque upon the "precious" school of writers."⁸

Beerbohm was undeterred by the opprobrium of the critics, those "watchful evil faces" in the windows of Grub Street.⁹ Another of Benson's friends, Robert Hichens, on the other hand, did not feel so secure in making his contribution to the art of comedy, although he envied E.F. Benson's youthful success.¹⁰ Initially Hichens's novel, The Green Carnation, appeared anonymously in 1894. This thinly disguised portrayal of the relationship between Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas was a very popular

⁷ Rupert Hart-Davis, The Letters of Max Beerbohm, 1892-1956 (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), 2.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 4. In 1896, he published The Work of Max Beerbohm and Caricatures of Twenty-Five Gentlemen. The Saturday Review, in its Christmas supplement, printed his parodies of five authors: George Meredith, H.G. Wells, Richard Le Gallienne, Alice Maynell and Marie Corelli. These were preliminary sketches for his book, A Christmas Garland (London: Wm. Heinemann, 1912), which included an amusing essay, parodying the preachy, droning style of E.F. Benson's brother, Arthur.

¹⁰ Robert Hichens (1864-1950), in his autobiography, Yesterday, published in 1947 said that his first meeting with E.F. Benson was a turning-point in his life. He admired Benson's cleverness, his athleticism and his conversational wit. He also envied E.F. Benson's youthful success as a writer. Hichens accompanied E.F. Benson and Lord Alfred Douglas on a trip up the Nile, and later met Oscar Wilde in London, at Lord Alfred's introduction. Hichens' auto-biography, a series of gossip, anecdotal reminiscences, gives a clear picture of the interconnections of political, social and literary life in pre-war England. He also shows that Benson was regarded as a model by up-and-coming writers.

roman à clef. However, as public opposition grew against Wilde during his trials, Robert Hichens withdrew the book and it was not republished until 1949. Although they had not met E.F. Benson, two other writers, who became very well-known for their comedies,¹¹ Edith Somerville and Violet Martin, also enjoyed and admired his first novel, Dodo: A Detail of a Day.

It is not surprising that a young man schooled at Marlborough and Cambridge, in the 1880s, living at Lambeth Palace in the 1890s and friendly with Max Beerbohm,¹² Reginald Turner, Robert Hichens, Lord Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde should, in his first novel, concentrate on the irreverent, irresponsible behaviour of people he knew. What did surprise E.F. Benson and his family was the astonishing success of Dodo: A Detail of a Day, published in 1893, and the controversy it provoked. Within a year the novel had run into fourteen impressions, a popularity fuelled by the wide-spread belief that E.F. Benson had modelled his characters on celebrities of the day. The novel, though, has been republished throughout the decades since the 1890s, the most recent version being Dodo: An Omnibus, a

¹¹Gifford Lewis, Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish R.M. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1985), 150-151. Their first novel The Real Charlotte (1894) was also about the adventures of a self-willed, high-spirited young woman, though the outcome of her adventures was not comic. Nevertheless, their subsequent trilogy, Some Experiences of an Irish R.M. (1899), Further Experiences of an Irish R.M. (1908) and in Mr. Knox's Country (1915) was very much in the comic tradition.

¹²When Max Beerbohm was honeymooning in the Grand Hotel Regina Elena in Santa Margherita in 1910 he described seeing "Dodo" Benson looking "out of place in his blue flannel blazer and white canvas shirt and tennis shoes, all fresh from the banks of the Cam. He was hurrying along, seemingly on his way from playing fives with the Bursar of Caius, and going to have tea with Bobbie Mainwaring of Peterhouse." (Rupert Hart-Davis, Max Beerbohm's Letters to Reggie Turner (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1965), 186.) Thirty years later, Max remembered E.F. Benson with as much affection when he published the obituary essay in The Spectator on November 1st, 1940.

compendium that includes the three Dodo novels, Dodo: A Detail of a Day, Dodo the Second, and Dodo Wonders, published by the Hogarth Press in 1986. Part of the immediate appeal of Dodo: A Detail of a Day lay in society's malicious delight in trying to identify its characters as contemporary celebrities; part of the novel's more enduring appeal is due to E.F. Benson's narrative technique. By foregrounding dialogue and minimizing description and authorial commentary E.F. Benson anticipates the narrative forms used by writers in the 1930s, in particular Evelyn Waugh, and in the 1940s by Henry Green. Critical respect for writers who replicate a plurality of voices other than their own to heighten the comic disparity between accepted social norms and a character's attitudes and values had to wait until the work of Mikhail Bakhtin became available in the West in the 1970s.

As the success of this novel set E.F. Benson on his way as a writer it is worth recounting, briefly, his comments on his purpose in writing the novel, the controversy it provoked and its reception by the reviewers. While Benson deliberately reduced the authorial presence in Dodo: A Detail of a Day, he did leave a detailed account of his narrative intentions in Our Family Affairs.¹³ During the 1890s he had been thinking about writing a novel whose main character was to be a spirited young woman. Perhaps Meredith's independent comic heroines were at the back of his mind, though Benson decided that his character would not have a heart. He wrote

For a long time there had been wandering about in my head the idea of some sort of fascinating sort of modern girl, who tackled life with uncommon relish and success, and was adored by the world in general,

¹³E.F. Benson, Our Family Affairs, 1867-1896 (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1920), 180, 254-6, 279-283, 297-311.

and had all the embellishments that a human being can desire, except a heart.¹⁴

Benson's comments reveal his ambivalent attitude towards the "new woman," as the educated young woman of the 1890s was labelled. Although his father¹⁵ and his uncle, Henry Sidgwick,¹⁶ were pioneers in promoting higher education for women, and his sisters had been educated at the prestigious Lady Margaret Hall¹⁷ at Oxford, E.F. Benson shared with many of his contemporaries the prejudice that if women were free to act independently, they would lose their capacity for compassion and love. Although he was ambivalent about the motivation of his central character, he was clear about his technique. He consciously decided against providing any authorial reassurances or explanations, allowing the meaning of his characters' utterances to emerge from their context.

She was to reveal herself by what she said, and thus, whatever she did, would need no comment.¹⁸

Moreover, he determined that in his story

There was no sort of plot. There was merely a clash of minor personalities breaking themselves to bits against the central gabbling figure. Hideously crude, blatantly inefficient as the execution was, there was just that one new and feasible idea in the manner of it. What I

¹⁴Benson, *Our Family Affairs*, 254.

¹⁵Arthur James Mason, "Edward White Benson," *Dictionary of National Biography*, (Supplement), 174.

¹⁶"Henry Sidgwick," *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Eleventh Edition, 1910-1911, Volume 25, 39.

¹⁷Elizabeth Wordsworth, *Glimpses of the Past* (London: A.R. Mowbray and Co., Ltd., 1912), 136-184.

¹⁸Benson, *Our Family Affairs*, 255.

aimed at was a type that revealed itself in an individual by oceans of nonsensical speech.¹⁹

This privileging of dialogue, then, is clearly no accident and Benson knew that his narrative technique in prose fiction was novel. In addition to its stylistic innovation, the characters, structures and techniques of the Dodo trilogy are consistent with several patterns found in English comedy: the abandonment of any sequential, or credible plot structure; the prominence of an egotistical character who freely adapts to the fluid, changing and developing nature of life; the presence of interdependent minor characters who coalesce round the central dynamic figure.²⁰ These patterns were not appraised critically until the work of C.L. Barber, Northrop Frye and Susanne Langer.

With hindsight, the stylistic innovation and these comic patterns can be distinguished in E.F. Benson's first comedy, but its initial impact was undoubtedly because of the irreverent portrayal by the Archbishop of Canterbury's son of a young social climber, Dodo Chesterford, who was identified by many as Margot Tennant. Nearly fifty years after its publication, Max Beerbohm vividly recalled the impact it had upon him.

I had read Dodo: A Detail of a Day, of course, when it burst on the world, and thought it very brilliant.²¹

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 255-256.

²⁰L.J. Potts in an early synthesis of comic theory and practice points out that inconclusiveness and incongruity characterize a comic plot and that the comic writer presents "the clash and contrast of varied abnormalities" in human conduct. These observations are in Comedy (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1948), 20-21, 45.

²¹Max Beerbohm, "Last and Best," Spectator, 1 November, 1940, 446.

Even as far as Castletownshend in Southern Ireland, the influence of Dodo: A Detail of a Day was recorded. Edith Somerville was so delighted by E.F. Benson's first novel that she named her most precious possession "Dodo."

The first horse that was absolutely mine, bought with money earned by myself, was a pretty, little well-bred mare, called Dodo, she and Mr. Benson's novel coming into action at the same time.²²

Edith christened the new horse "Dodo" because of her comic antics and undisciplined spirit.²³ The memorable quality of the dialogue in the novel, "that artless prattle packed with good things,"²⁴ was recalled by a writer who interviewed Benson in 1913 before the publication of the sequel to Dodo: A Detail of a Day:

All the world tried to talk "Dodo" in the later nineties of the last century.²⁵

E.F. Benson was the first to acknowledge that the extent and immediacy of the novel's popularity arose from the assumption that it was a *roman à clef*:

All sorts of adventitious circumstances aided it: it was thought extremely piquant that a son of the Archbishop of Canterbury should have written a book so frankly unepiscopal.the title-role and other characters were assigned to various persons who happened then to be figuring in the world.²⁶

Its two central characters, Dorothea Chesterford and Edith Staines, were universally thought to be fictional versions of the brewery heiress, Margot Tennant, and Ethel

²²Gifford Lewis, Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish R.M. (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985), 150.

²³Ibid., 151.

²⁴"Mr. Benson and Dodo: A Detail of a Day," Ladies Field, 15 February, 1913, 16.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Benson, Our Family Affairs, 302.

Smyth, the musician and women's rights activist who incidentally had once been briefly engaged to Oscar Wilde's brother.²⁷ Margot Tennant, the unorthodox Scottish heiress, was a central figure in the group of brilliant, wealthy and influential men and women, later dubbed "The Souls" by Sir Charles Beresford.²⁸ Nevertheless, in an interview with Raymond Blathwayt in 1893, E.F. Benson denied, categorically, that his character Dodo was drawn from one particular person.

Dodo, by-the-bye, is not the portrait of any one person.... Dodo is — to put it briefly — a compound of many characters blended in one type. She is the incarnation of the contrast that exists between this and the previous generations.... And for the type you can't take a model, you must take several models.²⁹

But he was judged guilty by association, however tenuous those associations might be. After all, he and his family had met Margot Tennant during a holiday at Pontresina, in 1891,³⁰ though Benson later remarked that the fortnight had been rather dull,³¹ despite the presence of Margot Tennant who could charm distinguished scholars, like

²⁷Ronald Crichton, The Memoirs of Ethel Smyth (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1987), 52-4. Ethel Smyth gives a light-hearted account of this less than romantic encounter.

²⁸This group included Lord George Curzon, the future Viceroy of India, two future prime-ministers, Arthur Balfour and Herbert Henry Asquith, as well as other figures prominent in diplomatic, social and artistic circles: Alfred Lyttleton, Lord and Lady Desborough, Lord and Lady Elcho, Henry and Nina Cust. Angela Lambert, Unquiet Souls: The Indian Summer of the British Aristocracy, 1880-1918 (London: Macmillan Ltd., 1984). This informative book traces the relationships between Margot, Laura and Lucy Tennant and the pre-eminent political figures of that time, as well as revealing the hypocritical façades required to survive in that world.

²⁹Raymond Blathwayt, "An Interview with E.F. Benson," Bookman 4 (August, 1893), 154.

³⁰David Newsome, On the Edge of Paradise (London: John Murray, 1980), 48.

³¹Benson, Our Family Affairs, 275.

Benjamin Jowett,³² princes of royal blood, and even his brother, Arthur Christopher. In addition, E.F. Benson was related by marriage to Arthur Balfour. His uncle, Henry Sidgwick, had married Balfour's sister, Eleanor, in 1876, and his sister Nellie belonged to the same cricket club as Arthur Lyttelton, who later married Margot Tennant's sister, Laura. Despite E.F. Benson's insistence that Dodo was a fictional creation, the memoirs of that period indicate that he was not believed. Margot Tennant, herself, in her book More Memories wrote, with some acerbity, that

Dodo: A Detail of a Day was a novel that made a sensation at the time of publication as the heroine — a pretentious donkey with the heart and brains of a linnet — was supposed to be myself.... I told everyone I could not have been the heroine, as I was not beautiful, and did not hunt in summer; nevertheless, there was an exact description of my sitting-room and other details, which proved that the author had me in his mind.... The Prince of Wales....addressed me as 'Miss Dodo' when we met at a ball, which gave great pleasure to bystanders.³³

Margot Tennant, however, was not pleased. The novel could possibly have prevented her marriage to H.H. Asquith, the future Prime Minister, if he had thought the stories circulating at the time would affect his political career. Lord Roseberry, the Liberal Prime Minister from 1894-5, and Lord Randolph Churchill, another key political figure, warned him, "If you want to know what Miss Tennant is like read Dodo: A Detail of a Day."³⁴ Although Margot pretended not to have heard of E.F. Benson's novel when

³²Some of Benjamin Jowett's letters to Margot Tennant can be found in Letters of Benjamin Jowett, M.A. Master of Balliol College, Oxford, edited by Evelyn Abbott and Lewis Campbell (London: Murray, 1899). Their relationship is described from Margot Tennant's point of view in Mark Bonham-Carter, ed., The Autobiography of Margot Asquith (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1962).

³³Margot Asquith, More Memories (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1933), 129.

³⁴Mark Bonham-Carter, The Autobiography of Margot Asquith (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1962), 117.

he apologized³⁶ for any embarrassment he may have unwittingly caused her, there was no doubt that the imputations rankled. Years later, Mark Bonham-Carter, Asquith's grandson, commented bitterly on

E.F. Benson's indifferent novel, which is a totally misleading and exceedingly malicious study of Margot's character.³⁸

And as late as 1920, E.F. Benson was still countering any suggestion that he intended any invidious comparison between Margot Tennant and Dodo.³⁷

Throughout the controversy E.F. Benson maintained that his eponymous heroine was a fictional, not an actual character. While the youthful Margot Tennant may have shared many of Dodo's iconoclastic attitudes, unlike Dodo she did not survive unscathed, and undiminished. Margot Tennant's autobiographies reveal how tedious the glamour of social diversion becomes to a woman of intellect and energy who has no professional place, and how charm and vitality are eroded by an unfaithful husband, the deaths of children and the taint of failure and scandal.³⁸ E.F. Benson's Dodo:

³⁶*ibid.*

³⁸*ibid.*, xxii.

³⁷A letter in the Benson family correspondence (Benson deposit 3/65-70) in the Bodleian Library from Sir Henry Lunn to E.F. Benson recounts a misunderstanding that arose between them over the publication of an edition of Dodo: A Detail of a Day that featured Mrs. Asquith (Margot Tennant) on the cover. Lunn says, "I never said 'that you had caused the cover to be issued.' I never thought it. It never occurred to me as a remote possibility.the last thing in the world I should think you capable of would be issuing a cheap edition of a novel with anyone's portrait on it to identify her with the heroine of the novel." Thirty years after its publication E.F. Benson was still defending himself against the misunderstandings arising from his first novel.

³⁸In the Benson family correspondence (Benson deposit 3/65-70), there is a letter dated 8th August, 1939, that compliments him on his book Daughters of Queen Victoria. It is from Margot Asquith. She says she thought his book "brilliantly written" and that she stayed up until 5:00 a.m. to finish it. Requesting a copy for her library, she asked Benson to inscribe it "by the author of Dodo: A Detail of a Day." This is a poignant note, indicating that Margot had not lost her sense of humour despite her misfortunes, and perhaps was finally ready to forgive.

A Detail of a Day, on the other hand, endures because she is in the tradition of comic, not actual, heroines in English literature. She is as witty and self-willed as Rosalind, as astute about men's failings as Millamant and as shrewd about the ways of the world as Becky Sharpe.

Ironically, the other independent and outrageous female character in Dodo: A Detail of a Day, Edith Staines, who was very clearly modelled on a close family friend of the Bensons, needed no apologies from Fred, and in fact, delighted in the notoriety. Unlike Margot Tennant, Ethel Smyth, who was as uncompromising, eccentric and accomplished as her fictional counterpart, Edith Staines, relished the comparisons people made. She describes an unexpected invitation to dine at Lambeth Palace which came as a consequence of the publication of E.F. Benson's book. She particularly enjoyed the Archbishop's attempts to compensate for what he thought was his son's lack of tact.³⁹

His Grace, when I entered the drawing-room, advanced rapidly to meet me, and much to my mingled terror and gratification almost embraced me. Throughout the evening he was "all over me."

"What on earth," I whispered to Mrs. Benson as I was leaving made the Archbishop so amiable to me tonight" She explained that he fancied I might have been "hurt" about Edith Staines.⁴⁰

³⁹Ethel Smyth, Impressions that Remained, Vol. I (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1919), 116, 120.

⁴⁰Ibid., Vol. II, 190.

Ethel Smyth⁴¹ was particularly amused because up to this point, Edward White Benson had avoided her company and had tried to dissuade the women in his family from associating with such an energetic advocate of women's rights. Although he disclaimed that Dodo was modelled on Margot Tennant, E.F. Benson never denied that he modelled the character of Edith Staines on the redoubtable Ethel Smyth, a close friend of his mother, Mary, and sisters, Maggie and Eleanor. In the 1890s Ethel Smyth was a frequent visitor to Lambeth Palace, though she usually came when the Archbishop was away as her militant feminism unsettled him. E.F. Benson, on the other hand, delighted in the company of this dynamic, talented musician and she remained his friend throughout her long and productive life.⁴²

Throughout Benson's trilogy, *Dodo* and Edith sustain their friendship in much the same way as E.F. Benson and Ethel Smyth remained friends throughout their lives.⁴³ Dodo's defiant vitality provides the raw material for Edith's compositions, and her common-sense tempers Dodo's tendency to become a parody, instead of a

⁴¹Ethel Smyth documented her extraordinary life and career in a series of frank memoirs, as well as leaving behind a rich legacy of musical accomplishment. A list of her music has been compiled by Jory Bennett and is published in *The Memoirs of Ethel Smyth*, abridged and introduced by Ronald Crichton (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1987), 373-381. Her autobiographies are: *Impressions that Remained* (London: Longmans, Green, 1919); *Streaks of Life* (London: Longmans, Green, 1921); *A Final Burning of Boats, Etc.* (London: Longmans, Green, 1928); *Female Plovers in Eden* (London: Peter Davies, 1933); *Beecham and Pharaoh* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1935); *As Time Went On* (London: Longmans, Green, 1936); *Inordinate (?) Affection* (London: Cresset Press, 1936); *What Happened Next* (London: Longmans, Green, 1940).

There are several witty, playful letters from Ethel Smyth to E.F. Benson in the Benson Deposit 3/65-70 that reveal the strength of their life-long, humorous perspective on life's absurdities.

⁴²Louise Collis, *Impetuous Heart* (London: William Kimber, 1984).

⁴³Ethel Smyth's irrepressible vitality comes through her breezy letters to E.F. Benson in the Benson Deposit 3/65-70. Her letters are scattered with puns and jokes and some of the nonsensical chatter that marks a close friendship.

fulfilment, of herself. Both Dodo and Edith are quintessential comic heroines as defined by Susanne Langer. They are amoral and vital, able to transcend shifting social conventions by refusing to fall into the traps of dullness or despair. Dodo, confident she is ageless, says,

"I shall stop young 'til I go out like a candle or am carried off by a whirlwind or something."⁴⁴

Having a healthy antipathy to stultifying Victorian conventions, she advocates loyalty to instinct and will, not subservience to Church and State. Edith, like Touchstone, validates Dodo's instinctual response in challenging the limitations imposed by nature and social order.

To all appearance her only method is to have no method. She seems to say and do anything that comes into her head, but all she says and does is rather striking. She can accommodate herself to nearly any circumstance.⁴⁵

Both Ethel and Dodo confidently outwit the kill-joys, the one through music and the other through wit. Relying on their imagination, instinct and intellect they both dominate the world which otherwise would be sterile and constricting.⁴⁶

While E.F. Benson was vigilant in countering the popular misconceptions about the novel's characters, he accepted with some delight its critical reception. He was

⁴⁴Benson, *Dodo: A Detail of a Day*, 159.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁶This is a simplified version of the philosophical position taken by Henry Sidgwick, E.F. Benson's uncle. In his writings on ethics Henry Sidgwick examined the issues associated with free will and intuitive action. According to his philosophy an individual may take action that produces the greatest amount of pleasure for himself as long as due regard is given to the pleasure of others. This philosophy has been called ethical hedonism to distinguish it from the psychological hedonism advocated by John Stuart Mill.

proud of Edmund Gosse's opinion that his book had a "high moral beauty."⁴⁷ Dodo: A Detail of a Day was praised in the Spectator for offering "a delightfully witty sketch of society."⁴⁸ Benson was called "a writer of exceptional ability" in the Athenaeum.⁴⁹ The reviewer for that magazine thought the portrayal of Dodo so vivid that she must have had a living prototype, though he did also allow the comic elements in "this sort of society Carmen" whose "brilliant chatter abounds in excellent fooling."⁵⁰ The same reviewer also noted the darker elements in the novel, outside the boundaries of comedy, commenting "and yet when all is said and done the witty sketch is tragical in its essence."⁵¹ The astonishing success of this young author merited an extensive interview with him, published in the Bookman. His conversation with Raymond Blathwayt provided significant insights into E.F. Benson's views about society, art and literature. At the outset of the interview Blathwayt was struck by the contrast between the reserved, scholarly demeanour of the Archbishop's son and the liveliness of his novel, described as "the most modern and up-do-date book that had yet appeared."⁵² Undeterred by his sudden celebrity, Benson was frank about the difficulties he had in constructing the novel and creating the minor characters and insisted that Dodo was a compound of many characters. He stated his preference for

⁴⁷Benson, Our Family Affairs, 309.

⁴⁸Spectator, 70 (17 June 1893), 810-11.

⁴⁹Athenaeum, 22 July 1893, 126.

⁵⁰ibid.

⁵¹ibid.

⁵²Bookman, 4 (August, 1893), 154.

using an impressionist technique because he thought it provided the artist with a way of recording the instinctive responses to existence which he claimed were ultimately more accurate and just than the analytic. In a playful set of inversions he talked about his motive in writing, claiming to be unable to decide

whether it was the amusement and interest I have always found in watching people....that led me to write, or my constant desire to write that led me to find interest and amusement in other people.⁵³

When Dodo: A Detail of a Day was published in North America, it received a favourable response. W. Morton Payne, writing in the American magazine, The Dial, was not distracted by any suggestion that Dodo was the copy of a living prototype. He firmly established Benson's central character in the tradition of literary comic heroines.

She clearly belongs to the world of conventional art of which Lamb discoursed in his essay on the dramatists of the Restoration.⁵⁴

In the Canadian magazine, Saturday Night, the reviewer mentioned the furore that the book had caused, adding that opinion in Canada was divided between "whether it was a marvel of genius or a conglomeration of rot."⁵⁵ Apparently, the novel had prompted a widely quoted mocking verse, though the popularity of this rhyme in Canada might tell us more about literary taste in Canada, than about the merit of E.F. Benson's novel.

Author of Dodo, quite the mode, O
How does your novel grow?
With profanity shocking, and

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴The Dial, 15 (1 December 1893), 340.

⁵⁵"Three New Novelists," Saturday Night, 5 May, 1894, 7.

great show of stocking.
And "smart" folks all in a row.

He may have had mixed feelings about the nickname "Dodo" that stuck to him all his life, but E.F. Benson never lost his affection for his first novel. Dodo: A Detail of a Day begins the chronicle of Dorothea Vaine, the beautiful, high-spirited daughter of a successful North of England tradesman. Aware that she lacks rank and social status, she deliberately trades her beauty and wit for a marriage to the quintessentially well-bred, but boring, scion of British aristocracy, the Marquis of Chesterford. After she has done her duty and produced "a piece of landed interest,"⁵⁶ she becomes steadily more aware of the limitations of her life. Unlike others in her situation⁵⁷ she is reluctant to produce a "spare" to accompany the heir and, initially, settles for a loveless marriage. Having resisted the temptation of running away with an admirer, Jack Broxton, she is rewarded by the improbable but convenient death of both her husband and her child, and is free to marry the faithful Jack who, conveniently, becomes the next Lord Chesterford. However, wilful, unpredictable and opportunistic as ever, Dodo chooses, instead, to run away with a man of even higher social rank, and much more sexual attractiveness, His Royal Highness, Prince Waldenech.

This brisk synopsis of the events in Dodo: A Detail of a Day indicates its consistency with other comic plots, which are frequently slight, improbable and contrived and in which comic characters are impervious to the predations of illness,

⁵⁶Benson, Dodo: A Detail of the Day, 58.

⁵⁷This cynical remark about a young woman's function as a member of the British aristocracy is attributed to Consuelo Vanderbilt who, under duress, married the Duke of Marlborough and produced the requisite number of sons before running away to live with her lover in Italy.

age and death. Comedies that emphasize life's regenerative qualities often contain central characters who are vital, opportunistic and amoral. Unlike tragic heroes, comic protagonists rarely seek to impose their authority on the world; instead they are content to hold their own "in a world amid the surprises of unplanned coincidence."⁵⁸ The embodiment of the instincts of self-preservation and survival, of *élan vital*, comic protagonists freely interact with other comic figures, the kill-joys and simpletons who are not as confident nor as indestructible as they. And because the struggle is to gain social prestige and avoid social embarrassment, not to maim or kill, the conflicts are ludicrous, not destructive. Susanne Langer neatly summarized the characters and conflicts in comedy:

The feeling of comedy is a feeling of heightened vitality, challenged wit and will, engaged in the great game of chance. The real antagonist is the World. Since the personal antagonist in the play is really the great challenger, he is rarely a complete victim, he is interesting, entertaining, his defeat is a hilarious success, but not his destruction."⁵⁹

Such is the case with Dodo, the parvenu. She approaches life vigorously, accepting that her world is governed by irrational forces beyond the control of her intellect and will, yet determined to make the best of what she has. The only guides and constraints are her own feelings and instincts, not remote and abstract principles and precepts. She expresses her views about the world in which she has no authority or place:

⁵⁸Susanne K. Langer, *The Comic Rhythm in Comedy: Meaning and Form*, edited by Robert Corrigan (New York: Chandler Publishing House, 1966), 133.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 139.

The whole system of things seems to me a universal puzzle, that I have given up trying to find a solution. I know what I like and I dislike. Can you blame me? I must make the best of what I have.⁸⁰

Making the best of what she has means using her beauty and wit to chase worldly position, not emotional or intellectual affinity. After the disappointments of the honeymoon, the natural death of her child and the accidental death of her husband, Dodo once again is free. Nevertheless, that freedom is circumscribed by society; she soon discovers that a husband-less woman, no matter how wealthy she is, has no place in society. So once again she opts for marriage, but with characteristic perversity, instead of choosing the faithful Jack, Dodo opts for the physical excitement, and even higher social position, of union with Prince Waldenech. The events in Dodo: A Detail of a Day seem to illustrate the disquieting view that life is unpredictable, absurd and uncertain, that emotional ties and religious precepts offer no absolute security.

The more serious views implicit in the action are corroborated by Dodo's comments on love, marriage, church and state which are offered flippantly, but which show she is not deluded by sentimentality or outer forms. Nearly a hundred years after they were first written they have a familiar and contemporary ring to them. In 1893, they were as provocative and as socially disruptive as anything the older jester Oscar Wilde was saying, having the same epigrammatic flair and paradoxical sense. Dodo, refusing to act the passive, self-effacing female, unnerves her suitor, Jack, by discounting romantic love.

⁸⁰Benson, Dodo: A Detail of the Day, 35.

The more I think of it the more I feel that love is an illusion. Think of all the people who marry for love, and get eternally tired of each other afterwards.⁶¹

An upper-class marriage she considers a material contract, not a match made in heaven:

You elevate marriage into a sacrament. Now I don't. It is a contract for mutual advantage. The husband gives wealth, position and all that, and the wife gives him a housekeeper, and heirs to his property.⁶²

And what society determines as a woman's supreme accomplishment, she regards as a bore.

There were a quantity of women who were content to pore on their baby's face for hour after hour, with no further occupation than saying "didums" occasionally. Dodo had given what she considered a fair trial to this treatment, and she found it bored her to say "didums" for an indefinite period, and she did not believe it amused the baby.⁶³

Pride in national character is as ridiculous and limiting as maternal instinct:

English people are just as irrational in their way....only they don't do such things in cold blood. They appeal to little morbid emotions, excited by Sunday evening and slow tunes in four sharps.⁶⁴

Also, she makes fun of the stultifying effect of living in rural ecclesiastical communities.

Bertie would do admirably in a cathedral town. He'd be dreadfully happy among dull people. They would all think him so brilliant and charming,

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 73.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 72-73.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 60.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 143.

and the bishop would ask him over to dine at the palace whenever anyone came down from London.⁶⁵

Because Dodo has no real power in society and because at the moment she is young and pretty, she is free to make outrageous remarks. The men who have real influence in political and religious life treat them as predictably nonsensical, sufficient to amuse and pass the time. Beneath the comic guise, though, Benson is revealing the frustrations and uncertainties the young men and young women of his generation felt growing up in this transitional period in English history, in which a whole body of ideas, political, economic, moral, literary and aesthetic, were questioned.⁶⁶

The sense that traditional values no longer have any worth emerges in Benson's characterization of Dodo's first husband, the Marquis of Chesterford, the very model of a modern English gentleman. Superficially he seems more admirable than his wife, but his rigid adherence to Church, State and Empire is as self-serving and egocentric as Dodo's instinctual response to life.

He was very loyal, and very much devoted to what he considered his duty, which consisted in being an excellent landlord and J.P. of his county, in voting steadily for the Conservative party in the House of Lords, in giving largely and anonymously to good objects, in going to Church on Sunday morning, where he sang hymns with fervour, and read lessons with respect, in managing a hunt in a liberal and satisfactory

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 69.

⁶⁶O.M. Brack in his book, *Twilight of Dawn: Studies in English Literature in Transition* (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1987), collects together essays that try to define this period of flux in literature. A vividly written analysis of the political and industrial conflict in pre-war England is in George Dangerfield's book *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935). A succinct account of the political and economic changes can be found in Donald Read's book *Edwardian England, 1901-1915* (London: Harrap, 1973).

manner, and in avoiding any introspection or speculation about problems of life and being.⁸⁷

In this subtly ironic passage, the voice of the implied author overrides the complacent tones of the approving community implicitly criticising the orthodox products of the upper-class English educational system that trains men to be comic automatons not complex human beings. He is the first of a long line of unreflective egoists who are comic butts in many of E.F. Benson's novels.⁸⁸ Unimaginatively and uncritically, the Marquis performs his tasks, almost by rote. He is always socially correct, but because he has lost the capacity to be spontaneous and original he is doomed to extinction. The amused and despairing voice of the implied author is clearer in the subsequent passage as it mimics the banal clichés denoting social approval of a man who is pathetic.

He walked through the world with an upright gait, without turning his eyes or steps to the right hand or the left, without ever concerning himself with what was not his business, but directing all his undoubtedly sterling qualities to that. He had a perfect genius for doing his duty. Nobody had ever called him shallow or foolish, but nobody on the other hand had ever called him either deep or clever.⁸⁹

Socially Chesterford may have a genius for doing his duty, but emotionally he is inept. Never regarding his wife as anything more than an empty-headed adornment, he is genuinely surprised she is dissatisfied with her role as purveyor of brittle chatter and

⁸⁷Benson, *Dodo: A Detail of a Day*, 14.

⁸⁸Henri Bergson in his essay *Le Rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (1900) defines laughter as the social means of correcting the dehumanizing effects of mechanical responses to life. In his philosophy, he prized the "*élan vital*," vital, open, individual consciousness over the fixed, repetitive and formal responses to life. A translation of his essay is published in *Comedy*, edited by Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1956), 61-90.

⁸⁹Benson, *Dodo: A Detail of the Day*, 14.

drawing-room entertainments. He has willingly provided the "the two golden keys which unlocked the most secret doors of the well-furnished apartment known as society,"⁷⁰ and is surprised when Dodo finds that apartment more and more like a cage.

Edith Staines, the character who refuses to play the part society ordains for women, is the only one who sees beneath the social masks of the other characters, discerning their true natures. As the outsider, she is part Touchstone, part Feste, using her wit and music to make sense of life. Society, though, does not take her seriously because she is direct in her speech and independent in her thinking and, unlike Dodo, does not look for the illusory security of a wealthy husband. Instead, she devotes her life to music, an endeavour society predictably judges ephemeral. Edith Staines is the first of many artists in Benson's novels who are moral and thematic touchstones. Absorbed by her need to compose music and conduct her original works, Edith, like Dodo, is indifferent to social and sexual codes, true only to her own emotions and observations.

"Oh, I'm not going to marry anybody," said Edith. "You know I get frightfully attached to someone about three times a week, and after that never think of any of them again. It isn't that I get tired of them, but somebody else turns up, and I want to know him too. There are usually several good points about everyone, and they show those to new acquaintances first; after that, you find something in them you don't like, so the best thing is to try somebody else."⁷¹

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 12.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 43.

Dodo admires Edith's dedication to her music, her lack of inhibition, and her lack of interest in governing the minds and feelings of others. A true exponent of artistic endeavour in the 1890s, Edith happily separates art from orthodox morality. In her response to Dodo's observation that she does not use her art to proselytise, she states the artist's credo.

"It's their business to produce – to give the world an opportunity of forming conclusions, not to preach their own conclusions to the world."⁷²

Wearing her Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, munching on pork chops, smoking, shooting and striding confidently across the grouse moors and through life, Edith celebrates life, and is a central figure in all three novels, unlike the other female characters in the novel, the self-denying Mrs. Vivian and the self-effacing Maud.

While society obviously approves of Mrs. Vivian and Maud, who are models of piety and rectitude, it is clear that E.F. Benson does not. They are the comic butts of Dodo's high-spirited remarks and instructive foils to her wilful vitality. Mrs. Vivian has found that her Prince Charming turned into a drunken, abusive ogre, but, naturally, blames herself for his deficiencies. Society approves of Mrs. Vivian's assumption of guilt, calling it forbearance and long-suffering. She now lives alone and consoles herself by working for the poor, but Dodo is not impressed by her self-sacrificial role. Although Mrs. Vivian represents the voice of social conscience in this novel, the motives behind that conscience are questionable. Plain, middle-aged and husbandless,

⁷²*Ibid.*, 41.

Mrs. Vivian can only achieve status by working with people who are worse off than she is. Dodo's assessment, though acerbic, is not unjust.

Mrs. Vivian seemed to revel in ugly things. She was always talking to drunken cabmen, or workhouse people, or dirty little boys who played in the gutter.⁷³

Dodo has no intention of becoming a self-effacing Mariana in the moated grange of good works. Dodo's sister, Maud, also appears to be admirably docile and worthy, but her behaviour also masks the reality of her self-serving pettiness. She is a parody of the Victorian Miss, proud of her mediocre piano-playing and her ugly worsted work. Her marriage to the sanctimonious Mr. Algernon Spencer seems to have been made in a Heaven for the narrow-minded and unimaginative. The spiritual needs of his parish are to be met by Maud's ugly shawls and comforters.

Mr. Spencer's parish was already speckled with testimonies to his wife's handiwork, and Maud's dream of being some day useful to somebody was finding a glorious fulfilment.⁷⁴

Several voices are played off each other to remind us of the different responses to Maud's marriage and handicrafts. The word "speckled" points out the random and ineffectual nature of Maud's patronage and the word "testimonies" reminds us of her husband's exaggerated respect for these futile tasks. Maud's sentimental notion of marriage implicit in the hymnal phrase "glorious fulfillment" is mocked by the fiat idiom of the implied author in the phrase "dreams of being someday useful to somebody."

⁷³*ibid.*, 45.

⁷⁴*ibid.*, 106.

In his very first novel E.F. Benson skilfully creates comic characters, the egoistical play-girls, the dull kill-joys⁷⁵ and witty touchstones that are familiar comic types, as well as manipulating a medley of discourses in his prose narrative. The dialogues of his characters present thoughtful criticisms in the guise of paradox and the idioms of social approbation are humorously set against the different values of the implied author.

The social criticism implicit in the ironic depiction of his characters' actions and dialogue is framed and reinforced by the imagery. This is particularly the case in the descriptions of Dodo's private sitting-room in Mayfair. After her marriage, Dodo feels imprisoned by the material world she has so eagerly sought to dominate and by the identity she has as Chesterford's wife. The detailed description of her room indicates her sense of frustration and her conflicts:

It was a room well calculated to make complete idleness most easy. The tables were covered with a mass of albums, vases of flowers, and a quantity of entirely useless knick-knacks. The walls were hung with several rather clever sketches, French prints and caricatures of Dodo's friends. A small bookcase displayed a quantity of flaring novels and a large tune hymn-book, and in a conspicuous corner was Dodo's praying-table on which the skull regarded its surroundings with a mirthless and, possibly, contemptuous grin....

In the corner of the room were a heap of old cotillion toys, several hunting-whips, and a small black image of the Virgin, which Dodo had picked up abroad. Above her head a fox's mask grinned defiantly at another fox's brush opposite.... A banjo case and a pair of castanets,

⁷⁵Harry Levin, *Playboys and Kill-joys: An Essay in the Theory and Practice of Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Levin isolates two fundamental aspects of comedy, the play-boy, the character with whom we laugh, and the kill-joy, the ridiculous or forbidding character whom we laugh at.

with a dainty silver monogram on them, perhaps inspired Dodo when she sat down to her writing table.⁷⁶

This jumbled, bizarre juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane neatly corresponds to the dichotomy between the material and spiritual in Dodo's life: the "small black image of the Virgin" is beneath the grinning mask of the fox; on the praying table is the "mirthless" and "contemptuous" reminder of "mortality;" on the writing table, a pair of silver monogrammed castanets, reminding Dodo that her role is to be like Nora in Ibsen's Doll's House, to dance, not to think, or write, or take decisions in any sphere other than the domestic.

After the death of her child, she compares her world to Dante's Inferno — and though the tone is light, the sense of purposeless entrapment is tangible.

"I daresay I should get accustomed to being roasted," she had said once to Miss Grantham. "It really would be rather interesting seeing your fingers curling up like fried bacon, but imagine being put in a nicely-furnished room with nobody to talk to, and a view over Hyde Park one side and Melton Mowbray the other, and never being able to get out! The longer that lasted, the worse it would become." And so she had felt the sort of rapture with which "the prisoner leaps to loose his chains" when she had gone out that morning, and again knew the infinite delight of feeling a fine horse answer to her hand, under a sort of playful protest. Then this had come upon her, and Dodo felt that language failed her to express her profound contempt and dislike for the destiny that shapes our ends.⁷⁷

Dodo fights back against the tragic accidents of nature and the random acts of Providence by relying on her instinct, wit and energy. Her grief about the loss of her child is intense, but private. Publicly she continues her life as before, riding in the Park

⁷⁶Benson, Dodo: A Detail of the Day, 57.

⁷⁷Ibid., 76.

and attending balls. Naturally, the world judges her callous because her responses are not in accordance with society's expectations that a woman should collapse under the burden of grief. Conscious that she is a prisoner of the social codes that prohibit an energetic, intelligent woman from having any real power in life, that allow her to do "silly little woman things" instead of "great important man things,"⁷⁸ she thinks her only outlet is to defy society, not change it. E.F. Benson is clearly sympathetic to the frustration of the "new woman," understanding the motives that propel her to dominate an existence over which she is materially and politically powerless, by avoiding any emotional surrender to the love of a man, or the whims of destiny.

The imagery used to depict exterior scenic descriptions also adds significantly to the comic structures in the novel. In the descriptions of the world the characters inhabit, the Mayfair drawing rooms, the London parks, the Alpine meadows, the narrator creates a holiday world away from mundane demands where the characters pursue the gratification of their private feelings and thoughts. These festive places are very much in the tradition of the "green worlds" of Arden and Acadia.⁷⁹ The consciously pastoral tone of the opening of Dodo: A Detail of a Day alerts the reader to expect the setting of the novel to be non-realistic. The narrator establishes the connection between London in the 1890s and the mythic Golden Age of the imagination in the opening lines:

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 78.

⁷⁹The notion of the "green world" as a place of revitalization and refreshment of individual ideas and feelings is found in Northrop Frye's essay, "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy" in Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), 163-239.

Poets of all ages and of all denominations are unanimous in assuring us that there was once a period on this grey earth known as the Golden Age.... At the time at which this story opens, London was having its annual golden days; days to be associated with cool, early rides in the crumbly Row, with sitting on small, green chairs beneath the trees at the corner of the Park; with a general disinclination to exert oneself, or to stop smoking cigarettes; with a temper distinctly above its normal level, and a corresponding absence of moods. The crudeness of spring had disappeared, but not its freshness; the warmth of the summer had come, but not its sultriness; the winter was definitely over and past, and even in Hyde Park the voice of the singing bird was heard, and an old gentleman, who shall be nameless, had committed his annual perjury by asserting in the Morning Post that he had heard a nightingale in the elm-trees by the Ladies' Mile, which was manifestly impossible.⁹⁰

The allusive, whimsical, balanced tone of the narrator establishes the festive "once upon-a-time" setting for a story about a contemporary Cinderella. In Shakespearean pastoral comedies there is often very little action, and the same is true in this novel. Instead, much of the novel is constructed around inter-leaved conversations on fate, fortune, reason, passion. What distinguishes Benson's comedy from Shakespeare's is that there is a distinctly *fin de siècle* tenor to these conversations between Dodo and her friends. Though there is little correspondence between her acerbic remarks and the courtly debates or pastoral love-eclogues found in, for example, Shakespeare's As You Like It, there are other correspondences between Shakespeare's romantic comedies and the novels that feature Dodo and Edith. While Dodo's views on life and love have more affinity with Jacques's perspective than with Rosalind's, she does share Rosalind's scepticism about the permanence of human affection. Also, there is a similarity between the festive world of London parks, the Thames river valley and

⁹⁰Benson, Dodo: A Detail of the Day, 3.

the Swiss Alps and the Forest of Arden. In both locales, play-acting, disguise and pretence are all potent ways of warding off fear, suffering and malice. In Dodo's world, unlike Rosalind's, no resolution is found in Christian idealism. Dodo is not impervious to the need for spiritual satisfaction, only dubious about finding it in the traditional forms of religion. Like Sir Walter Raleigh's nymph⁸¹ who responds sceptically to Christopher Marlowe's swain, she distrusts the transient promises of romantic love. The setting for the Marquis of Chesterford's marriage proposal is an Arcadian idyll.

There is a particular beauty about the Thames valley for which you may search for years elsewhere, and not find; a splendid lavishness in the way that the woods are cast down broadcast along the river, and a princely extravagance of thick lush hayfields, that seem determined not to leave a spare inch of land between them and the water. The whole scene has been constructed with a noble disregard of expense, in the way of water, land, and warm woodland air.⁸²

But Dodo knows that the real world is expensive and that only Chesterford's wealth can make these pleasures permanent, so she agrees to marry him, although she does not love him. Later in the novel, after Chesterford's convenient death, the ever-faithful Jack courts Dodo in a similarly pastoral location.

The cows were being driven homewards, and the faint sounds of bells were carried down to them from the green heights above. Now and then they passed a herd of goats, still nibbling anxiously at the wayside grass, followed by some small ragged shepherd, who brushed his long hair away from his eyes to get a better look at this dazzling, fair-skinned woman,

⁸¹Gerald Bullet, ed., *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1970), 285-6.

⁸²Benson, *Dodo: A Detail of the Day*, 20.

who evidently belonged to quite another order of beings from his wrinkled, early-old mother.⁸³

But this romantic proposal in the holiday "green world" does not result in the happy nuptials of Jack and Dodo.

The strength of E.F. Benson's first novel lies in his portrayal of the comic heroine, Dodo, and her friendship with the artist, Edith Staines, and in their domination of a world where age, suffering and death are defeated by their wit, sensitivity and imagination. The epigrammatic dialogue, ironic medley of narrative discourses, images and pastoral allusions reveal the more serious natures of these apparent playgirls as they freely discuss the relationship and circumstances of their existence. Not unexpectedly, there are, in this first novel, some weaknesses in characterization and structure: the devoted Jack is a more convenient than convincing character; some minor characters, Featherstone and Sir Robert Grantham, are not integrated into the action or fully developed; the structure of the novel is loose, the movement of the characters to Switzerland does not seem necessary and, while the use of coincidence is a familiar device in comic fiction, sentimentality is not. The influence of Dickens, a writer Benson admired, is only too evident in Lord Chesterford's death-bed⁸⁴ scene. Benson has yet to learn the wisdom of Oscar's witty inversion,

"One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing."⁸⁵

⁸³*Ibid.*, 134-5.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 118-122.

⁸⁵Hesketh Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: Methuen, 1946), 234.

It is interesting that an early reviewer, William Morton Payne, put this "preternaturally clever"⁸⁶ book firmly in the comic tradition, identifying the originality of Benson's comic heroine, as well as her affinity with her comic predecessors.

She clearly belongs to the world of conventional art of which Lamb discoursed in his essay on the dramatists of the Restoration; a world that lies apart from the one in which we actually live, a world whose people may do as they please.⁸⁷

Other reviewers noted her "egotism in excelsis, her egotism triumphant"⁸⁸ and her infinite variety. In the Dodo novels, Benson celebrated the wilful energy of the independent spirit. In the "Lucia" sequence he is less sanguine about unfettered egoism.

The sequel to Dodo: A Detail of a Day, Dodo the Second, or Dodo's Daughter, as it was entitled in New York, is a testimony to how influential that first novel had been. Although E.F. Benson wrote the sequel twenty years later, when he was forty-seven, it was received by the critics and the public with pleasure. The return of the comic spirit of playful festivity was noted, and valued, by H. Hawthorne in his review of Dodo the Second.

It all glitters, but not with the glare of paste. The rays are many-coloured, rich, glowing. The life portrayed is one of careless ease and the habit of play, but it is not wasted.⁸⁹

⁸⁶William Morton Payne, Review of Dodo: A Detail of the Day, Dial XV (1 December 1893): 340.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Spectator 70 (17 June 1893): 810-11.

⁸⁹H. Hawthorne, "Mr. Benson's Dodo as Charming as Ever," New York Times Book Review 22, March 1914, 130-131.

The reviewer in The Ladies' Field remarked on how adept E.F. Benson had been at making his characters contemporary.

Twenty years have passed since "Dodo" delighted London, and the English world has been made anew since then. The manners and customs of the nineties are no more those of today than are the decoration and clothes.

....His youthful Dodo of the nineties is almost a member of a type today.⁹⁰

This reviewer looked forward to Dodo the Second which was serialized in the Spring Double Number of The Ladies' Field, beginning in March 8, 1913, before it was published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1914, and it more than met that reviewer's expectations.

Between Dodo's spectacular debut in 1893 and her reappearance in 1913, E.F. Benson had enjoyed a popular and profitable career. Not only had he made a great deal of money⁹¹ from his first novel but its success had persuaded him to pursue a literary career. Dodo: A Detail of a Day was followed by a collection of short stories, Six Common Things (1893), and Rubicon, which was not treated kindly by the reviewers.⁹² A cursory glance at his bibliography will show how productive E.F. Benson was. He worked in several different genres: there were reminiscences of school and undergraduate life, The Babe B.A.; serious novels about suffering, artistic conflict and divorce, The Angel of Pain (1906), Sheaves (1908) and Mrs. Ames

⁹⁰"Mr. E.F. Benson and Dodo: A Detail of a Day," The Ladies' Field, 15 February, 1913, 16.

⁹¹Daphne Bennett, Margot, A Life of the Countess of Oxford and Asquith (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1984), 315.

⁹²Benson, Our Family Affairs, 303-311.

(1912); ghost stories and Gothic horror novels and detective mysteries, The Luck of the Vails (1901), The Image in the Sand (1905) and The Blotting Book; historical novels Princess Sophia (1900) and The Vintage (1898); several novels that were more satiric than comic, The Money Market (1898), Mammon and Co. (1899), Scarlet and Hyssop (1902), The Relentless City (1903), The Climber (1908) and Juggernaut (1911), Daisy's Aunt (1912) and Freaks of Mayfair (1916). Many of Benson's works during this period examine the themes that preoccupied his contemporaries:⁹³ the changing relationships between the sexes; the artist's struggle to survive aesthetically and economically; the appeal of alternate philosophies such as mysticism, Hellenism, Pantheism; the price paid for hedonism and selfishness. Benson's popularity and the widespread appeal of his wit is evidenced by the publication, in 1912, of Bensoniana, a handbook of over 200 epigrams and apothegms drawn from sixteen of his novels.

E.F. Benson's return to the familiar world of Dodo Chesterford, in Dodo the Second, was not a sign that his energies were flagging, nor that he was seeking to capitalize on his earlier success. In fact, his range and versatility was as powerful as ever. In 1913, when the New York edition of Dodo the Second was published, Benson also published two other novels, The Weaker Vessel, a novel that seriously examines the plight of a woman married to an alcoholic, and Thorley Weir, as well as an introduction to an edition of Nicholas Nickleby and an extensively illustrated book, Winter Sports in Switzerland. In 1914, when the English edition of Dodo the Second

⁹³Two recent books provide useful surveys of the issues explored by novelists during this period. They are by Jefferson Hunter, Edwardian Fiction (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982) and John Batchelor, The Edwardian Novelists (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

came out, he published Arundel, an intriguing novel about the difficulties facing an English girl who has been brought up in India when she returns to the confining life of the southern counties of England.

His decision to write a comic sequel to Dodo: A Detail of a Day should be set, then, in the context of the other works he wrote between 1904 and 1913 and of the times in which he lived. Far from being a frivolous, escapist work, Dodo, The Second re-affirms the worth of private pleasures and relationships in a society that is fluid and changeable and unsettling.⁹⁴ To survive, individuals need the comic values of pleasure, flexibility and a keen sense of the absurd. "The World goes spinning on," Nadine, Dodo's daughter said, "If we do not wish to become obsolete, we spin too."⁹⁵ Published in 1914, Dodo, The Second is one of several social comedies popular at the time, as well as today. V.S. Pritchett has remarked that the Edwardian Age, which he dates from the 1880s to 1914, was "prolific in light, satirical society novelists of remarkable urbanity and invention."⁹⁶ The comic mode even crossed the boundaries of class and fashion. Wilde, Beerbohm, Saki (H.H. Munro) and Benson chronicled the follies and hypocrisies of Mayfair Marchionesses, while George and Weedon Grossmith, W.W. Jacobs and Jerome K. Jerome and H.G. Wells recounted the petty intrigues and pretensions of minor officials and office clerks.

⁹⁴One of the standard works that charts the intellectual and social history of this period is Samuel Hynes' book The Edwardian Turn of Mind (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968). A thoughtful supplement to this is Jonathan Rose's book The Edwardian Temperament, 1895-1919 (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1986).

⁹⁵E.F. Benson, Dodo, The Second in Dodo: An Omnibus (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986), 184.

⁹⁶V.S. Pritchett, The Tale Bearers: Literary Essays (New York: Random House, 1980), 18.

E.F. Benson's decision to set the sequel to Dodo: A Detail of a Day in 1910, and complete the comic triptych with Dodo Wonders, which spans the years 1914-1918, was not an arbitrary one. These dates mark a significant "terminus ad quem" that Benson explored in another genre, autobiography. In his memoirs, As We Were and As We Are, he was far less vehemently critical of the Victorians than Lytton Strachey,⁹⁷ or of the affluent Edwardians than Vita Sackville-West.⁹⁸ E.F. Benson's view that the Edwardian era was a halcyon time came from his youth, class and connections, but the belief that a decent, civilized life was possible, if people were allowed to cultivate their hearts and minds, was prevalent among the Cambridge-educated men of his day.⁹⁹ E.F. Benson's pleasure in being young and creative during this time of flux is evident in the following:

All the movements of the nineties, the romance of its huge, scientific progress, its literary splendours, its pageantries now glittering more brightly than ever, swept on again with added momentum.... No longer was the monarch a cramped sequestered presence, with a great prestige which nobody quite grasped, but a power apparent everywhere. The national prosperity was reflected in a social brilliance, the fairy-tales of science were fast crystallizing into sober facts of commerce and convenience, and throughout his reign no cloud of menace appeared above the glittering horizons of an empire which reached to the ends of the earth.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷Lytton Strachey, Eminent Victorians (London: Chatto and Windus, 1918).

⁹⁸Vita Sackville-West, The Edwardians (London: The Hogarth Press, 1930).

⁹⁹George Edward Moore's influential Principia Ethica, published in 1903 emphasized the value of personal relationships. In Mother (196-8), Benson recounts amusing remarks by G.E. Moore about Wagner's music. Benson, and possibly G.E. Moore, were guests of Lord Charles Beresford and his wife at the Bayreuth festival.

¹⁰⁰E.F. Benson, As We Were: A Victorian Peep Show (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930), 336-7.

He shared none of G.E. Masterman's¹⁰¹ anxiety and pessimism about the twentieth century, nor had any sense, at the time, that this world would soon be lost forever.

1910 was a significant year, not only because it marked the beginning of a new reign, but also because in art, music and literature artists were exploring new ways of presenting human experience. The first Post-Impressionist Show opened in London in 1910 and Stravinsky's "Fire-bird" was performed that year. Looking back on this period, in 1924 Virginia Woolf wrote that "on or about December 1910 human character changed."¹⁰² Less extravagantly, in 1930, E.F. Benson, citing, among others, the work of Henry James, Conrad, Wells, Meredith and Moore said,

I cannot think of any epoch in the last hundred years and more of English literature in which there was appearing so much diverse and first-rate work.¹⁰³

This was also a time of important social and economic changes. 1910 was the year that saw increased militancy in the suffragette movement and among the London dockers. Lloyd George was preparing the legislation that would introduce substantial changes in attitudes to social welfare — The National Health Insurance and Old-Age Pensions Acts. In their respective novels, Ann Veronica (1909), The Man of Property (1906), Anna of the Five Towns (1906) and Clayhanger (1910), H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett explored these social, industrial and scientific changes in the lives of ordinary people. From the perspective of the 1920s the Edwardian Age

¹⁰¹Donald Read, Edwardian England, 1901-1915 (London: The Historical Association, 1972), 52.

¹⁰²Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" in Collected Essays (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), 321.

¹⁰³Benson, As We Were, 318.

seemed like one long summer afternoon, but to contemporary artists and intellectuals the time was one of flux.

All human relations have shifted — those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in allegiance, conduct, politics and literature.¹⁰⁴

In the Dodo trilogy, E.F. Benson expresses the view that although the external forms change with each age, the essential struggles between men and women, self and society do not. In this he is in agreement with George Meredith's view that folly, fads and fantasies were endemic in people who had more money than wit.

Folly perpetually sliding into new shapes in a society possessed of wealth and leisure, with many whims, many strange ailments and strange doctors.¹⁰⁵

In the sequel to Dodo: A Detail of a Day, E.F. Benson humorously explores these new, shifting relationships and changes. Dodo the Second begins twenty years after Dodo left for Paris with the disreputable Prince Waldenech. Dodo now has a daughter, Nadine, who is as restless as her mother had been. Unlike Mrs. Vivian, Dodo has not blamed herself for Waldenech's adulterous affairs; instead, she has divorced him and returned to England, as vivacious as ever. She is not going to repine over a disastrous marriage. Instead she takes delight in its benefits, a title, wealth and a beautiful daughter. She re-establishes contact with her old friends, finding Edith as eccentric as ever, but very successful. Some relics of Victorian prudery, piety and

¹⁰⁴Read, Edwardian England, 51.

¹⁰⁵George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit in George Meredith, "The Egoist," edited by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1979) , 441.

repression linger on, but these kill-joys are even more obvious comic butts than they were in Dodo: A Detail of a Day. Dodo's credo, as always, is the pursuit of individual happiness, and the tolerant acceptance of folly, one's own as well as other people's.

If you are to be happy, you must play, you must be ridiculous, you must want everybody else to be ridiculous. But everybody must take his own absurdities quite seriously.¹⁰⁸

Parallelism and antithesis frequently provide the structure for many comic works. The structure in this comic novel is built around two parallel quests: the younger generation search for fulfilment in personal relationships; the older generation seek a re-affirmation of their personal values, as they face change and loss. The two love stories, Dodo's marriage to Jack Broxton, and the birth of their child David, and the courtship of her daughter, Nadine, by Seymour Sturgis and Hugh Graves, are convenient frames for the serious ideas discussed in the light-hearted conversations about the conflict between feeling and logic, orthodoxy and unorthodoxy, which provide the dynamic structure of the novel. The festivities, Dodo's ball, her wedding, and Christmas at Meering — and even the travesty of "playing holidays," Lady Ayr's provincial tour — are occasions to celebrate life's cyclic continuity, as well as being a time when feelings, relationships and roles can be examined freely. Throughout the novel Dodo is as dynamic as ever, articulating her vitalist philosophy to her inexperienced daughter, but in this novel she is drawn into the community, not isolated from it. She is as clear-sighted as Meredith's "femmes savantes," and has developed a heart, without sacrificing her intellectual identity. Nadine, like her mother before,

¹⁰⁸Benson, Dodo the Second, 265-266.

questions the social expectations that a woman's fulfilment comes only through marriage to an eligible man. Dodo's advice to her equates duty with the pursuit of personal, private happiness not with the abstractions of God, Monarch and Empire.

What I always have sought is my happiness. And that on the whole is our highest duty.¹⁰⁷

The comic mode, where endings are usually happy and all wishes are fulfilled, is a suitable one for this optimistic view. It also makes acceptable ideas that otherwise would be thought subversive. In Dodo, The Second men survive storms and loss, women save themselves from error, abuse and violence. Hugh is not crippled after his heroic rescue of the fisherman's son, and Dodo prevents the vengeful, jealous Waldenech from killing her unborn child and herself. The destructively erotic elements of the life-force are contained within the festive world of marriage, birth, and restoration after illness.

Throughout Dodo the Second, Dodo rules the magic kingdom, respecting the diversity in human motives, aspirations and needs:

Because the thing that above all others makes me happy is to contrive that other people should have their own way.¹⁰⁸

Instinctively non-dogmatic, anti-authoritarian, Dodo's ethical hedonism is redemptive. In this sequel, Dodo and Edith have changed little in appearance and not at all in essence. Dodo, unscathed by divorce from the promiscuous Waldenstein, has the benefit of a daughter, title and wealth. Edith's success as a composer has made her

¹⁰⁷ibid., 264.

¹⁰⁸ibid.

eccentricities more acceptable to society. Dodo's dreary sister, Maud, has fittingly died with the death of the Victorian Age. Mrs. Vivian is also left behind, having failed to adapt to the rapidly changing world of the twentieth century. But each generation has foolish and pretentious people who limit the spirited individual so their place is taken by a new generation of clowns and kill-joys.

In his characterization of Nadine Waldenech, Dodo's daughter, Bertie Arbuthnot, Edith Staines' son, and Lady Ayr's children, Esther, Seymour and John Sturgis, E.F. Benson gently mocks the new generation as much as he did the old. He is in sympathy with their playful disregard for the Victorian deference for rank, wealth and tradition, but he mocks the new tyrannies of fashion, slangy speech, realistic fiction, and popular newspapers that preoccupy Nadine and her set.¹⁰⁹ The whole of the first chapter consists of this stylized layering of cliché, exaggeration and slang as E.F. Benson reproduces the linguistic patterns of callous youth. Nadine voices her opinions about her relations:

I do not mean that a man is not a gentleman because he is stupid, but I do mean that quarterings cannot make him one. The whole idea is so obsolete, so Victorian, like the old mahogany sideboards. Who cares about a grandfather? What does a grandfather matter any more? They use to say 'Move with *The Times*.' Now we move instead with the '*Daily Mail*.'¹¹⁰

Esther, her friend, is not as voluble in her criticisms as Nadine. Her well-born English reticence demands that her views are heard not in direct discourse but indirectly.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 181-199.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 184.

Apart from natural love, Esther did not care for her mother. She would not, that is to say, have cared for her if she had been somebody else's mother, and, indeed, there was very little reason to do so. She had a Roman nose and talked about the Norman Conquest, which in the view of her family, was a very upstart affair. She had not a kind heart, but she had an immense coronet in her own right, and had married another. Indeed she had married another twice: there was a positive triple crown on her head like the Pope; in other respects also she was like a pope, and was infallible with almost indecent frequency. Nadine loved to refer to her as Holy Mother. She felt herself perfectly capable of managing everybody's affairs, and instead of being as broad as she was long, was as narrow as she was tall, and resembled an elderly guardsman.

Her degenerate daughter finished her sigh.¹¹¹

In the final sentence of this passage the voice of the implied narrator reminds us of the humorous restraints on dutiful daughters.

Seymour Sturgis¹¹² is the most memorable comic figure in the novel, though Benson's clumsy attempt to transform him into a romantic lover diminishes him. He is the first of a line of sexually ambivalent characters, culminating in Georgie Pillson in the "Lucia" books, whom Benson treats with varying degrees of sympathy. The antithesis of muscular, Christian gentlemen, they are intellectual, witty, more concerned about their dress and hobbies than with being heroically selfless and dutiful. Frequently, other characters ridicule them, not realising they are exposing their own limitations; for example, Bertie Arbuthnot's remark that Seymour

"ought to have been drowned when he was a girl, like a kitten."¹¹³

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, 184-5.

¹¹²Seymour's surname is the same as that of Howard Sturgis, a friend of E.F. Benson's brother, Arthur. A detailed description of Howard Sturgis' appearance, personality and sexual preferences is contained in Miranda Seymour's book, *A Ring of Conspirators, Henry James and his Literary Circle, 1895-1915* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988).

¹¹³Benson, *Dodo, The Second*, 192.

shows the innate cruelty in a narrow community towards anyone who is different. Seymour, though, is more the traditional wise fool, than the grotesque. Seymour's wry conversations with Nadine about art, literature and monogamy offset the sentimental and limited views of the conventional lovers. Seymour, like Jacques in As You Like It, offers a different perspective on the frantic pursuit of physical gratification and points to the interesting ironies in any set of choices. Unlike Jacques, Seymour wanted "the dancing measures" of heterosexual marriage and is bitterly disappointed at Nadine's rejection. Seymour spends his time pandering to the social and physical vanities of others — he designs jewellery and writes a gossip column for "The Lady" — but he has no illusions about himself, his trade, or his customers. His witty conversation makes him a useful last-minute guest at dinner parties, in much the same way that Benson, himself, was popular with society hostesses. Viola Banks recalls that Benson was a frequent guest at fashionable gatherings.

I was always enchanted when E.F. Benson lunched or dined with us, and manoeuvred to sit next to him whenever possible. He was so gay, and had the most original things to say upon every subject that was discussed. In all the vicissitudes that have befallen him, I have never known him fail a joke or smile. He was always the last to arrive at a party, and seemed to appear with a sudden rush, out of the floor, almost before he was announced. This surprising manner of arrival was peculiar to him, and although I carefully watched each time to see him mount the stairs and enter the room, I was always defeated by seeing him already there and shaking hands, his amazing blue eyes smiling at me, and his rough grey hair standing straight up on his head.¹¹⁴

E.F. Benson's character, Seymour Sturgis, also jokes and smiles, most of the time, decorating his conversation with epigrams that no-one takes seriously: "Life, not

¹¹⁴Viola Banks, Why Not? (London: Jarrolds, 1934), 74-75.

death, is the great leveller;"¹¹⁵ "All those laws about one man one wife were made by ordinary people for ordinary people."¹¹⁶ Lightheartedly, he advocates variety and distinctiveness in life.

I should like a lunch wife, and a dinner wife. I want to see a certain kind of person from about mid-day till tea-time.¹¹⁷

He thinks he ought to get married soon, because English people expect others to live life "à deux," but the prospect bores him.

They live in rows and respect each other. But why it should be considered respectable to marry and have hosts of horrible children I cannot imagine. But it is, and I bow to the united strength of middle-class opinion. But neither you nor I are ready made to live in rows. We are Bedouins by nature, and like to see a different sun-rise every day.¹¹⁸

Although the others in the novel treat him as an emasculate clown, his advocacy of the ridiculous and the extra-ordinary is a refreshing alternative to the philistinism of his family. He advises Nadine that

there ought to be a small country set apart for ridiculous people, with a rabbit fence all round it, and anyone who could be certified to be ridiculous in his tastes should be allowed to go and live there unmolested.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵Benson, *Dodo, The Second*, 238.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 237.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 238.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 234.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 237.

For a while, Nadine considers marrying Seymour, but she opts for union with the more self-consciously masculine Hugh Graves, whose name is a pun on the deadly earnestness of his demeanour and intellect. In an ending that is so blatantly sentimental, one wonders if Benson is parodying the novels of Dickens he admired. Nadine yields to Hugh's passionate embraces when they are sheltering from a storm, but only agrees to marry him after he has been injured while heroically rescuing the fisherman's son. Seymour cynically responds to her trite description of her feelings by saying,

You are a vampire, I think. You suck people dry, and then you throw them away like orange skins.¹²⁰

and he remains the outsider, the unpartnered. Other social critics in the novel, for example Edith Staines, are more influential in society than Seymour, but only because they receive public acclaim. Secure in her philosophy that the only two things worth doing are love and work, Edith, like E.F. Benson, balances her life between the aesthetic and the physical. She describes "all artistic activity as a sort of celestial disease" whose "only antidote is bodily activity which is a material disease."¹²¹ Critical of social realist fiction, portraying "the hopeless lives of suburban people,"¹²² unrelieved by romance or beauty, Edith voices many of Benson's views, expressed in As We Are. An advocate of art that takes people "out of reality," Edith maintains that

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 380.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 372.

¹²²*Ibid.*, 373.

the artist's role is to "fight against dullness,"¹²³ in the full knowledge that the dull are always with us. Aware that joy and beauty are transient, she encourages her friends to engage in life, welcoming Dodo and Jack's marriage and the birth of their child. The middle-aged characters who do not metamorphose, who stay fixed in their old styles, are absurd, like dried, stuffed, extinct creatures in glass cages.

The most ludicrous example of ossified humanity is Seymour Sturgis' mother, Lady Ayr, and her priggish son John. Intent on patronizing others so that she feels superior, she continues to give "awful dinner parties"¹²⁴ governed by the Victorian proprieties of rank and wealth, not talent or intelligence. Consequently, her guests are social climbers, women with faces "like a handsome monkey"¹²⁵ who dress without the "slightest regard to expense,"¹²⁶ or taste. Lady Ayr is another typical comic character, the kill-joy. She turns feasts and holidays into ordeals. Ruling her life and her family according to the fashionable dictates of Society, she organizes holidays for the "improvement and discomfort of her family."¹²⁷

One year she dragged them along the castles by the Loire, another she forced them, as if by pumping, through the picture galleries of Holland, and this summer she proposed to show them a quantity of English cathedrals. These abominable pilgrimages were made pompously and economically: they stayed at odious inns, where she haggled and bargained with the proprietors, but on the other hand she informed the petrified vergers and custodians whom she conducted (rather than was

¹²³*Ibid.*, 373.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, 252.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 255.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, 283.

conducted by) round the cathedrals or castles in their charge, that she was the Marchioness of Ayr, was directly descended from the occupants of the finest and most antique tombs, that the castle in question had once belonged to her family, or that the gem of the Holbeins represented some aunt of hers in bygone generations.¹²⁸

This is another example of the humorous use of multi-voiced discourse. The verbs in the opening section are typical of the exaggerated tones of her son, Seymour, but the objective "them" suggests also that either the implied narrator, or the other amused tourists, are recounting this "tour de force." Mid-way through the passage the patronizing voice of Lady Ayr dominates in the indirect discourse announcing her lineage and family portraits. Humourless, mean and narrow-minded, fortunately she has no influence on the action in the comic novel, other than being a foil to Dodo and Edith. If she represents sobriety and propriety, it is not surprising that her son, Seymour, lauds the ridiculous and the eccentric. Her other son, John, has inherited her smugness and condescension. He associates with Nadine's "clan" but he is out of tune with their irreverence and their aspirations. For once the voice of the implied narrator intrudes to deflate John's self-important remarks.

John, like most prigs, was of a gregarious disposition, and liked his own superiority of intellect, of which he was so perfectly conscious, to be made manifest to others, and literally, he could not imagine that Dodo should seem to prefer burying herself in household affairs when he was clearly at leisure to converse with her. He did not feel himself quite in tune with the younger members of the party, and sometimes wondered why he had come here. That wonder was shared by others. His tediousness in ordinary intercourse was the tediousness of his genus, for he always wanted to improve the minds of his circle. Unfortunately he mistook quantity of information for quality of mind, and thought that large

¹²⁸*ibid.*, 283-4.

numbers of facts, even such low facts as dates, had in themselves something to do with culture.¹²⁹

The comic progress of Lady Ayr's family around the cathedrals and temperance hotels of England contrasts, markedly, with the other festive times in the novel where the characters are free to think, feel and act, free from the constraints of convention. At Dodo's holiday cottage at Meering, North Wales, in the summer, the younger generation comment, irreverently, on Darwinian theories about heredity and evolution, on Victorian precepts about gentlemanly behaviour, rank and title, marriage and family, on social reformers and suffragettes, on patriotism and Empire.¹³⁰ Socially and financially secure, this pre-war, upper-class generation earnestly want to make sense of their world and find a place in it. Freely mingling slangy expressions with literary, Biblical and Shakespearean allusion, their speech reflects the variety of influence on them. John Sturgis, a civil servant, amasses information in his government reports that recommends social and economic reform, but Nadine calls his attitudes and solutions unimaginative.

You Prigs turn the world topsy-turvy that way. You do not start with joy, and you finish up in a slough of despondent information.¹³¹

Preferring the perspective on life offered by Swinburne and Lewis Carroll, to that of Mrs. Humphrey Ward and Shaw, Nadine reflects her mother's distaste for all art that

¹²⁹*ibid.*, 212.

¹³⁰*ibid.*, 182-199.

¹³¹*ibid.*, 216.

is self-consciously didactic. Realistic fiction about slum life, home rule, tariff reform, and Christianity have no appeal for her,¹³² nor for Benson.¹³³

The older generation, on holiday in Wales, or at Dodo's country house at Winton, are more secure in their self-knowledge which they have gained through experience. In middle-age they need to re-affirm relationships and find constructive ways to continue living rather than discover what they think and value about life. Edith continues to compose, Dodo avoids acting like a "grizzly kitten,"¹³⁴ perennially seeking youth, and instead marries Jack, who, conveniently, is not bald, deaf or fat. She, herself, is still youthful, looking like a literal, as well as a fairy-tale princess. Her philosophy, that sensible choices are made by listening to one's feelings not by responding to abstract moral precepts, has kept her youthful. Particularly sceptical about people who spend their lives improving the lives of others, she suspects the motives of the joyless people who work for causes, calling them a slave-class.

We ought to have a voluntary slave-class, consisting of all the people who like working for a cause. There are heaps of politicians who naturally belong to it, and clergymen and lawyers and financiers, all the people in fact who die when they retire, being devitalized when they have not got offices and churches to go to.¹³⁵

Her vitality is presented in mythic terms. Triumphant over age and grief, she greets her guests.

¹³²*Ibid.*, 222-223.

¹³³E.F. Benson, *As We Are* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1932), 252-286.

¹³⁴Benson, *Dodo the Second*, 201.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, 266.

As in the old days when Dodo piped, the world danced, and tonight she was as vital, as charged with that magnetism that spreads enjoyment round itself more infectiously than influenza, as ever. Her beauty too was like a rose, full-blown, but without one petal yet fallen; and she stood there, in the glory of her incomparable form, jewelled and superb, a Juno decked for a feast among the high gods. All the world of her friends streamed up the stairs to be welcomed by that wonderful smiling face, and many instead of going in to the ball-room waited round the balustrade at the stair-head watching her.¹³⁶

In preparing to separate from her Prince who became an ogre, she returns, symbolically, Waldenech's jewelled girdle,¹³⁷ and fearlessly withstands his jealous rage when he arrives at her home in Eaton Square.

As menacing as a Greek fury, beautiful as the dawn, dominant as the sun. All depended on her not faltering, on her complete self-assurance; and never in her life had she felt more entirely mistress of herself and of the occasion then when she marched up to this drunkard with the loaded revolver.¹³⁸

In the comic realm, violence, malice and rage never triumph. His Royal Highness Prince Waldenech, like Duke Ferdinand in As You Like It, learns to forgive, and Seymour Sturgis, Nadine's rejected suitor, like Malvolio, is driven out of the charmed circle of the clan. The novel ends on a note of regeneration and renewal. Dodo gives birth to her son David and Nadine marries Hugh Graves, but only after he has subdued her selfish spirit. During a scene which is a parody of the climactic scene in The Taming of the Shrew where Kate submits to Petruchio's view of reality, Nadine reverses her decision to marry Seymour.

¹³⁶*ibid.*, 300.

¹³⁷*ibid.*, 301.

¹³⁸*ibid.*, 391.

"Oh Hughie, what has happened to the sun?" she said.

"I know it is the moon," said Hugh. "You needn't quote that. The shrew is tamed for a time. Is a shrew mouse a lady mouse with a foul temper, do you think?"¹³⁸

Discord has resulted in concord, at least for the main comic characters. The weaknesses are more pronounced in this novel than in Dodo: A Detail of a Day, though they stem from the same source. When E.F. Benson moves away from the comic mode his characters lapse into sentimentality. The description of the storm scene only clumsily parallels Nadine's sexual arousal; the sick-bed scene, when Hugh is paralysed by his heroic and selfless act and Nadine decides to devote herself to him, justifies Seymour's cynical comment. It is the comic characters, Dodo and Edith, the irrepressible egoists, Seymour the wise fool, Lady Ayr, the kill-joy, and her son John, the pedantic prig, that make this novel a memorable sequel to Dodo: A Detail of a Day.

E.F. Benson published the final novel in the trilogy, Dodo Wonders, in 1921, three years after the end of the Great War. Thirty years on, the incorrigible Dodo had lost none of her appeal for the reviewers, especially in the United States. H.W. Boynton writing in The Weekly Review was glad Dodo's positive attitude to life was indestructible, particularly at a time when so much had been destroyed. Boynton recognized the difficulty E.F. Benson found in maintaining the comic spirit, the delight in things and people, in the face of the forces of disintegration within the human mind and society during the war.

¹³⁸ibid., 318.

It is a difficult thing too; Dodo was so much creature of the sane if volatile and yellowish nineties that her conveyance into the most troubled years of this century could not be undertaken without great risk of rendering her merely silly or merely piteous or worse, of transforming her into a worthy and sensible person of middle-age.¹⁴⁰

Boynton is grateful for Benson's success in showing that open-mindedness, adaptability, independence and "a devotion to the delicious art of living" are inexhaustible despite the passage of time and the presence of suffering. The reviewer in the New York Times Book Review¹⁴¹ shared Boynton's relief that Dodo is still able to find amusement in human society and delight in the restorative beauty of the English countryside. He remarks on the comic elements in the book, noting "there is not even the faintest pretext of a plot," that Dodo's life-time friend, Edith, for all her artistic talent, is as capable of folly as anyone else and that Benson's wit was as clever as always:

One continuously finds oneself smiling at some neat turn of phrase, some amusing thrust at a familiar human foible.¹⁴²

Dodo's "scintillating talk" likewise appealed to the reviewer in the Boston Evening Transcript.¹⁴³

The reviews in the British press were not as enthusiastic about this final part of the trilogy. Perhaps because they were closer to the devastation of war they were

¹⁴⁰H.W. Boynton, "Seeing It Through and After," The Weekly Review, 24 September, 1921, 280-281.

¹⁴¹"Latest Works of Fiction," The New York Times Book Review and Magazine, 11 September, 1921, 22.

¹⁴²Ibid.

¹⁴³"Dodo Wonders: The Latest Manifestation of E.F. Benson's Satirical Mood," Boston Evening Transcript, 28 September, 1921, 4.

not as interested in reading about how middle-aged non-combatants sustained a belief in the virtue of life as they watched the old order disintegrating. The reviewer in The Times Literary Supplement¹⁴⁴ found the story "saddening," thinking Dodo "a shadow of her former self." Although he did commend Benson's "power of hitting off a fool," he did not see the affirmative qualities in Dodo's capacity to adapt and adjust to changing human circumstances, while simultaneously drawing strength from the enduring vitality of the English countryside. The final lines of the review suggest that the reviewer was weary of all books that had anything to say about the recent war.

It is possible that the book, as a whole, may be more interesting to the next generation than to this, which has not only experienced the war but has read so many descriptions of it as to be disinclined for more.¹⁴⁵

The reviewer in The Spectator said he did not expect this to be the great novel on the theme of the English society woman and the World War;¹⁴⁶ instead, he recognized Dodo's significant place in the tradition of comic heroines:

Dodo has, of course, by this time become the symbol of a particular type of eternal and flamboyant female who we have the best of reasons for knowing has flourished ever since the eighteenth century and possibly long before that.¹⁴⁷

He ended his review with the prescient remark: "The point of the book was contained in the title."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴"Dodo Wonders," Times Literary Supplement, 8 March, 1921, 143.

¹⁴⁵The reviewer in The New York Times Book Review and Magazine suggests this expectation.

¹⁴⁶"Dodo Wonders," The Spectator, 23 April, 1921, 531.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

Much of the point of this final novel in the Dodo trilogy is, indeed, in the title. The word "wonder" in the title has a double meaning: it points both to the characters' awe as well as their apprehension as they face age, change and death. Dodo's laconic definition of life

Aspiring and perspiring and admiring and conspiring, and then it's all over.¹⁴⁸

sets the more reflective tone for a novel that wonders what pleasure there is in life in which there is so much physical and mental suffering. Published in 1921, this final novel in the trilogy covers the period immediately before the outbreak of war in 1914 and the four years of the war's duration. Not the usual kind of war novel, nevertheless it offers a reflective, detached perspective on the fateful summer of 1914 and on the war years. Dodo and her husband Jack, like E.F. Benson, are not eligible for active service, but offer the skills that they have to the war effort. As part of his contribution, Benson wrote political analyses on Germany¹⁵⁰ and Poland.¹⁵¹ Up and Down¹⁵² was a semi-autobiographical diary of the war years. In 1933, Benson returned to that time, writing a complete volume, The Outbreak of War 1914,¹⁵³ for the Great Occasions series published by Peter Davies. In each of these forms, the political, historical, anecdotal and comic, there is a familiar theme, the irrevocable

¹⁴⁸E.F. Benson, Dodo Wonders in Dodo: An Omnibus (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986), 399.

¹⁵⁰....., Deutschland über Allah (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917).

¹⁵¹....., Crescent and Iron Cross (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918).
 , The White Eagle of Poland (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918).

¹⁵²....., Up and Down (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1918).

¹⁵³....., The Outbreak of War 1914 (London: Peter Davies, 1933).

changes to the confident, prosperous lives of the English upper- and upper-middle-classes brought about by this cataclysm. In As We Were, E.F. Benson remembers how he "wondered" about the coming catastrophe.

Up till the last week in July which I spent at my mother's house, this sense of security remained firm. Then came the first tremors of the solid earth, faint, but felt in the foundations of the house. Austria sent Serbia an ultimatum in which no free State could acquiesce, demanding her acceptance of it within forty-eight hours. It was followed by Russian preparations to mobilize and remonstrances from Berlin. Backwards and forwards flew the shuttle, weaving catastrophe, and at every passage of it the web of war grew on the clashing loom. Early in August the shirt of fire in which Europe was to burn for four years, was ready for the wearing, and the older order of secure prosperity, of which I have been speaking, smouldered into ash, and England will know it no more.¹⁵⁴

Dodo, the life-long exponent of play, and the pleasures of instinct, is now, in Dodo Wonders, only slightly older than Benson. Aged fifty-four, she is also wondering about her life. She knows that all she can do is "play the fool and no-one wants that now."¹⁵⁵ She recognizes that now is not the time to jest and dally. Unlike Falstaff, she does not degenerate into self-pity, venality and lewdness, although she and Edith are aware of the temptations of middle-age. They warn each other against becoming "terrible grizzly kittens."¹⁵⁶

There's nothing that makes a woman look so old as to drag about some doped boy. It is so easy to make a boy think you are marvellous: it's such a cheap success, like spending the season at some second-rate watering-place.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴-----, As We Were, 344.

¹⁵⁵Benson, Dodo Wonders, 470.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 403.

¹⁵⁷Ibid.

Her re-marriage and her love for her young son save her, as does her endless curiosity and sense of wonder about life. She is determined to make sense of it, in her own way and through her own perceptions, not through received opinions. She can be as flippant as ever in her definition of life,

We've gone on aspiring and perspiring and admiring and conspiring, and then it's all over¹⁵⁸

and as cynical about the absurdity of human effort.

We're little funny things kicking about together in the dust.¹⁵⁹

But she never loses sight of the value of enduring relationships with her family and friends in a world where all other values have changed.¹⁶⁰ The other constants are provided by her pleasure in the world of nature, "that steadfast, imperishable thing"¹⁶¹ which she describes in restorative metaphors drawn from Ecclesiastes and the Psalms.¹⁶² For the first time Benson borrows discourses from the Bible and from English poetry to sound alongside other direct, indirect and doubly-oriented discourse.

The novel Dodo Wonders opens in June 1914 at Winston, Dodo Chesterford's country estate. Dodo and her family are adjusting to modern inventions — the aeroplane, movies, modern poetry and the fox-trot — but they are more conscious of mortality than in earlier novels as they move along time's continuum. Once again the

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 399.

¹⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 413.

¹⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 477.

¹⁶¹*Ibid.*, 508.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*

contest is between the play-girls and the kill-joys, those who respond to the changing circumstances of life and those who try to control festivity and individual delight. Maudie Grantham, a minor character in *Dodo: A Detail of a Day*, has re-entered Dodo's enchanted Kingdom, like a bad fairy. An inherited income has not improved Maudie's disposition and her exchanges with Dodo are uncompromisingly astringent. Maudie has assumed Mrs. Vivian's role as Dodo's uncompromising critic, advocating duty to others, self-sacrifice and submission and an endless round of worthy activities, which are self-serving rather than festive. Unlike Dodo, Maudie embraces middle-age, solemnly. The implied narrator grudgingly admires the ease with which she has aged:

Grantie had accepted (you might almost say she had courted) middle-age in a very decorous and becoming manner: Her hair, fine as floss silk had gone perfectly white, thus softening her rather hard, handsome horse-like face, and she wore plain expensive clothes of sober colours with pearls and lace and dignity.¹⁶³

Maudie's time is spent in a ceaseless round of joyless tasks, devoted to controlling others, turning feasts and festivals into dreary, obligatory duties. Irreverently alluding to Gray's *Elegy*, Dodo describes Maudie's life:

You are like the poet who said that the world was left to darkness and to him. He liked bossing it in the darkness. You train the village choir, Grantie, and it's no use denying it. You preside at mother's meetings, and you are local president of the Primrose League. You have a flower-show in what they call your grounds, just as if you were coffee, an August Bank-holiday, and a school feast.¹⁶⁴

Maudie is as tediously formal and dutiful as Dodo's first husband, thriving as he did on being a pillar of the local community, but having no genuine interest in community

¹⁶³*ibid.*, 419.

¹⁶⁴*ibid.*, 420-421.

or personal life. Maudie counters by pointing to the superficiality and transience of Dodo's activities. Her own life of good works for the less privileged, her reading, wood-carving and piano playing, Maudie claims is more useful than "playing bridge all night, or standing quacking on a stair-case in a tiara,"¹⁶⁵ or behaving like a flea on the body politic. In an oblique parody of John Donne's flea, Maudie denounces Dodo's delight in the fertile variety of life:

You hop about with dreadful springs, and take little bits of other people, and call that life. If you hear of some marvellous new invention, you ask the inventor to lunch and suck a little of his blood. Then at dinner you are told that everybody is talking about some new book, so you buy a copy next morning, cut the first fifty pages, leave it about in a prominent place, and ask the author to tea. Meanwhile you forget all about the inventor. Then a new portrait-painter appears, or a new conjuror at the music-halls or a new dancer, and off you hop again and have another bite.¹⁶⁶

The bitter tone of this exchange is mollified by Dodo's lack of malice, and her good-natured acceptance of this limited view of her nature. She does not delude herself about her egoism, nor the freedom it gives her to express her vitality. Grantie, on the other hand, does not see that her devotion to others is egoism in another form — less vital, more oppressive and far less personally satisfying. Dodo, unlike Grantie, accepts her "dreadful nature,"¹⁶⁷ accepts her animal appetites while simultaneously recognizing their limitations. Alluding to the poets, not the moralists, she says.

We are all in cages, at least I am, and you are a raven in a cage. You croak, and you peck me if I come near you. Iron bars do make a cage,

¹⁶⁵*ibid.*, 421.

¹⁶⁶*ibid.*, 422-423.

¹⁶⁷*ibid.*, 426.

whatever Lovelace thought about it, if the iron bars are your own temperament.¹⁰⁸

She refuses to delude herself into thinking that the high-sounding principles of "devotion to others, duty, expansion of the soul, and development of character" are more altruistically motivated.

In this novel, the capacity for self-delusion and self-indulgence is not limited by class, rank or station. Other much more politically powerful kill-joys, fools and clowns abound. Lord Cookham is joined by the aristocratic spongers, the Prince and Princess Allenstein, and by the foolishly deferential merchant prince, Dodo's father, Mr. Vane. These buffoons and clowns represent many unattractive aspects of human nature. Lord Cookham, an influential member of the Foreign Office, is a patronizing, humorless prig, hide-bound by rules and regulations, that become increasingly absurd as the world moves towards the anarchy of war. His grandiloquence is in marked contrast to Dodo's vivacious remarks. She acquiesces to his request that she arrange a ball for the Maharajah of Bareilly, but she does this out of friendship for Jumbo, not because she is over-awed by Jumbo's status as Maharajah. She is not deceived by Cookham's "superb periods"¹⁰⁹ as he tries, with assiduous flattery, to manipulate the guest list. Sycophancy oozes through Lord Cookham's flattering direct discourse.

"Exactly," he said. "The fame of the Chesterford diamonds is world-wide, and you have supplied a wholly apposite illustration of what I am attempting to point out. But it is not only in material splendour, Lady Chesterford, that I desire to produce a magnificent impression on our honoured visitor; I want him to mix with all that is stateliest in birth, in

¹⁰⁸*ibid.*

¹⁰⁹*ibid.*, 437.

intellect, in aristocracy of all kinds, of science, of art, of industrial pre-eminence, of politics, of public service. It was with this idea in my mind that your name occurred to me as being the most capable among all our London hostesses of bringing together such an assembly as will be perfectly characteristic of all that is most splendid in the social life of our nation."¹⁷⁰

Immediately following this narrative is the brisk humorous counterpoint of Dodo's indirect discourse.

These well-balanced and handsome expressions did not deceive Dodo for a moment; she rightly interpreted them as being an amiable doxology which should introduce the subject of the revision of her list of guests. She could not help interjecting a remark or two any more than a highly-charged syphon can help sizzling a little, but she was confident, now that Lord Cookham was well afloat, that her remarks would not hamper the majestic movement of his incredible eloquence.¹⁷¹

For all his power, Cookham is as deferential to rank and class as Maudie, and as self-serving. Dodo's father, the purveyor and manufacturer of shoe-horns, makes a fool of himself in front of royalty.¹⁷² Dodo does not escape from the taint of snobbishness, preferring "notable people to nonentities"¹⁷³ but even she is not taken in by Prince Albert. Despite the fact that he is one of the crowned heads of Europe,

He was a slow, stout, stupid man of sixty.... He had a miraculous digestion, a huge appetite for sleep, and a moderate acquaintance with the English language.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 436.

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*

¹⁷²*Ibid.*, 419.

¹⁷³*Ibid.*, 413-414.

¹⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 414.

She compares him to a "boa-constrictor"¹⁷⁵ and a "rhinoceros,"¹⁷⁶ recognizing that his actions and character are as repellent and destructive as these creatures.

Although animal imagery has figured in other novels in the trilogy, it is more pronounced in this novel, an appropriate technique in a novel dealing with the effects of growing old in a disintegrating world. The innate rapacity and violence in human nature comes to the fore-front as war seems inevitable; it pervades not only the banter between Dodo and Grantie in their elegant drawing rooms, but also the smart, public London restaurants. Guests at a luncheon party at the Ritz are described in the hackneyed discourse of the gossip columnist:

Prince Albert of Allenstein was there alone, "looking very greedy," as a veracious paragraphist might have remarked: here was a Cabinet Minister, Hugo Alford, lunching with a prima-donna, there an Australian tennis-champion with an eclipsed duchess, a French pugilist and a cosmopolitan actress of quite undoubtful reputation dressed in pearls and panther-skins. Then there was old Lady Alice Fane bedizened in bright auburn hair and strings of antique cameos, looking as if she had been given a Sunday off from her case in the British Museum, smoking cigarettes and leaving out her aspirates, and with her a peer, obviously from Jerusalem, the proprietor of a group of leading journals, a sprinkling of foreign diplomatists, and several members of the Russian ballet.¹⁷⁷

The gossip columnist who feeds this information to a celebrity-seeking public is compared to a thin scavenging "flat-fish."¹⁷⁸ Dodo is as amused by an encounter with this priggish woman, who corrects David's manners, as she is by the German

¹⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 419.

¹⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 459.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 450.

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 446.

Prince's gluttony and Lord Cookham's pomposity. Her sense of the absurd prevents her from taking these experiences too seriously, though she is aware that these self-deluded people are deciding the fate of nations. In the menagerie of life, the flat-fish is no more bizarre than the German prince preening himself like a blue mandrill,¹⁷⁹ or stuffing himself with food until he is like a flushed boa-constrictor.¹⁸⁰ The English diplomats are no better than the German: Hugo, the English minister is like a small grey ape, preyed upon by the monkey-eating eagles;¹⁸¹ the German agent is like "a large alligator, bald and horny, which puts on a great, long smile and watches you with its wicked little eyes."¹⁸²

Dodo is adept at negotiating her way through the jungle, relying on her instincts to distinguish between camouflage and true substance. The touchstones for her discernment are spiritual: a visit to St. Paul's with her son, David,¹⁸³ an afternoon's fishing,¹⁸⁴ a birthday party, are private festivities¹⁸⁵ that recharge her spirit. As the world moves closer to discord and disintegration, Dodo finds renewal and reaffirmation in private communion with the people she loves, with the cyclic rhythms

¹⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 445.

¹⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 419.

¹⁸¹*Ibid.*, 451.

¹⁸²*Ibid.*, 405.

¹⁸³*Ibid.*, 444.

¹⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 492.

¹⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 490.

of nature and the poetry of the Bible. Here the implied narrator counter-balances Dodo's brittle utterances.

To sit quiet in this huge church, dim and cool, charged with the centuries of praise and worship which had soaked into it was like coming out of the glare of some noisy noon-day, into the green shelter of trees and moisture....

Deep down in her (very effectively screened, it must be allowed, by her passion for the excitements and mundane interests of life) there existed this chamber of contemplation for her soul, a real edifice, quite solid and established. It was not in her nature to frequent it very much, she was ecstatically content, with David by her side, to sit there while the voice of the preacher hooted round the dome. There she recaptured the consciousness of the eternal, the secure, the permanent that underlay the feverish motions of her days.¹⁸⁶

The shorter, symmetrical structure of Dodo Wonders establishes the antithesis between the demands of public performance and the need for private pleasures. The first seven chapters of Dodo Wonders are organized around public occasions, culminating in the ball Dodo gives, at the request of Lord Cookham, before war is declared. The implicit comparison between Dodo's ball and the one before Waterloo is, itself, ironic. Waterloo was a prologue to Britain's hegemony in Europe; 1914 marks the beginning of the end of that supremacy. The old order is disintegrating and society is behaving "as we behave when the ice is breaking up, and we shall have one more minute skating."¹⁸⁷ Although minutes away from extinction, Dodo preserves her comic élan and the ball is a fitting memorial to the *fin de siècle*.

The whole of the diplomatic corps was there, German and Austrian included, and there was the German ambassador, quite recovered from his curious indisposition, waltzing with the Italian ambassadress. The

¹⁸⁶ibid., 444.

¹⁸⁷ibid., 455.

same spirit that had animated Dodo in breaking up serious conjectures and conversation seemed now to have spread broadcast; all were conspirators to make this ball, the last of the year, the most brilliant and memorable.¹⁸⁹

Although this festive occasion is useless from a "utilitarian point of view"¹⁸⁹ it has a symbolic function because it represents,

The glory for great names, wide-world commerce, invincible navies, all the endorsements of Empire, lay behind it. It glittered and shone like some great diamond in an illumination which at any moment might be obscured by the menace of thundercloud, but, if this was the last ray that should shine on it before the darkness that even now lapped the edge of it enveloped it entirely, that gloom would but suck the light from it, and not soften nor crush its heart of adamant....¹⁹⁰

In this unashamedly patriotic piece, E.F. Benson regrets but does not deny the passing of English supremacy, as an Empire that is no longer worth five shillings¹⁹¹ disintegrates. The second section of the novel ends on a similarly festive occasion, the celebration at Winston of Armistice Day. The second part of the novel is narrower in focus, concentrating on the lives of non-combatants, in London, trying to keep sane in an increasingly menacing world. Dodo's family and friends are relatively unscathed by the war: her son-in-law, Hugh, is shot down over France, but survives; Edith's house in London is damaged by German bombing; Dodo has a nervous break-down caused by the unrelenting strain of nursing maimed and injured soldiers. Recovering from her breakdown, Dodo finds that her need for joy and wonder is replenished by

¹⁸⁹*ibid.*, 464.

¹⁸⁹*ibid.*

¹⁹⁰*ibid.*

¹⁹¹*ibid.*, 457.

the natural scenery of the Norfolk coast. She finds "that the steadfast, imperishable thing called Nature"¹⁸² is restorative, revealing as it does the cyclic, at times incongruous interplay of life and death. She also finds consolation in Psalm 91, which offers faith, not despair. The first section of the novel ends with the grand finale of the Marchioness of Chesterford's ball, the second section with Jack and Dodo facing the uncertainties of the post-war world, with its diminished incomes and threat of labour unrest.

The world of Dodo's youth is now as extinct as the Mauritian bird, but Dodo the comic heroine is not because she always knew the material world was provisional and imperfect. At the outset, she had tried to dominate it, but instead found it was a cage. Gradually she learned to follow her instincts, not the moral absolutes of others, and by pursuing an ethical hedonism, she survived. She always chose the relative over the absolute, preferring to avoid misfortune if she could, but bearing it with courage and humour, if she had to. Never regarding play as trivial, Dodo knew the need to leave periodically the cage of work and social responsibilities in order to be replenished by festivity. Throughout the trilogy, Dodo survives error, loss, fear and mental breakdown through her self-knowledge, her uninhibited sense of play, and her spontaneous pleasure in fellowship and family. To the prigs and the pompous, she seems egotistical, frivolous and ineffectual, but by denying the value of intuition and instinct in their own lives they develop into foolish, unproductive and cruel people.

¹⁸²*Ibid.*, 508.

At the end of this first comic series, Dodo "wonders" and Jack wants to withdraw from a life that is so changed. At that stage in his life, Benson, himself, must have wondered what was left. In 1921 he was fifty-three. Only he and Arthur remained. Fred had borne the brunt of his mother's death, his sister's mental illness, and Arthur's neurasthenia. But in 1920 he had published Queen Lucia, the first in what was to be a new comic series that he worked on until the year before he died. In these works, the world is less glittering, less festive. There are no children, lovers or marriages to ensure the renewal and continuity of the life-force. Egoism remains but it is more repressive, as it struggles against the twin disasters facing the middle-aged and the middle-class, loss of income and loss of prestige. As he grows older, Benson seems less convinced that appetite and instinct are healthy antidotes to society's laws and restrictions. Riseholme and Rye are governed by women as egotistical as Dodo but who lack compassion and self-knowledge. The true artists are on the periphery of these communities, not central as Edith was in Belgravia. And all the talk is not of art, philosophy, literature and love. Instead the characters, in the next series, are all obsessed with appearance, food, and dress. Maudie Grantham and Seymour Sturgis are transformed into Miss Mapp and Georgie Pillson. And rapacious Lucia becomes the driving force in their universe, a universe devoid of any intellectual, spiritual or emotional aspirations. Spontaneous festivity gives way to the guises of masquerade.

CHAPTER FOUR

Comic Fiction II: Masks and Masquerades

In this hard, practical world to disregard material considerations is a sign not of an idealistic mind but an idiotic mind.

E.F. Benson, Account Rendered (1911)

Queen Lucia: "Queen of Masks and Masquerades"

The memory of the never-ending manoeuvres and manipulations of the "cliques, coteries and climbers"¹ that so amused E.F. Benson and his mother during their time at Lambeth Palace was possibly in the forefront of his mind when he published Queen Lucia in 1920, his first novel in a series of six that have come to be regarded as his comic masterpieces:² Queen Lucia (1920), Miss Mapp (1922), Lucia in London (1927), Mapp and Lucia (1931), Lucia's Progress (1935), and Trouble for Lucia (1939). After 1920, Benson was living in Lamb House in Rye, Sussex, and was wholly content in his new home.

Its cobbled ways and its marsh with its huge sky, as at sea, and in particular the house and the garden room and the garden were making a ferment of their own in my veins, not because they were associated with any cherished and intimate experiences, but because they were themselves.³

Benson lived in Lamb House for the rest of his life, and the house and garden, the cobbled streets of the ancient Cinque Port and the surrounding marshlands were the setting and the inspiration for his comic work during the next twenty years. Initially,

¹E.F. Benson, Mother (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925), 135.

²V.S. Pritchett, "E.F. Benson" in The Tale-Bearers: Literary Essays (New York: Random House, 1980).

³E.F. Benson, Final Edition, 160.

he was considered just another Londoner who stayed for a few weeks to sketch, write or play golf, but over the years he was accepted as a permanent resident. In 1933, he became a magistrate and in 1934 he became Mayor of Rye. Re-elected in 1935 and in 1936, he was then honoured for his service by being given the Freedom of the Borough of Rye in 1938.

His contentment, though, did not extend to his previous accomplishments. E.F. Benson is not the first writer to dismiss his attainments or talents and have later critics take him at his word, without making an assessment for themselves. In his last autobiographical work, Final Edition, E.F. Benson reveals his ambivalent attitude towards his comic fiction. Late in life, he expressed, in an excessively self-critical paragraph, his disappointment with most of his serious fiction, regretting what he regarded as its sentimentality and lack of vigour.

There is a story that Thackeray, years after he had written Vanity Fair, came across a copy of it, and found he had forgotten how good it was. My experience was precisely the opposite: I had forgotten how poor they were. They did not interest me, and I felt that I should very soon forget them again. Accordingly, I pronounced myself guilty, as regards a horrid large number of these. But in the case of some of these books, I pleaded not guilty and was willing to go into the witness box on oath, and be cross-examined. A novel called Sheaves was one, The Luck of the Vails was another; The Climber was a third, and a school story, David Blaize. Into these — there may have been one or two more which I have forgotten — I had put emotional imagination.⁴

He was more satisfied with his scholarly work, and was proud of his appointment, in 1938, as an Honorary Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge, but he never took seriously his comic fiction. Perhaps he paid too much attention to his brother Arthur's

⁴Benson, Final Edition, 183.

back-handed compliment, in 1923, that he produced books with "incredible regularity."⁵ Or he may have been too modest about his success, too afraid of appearing as preposterous as the egoists he ridiculed. His diffidence about his literary career did not prevent him from continuing to write, but he dismissed as "frivolous"⁶ his recounting of the "preposterous adventures"⁷ of Lucia and Miss Mapp. He concentrated instead on writing biographies and memoirs, most of which, ironically, have not had anything like the lasting effect of those preposterous adventures, though at the time they were critically acclaimed and gave E.F. Benson the respect in scholarly circles that he sought.

The reviewers and the public, on the other hand, have been consistently pleased with the antics of Mrs. Emmeline Lucas, Queen Lucia, and her reluctant, at times rebellious, ladies-in-waiting Daisy Quantock and Elizabeth Mapp, and courtier George Pillson, in the small English provincial towns of Riseholme and Tilling. The "Lucia" books have remained in print and recently were dramatized on radio and television⁸ and have been the inspiration for the establishment of two literary

⁵Christopher St. John, Ethel Smyth (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1946) 277.

⁶Benson, Final Edition, 184.

⁷Ibid.

⁸In October 1984, Aubrey Woods narrated two five-part dramatizations of Queen Lucia for Radio 4, B.B.C. and between September and October 1985 he narrated a dramatization of Lucia in London.

In April 1985, LWTW filmed a five-part series based on Mapp and Lucia, produced by Michael Dunlop and directed by Donald McWhinnie. In May 1986, this series was shown on PBS in the United States of America. In 1986, LWTW filmed a second series based on Lucia's Progress, and Trouble for Lucia.

societies, The Tilling Society,⁹ based in Rye, and The E.F. Benson Society,¹⁰ in London, both dedicated to preserving Benson's place in literature, and to promoting research about his life and works. There are also E.F. Benson societies in New York, St. Louis and California.¹¹ At the time they were published and when they were re-issued, E.F. Benson's "Lucia" books pleased the reviewers as well as the public. This comic sequence was published over a period of twenty years and, for the most part, the reaction of contemporary reviewers was favourable. Subsequent reviews occasioned by the re-issuing of the novels, either singly or in collected editions, have been, on the whole, even more commendatory as the comic genre gained more critical attention and as more writers were working in that genre. In general, the early reviews in the United States distinguished, though did not as yet define, the comic aspects of his work. For example, in The Literary Digest,¹² the reviewer, remembering the "Dodo" sequence and using Alexander Pope's line, dubbed Benson "well qualified to shoot folly as it flies."¹³ He thought he had accurately portrayed the shallow affectations of the period from 1900-1920. In a final comment, he

⁹The Tilling Society, founded in 1982, has a membership of about 400 and publishes an informative newsletter. Tony and Cynthia Reavell run the society from The Martello Bookshop, 26 High Street Rye, East Sussex, TN31 7JJ.

¹⁰The E.F. Benson Society published its first journal in January, 1986. Its present Chairman is Mr. Keith Cavers, 135A Bedford Court Mansions, Bedford Square, London WC1B 3AH.

¹¹There is a Miss Mapp Society in New York, an E.F. Benson Literary Guild in California and a Friends of Lucia U.S.A. Society in St. Louis.

¹²"A Fearful Spectacle." Literary Digest, 18 September 1920, 101-102.

¹³Ibid., 101.

remarked on the absence of a critical measure or justification for the structure of Benson's work which, nonetheless, he thought was a masterly work.

The book is lacking in what we are constantly told is necessary for a good novel. There is not much plot; there is not love interest; there is no climax — the book just stops.¹⁴

Unconsciously, the reviewer was pointing to the cyclic rather than the climactic structure of the plot that is frequent in comic design. The comic reliance on subterfuge, masking and masquerade he does identify in Benson's main character, Lucia.

She has played with her mental integrity for so long, she has so constantly refused to look herself and her motives in the face, that she has become impervious to truth in any form — a fearful spectacle.¹⁵

The fearful spectacle was apparent, if not the fearful symmetry. In England, in August 1920, Arthur Waugh, Chairman and Managing Director of the publishing firm Chapman and Hall, wrote a long and perceptive review of Queen Lucia.¹⁶ He dubbed the book "Mr. E.F. Benson's Holiday Novel," noting that while the book provoked more holiday humour than any sea-side pierrots, it also reminded him of the timeless nature of human folly. Arthur Waugh in his analysis of the book's appeal may have

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Arthur Waugh, "Queen Lucia: E.F. Benson's Holiday Novel," Daily Telegraph, 13 August, 1920.

had in mind Sir Philip Sidney's definition of comedy.¹⁷ In fact, Waugh did refer to the classical author Lucretius who also noted the pleasures of malice.¹⁸

It is packed with its author's quiet satire at its best; it is deliciously clever without being supercilious; and it possesses one unfailing secret of holiday entertainment, a secret at least as old as human nature. For what greater pleasure is there to unregenerate man than to sit in comfort himself and watch someone else in the process of feeling extremely uncomfortable? "Suave mari magno," said Lucretius, now some years ago.¹⁹

Arthur Waugh recommended Queen Lucia to the holiday-maker who was temporarily removed from the workaday world of duty, responsibility and time-tables. Even in this early review Arthur Waugh noticed that duplicity governed the action and design of the book, that in Queen Lucia all Benson's characters assumed a false, outward show in order to conceal the emotional and spiritual sterility of their lives.

For at Riseholme everyone was playing a part, pretending to be something different; there was scarcely an honest word said there from breakfast to bed-time.²⁰

¹⁷Sir Philip Sidney, A Defense of Poetry, edited with an introduction and notes by Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 44.

¹⁸V.S. Pritchett, "The Pleasures of Malice," New York Review of Books, 23 June 1977, 8-10.

¹⁹The complete quotation is as follows:

Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,
E terra magnum aetherius spectare laborem;
Non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas,
Sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est.

Sweet it is, when on the great sea the winds buffeting
The waters, to gaze from the land on another's great struggle.
Not because it is pleasure or joy that anyone should be distressed,
But because it is sweet to perceive from what misfortune you yourself are free.

²⁰Arthur Waugh, "Queen Lucia."

The reviewers of the more recent publications of Benson's "Lucia" novels offer some insights into why these six novels deserve a place in the comic matrix of English literature. In an ironic connection that would have amused E.F. Benson, it was Arthur Waugh's grandson, Auberon, who reviewed Queen Lucia, and the other "Lucia" books when they were republished in a compendium in 1977.²¹ Auberon Waugh was no less impressed than his grandfather had been over fifty years earlier. In his review he compared the response in the 1920s and 1930s to the "Lucia" novels to that occasioned by Anthony Powell's A Dance to the Music of Time, though he thought that Powell's work would not wear as well. He also mentions Benson's appeal for his parents' generation:

Like most of my generation, I had only dimly heard of E.F. Benson, while taking P.G. Wodehouse and Saki with my mother's milk.²²

Having now read Benson as an adult, Waugh commented on the timeless nature of the comedy, and the "unflagging delight" of the novels. These points were echoed by the reviewer in Punch who added this comment about Benson's style.

The suavity and sureness of his attack, the unforced flow of comic invention will ensure a good supply of fresh addicts to join the shell-shocked fans of sixty years ago.²³

Peter Matthews, writing in the journal America, went even further comparing E.F. Benson's work to Anthony Trollope's, and wondering at the enduring fascination of the "Lucia" novels.

²¹E.F. Benson, Make Way For Lucia (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Co., 1977).

²²Auberon Waugh, "913 Pages of Delight," New York Times Book Review, 7 August, 1977, 26-27.

²³David Williams, "Jean Machine," Punch, 27 June, 1979, 1136.

He uses structures and cadences redolent of those which make Thackeray and Trollope such great fun to read aloud, but without a hint of those excesses which make Dickens such a paralyzing bore.

Perhaps that is the key. It is as if Benson has accomplished with a chamber group what Trollope created for full orchestra in, say, the Barset Chronicles. The two have created individual worlds whose inhabitants should not really exact much of our interest and whose problems ought not interest us at all. Before we know it we have been snared; we develop a passionate interest in the characters, their activities and even their gossip.²⁴

In fact, Matthews is indirectly noting what makes E.F. Benson's work so appealing, namely the orchestration of many voices that create a polyphony of humorous discourses. During the 1980s, E.F. Benson's "Lucia" books enjoyed a renaissance of attention. Writers in The Christian Science Monitor,²⁵ The Listener,²⁶ Punch,²⁷ and Book and Magazine Collector²⁸ all regretted that Benson's work had been neglected for so long and welcomed the various reprintings of his books. They called him one of England's finest, but almost forgotten humorists,²⁹ commending his clear-sighted cynicism and restrained irony. Like reviewers before her, Hilary Spurling, writing in The Observer, tried to account for the continued appeal of the "Lucia" books.

But accuracy alone will not account for Benson's vitality and bite, or for the disinterested viciousness running as clear and pure in the Lucia books

²⁴Peter Matthews, "The Giddy, the Grim and the Gay," America, 18 February, 1978.

²⁵"Between Soft Covers," Christian Science Monitor, 2 March 1984.

²⁶Stephen Pile, "Agatha Christie Without the Murders," The Listener, 30 May 1985, 9-10.

²⁷Punch, 7 March 1984, 57.

²⁸Richard Dalby, "E.F. Benson," Book and Magazine Collector, August 1985, 5-13.

²⁹Ibid., 5.

as it once did in Restoration comedy: 'these studies are a tapestry of early-twentieth-century Candours and Back-bites and Sneers' wrote Micheal Mac Liammoir, and indeed conventional opinion has tended to dismiss Benson, as himself a mixture of Tattle and Frail, turning out a tarnished version of the sort of frivolity that was all critics saw until recently in Congreve.³⁰

Spurling, through this comparison of Benson's work to the "blazing honesty and wit" of Congreve, and Christie's habit of rigorous observation and deduction" also finds nothing "vengeful or mean" about Benson's world. This review points out his affinity with other writers in the comic tradition of English literature, as well as reiterating the respect for Benson's work that continues through each generation.

What is interesting about these reviews is that time and again the writers struggle to articulate the distinguishing features of Benson's comedy in the absence of any common critical matrix. Many of the reviewers note the implicit didacticism of these novels that depict self-deluded characters masquerading in a holiday world removed from workaday experience. The holiday world of the Lucia novels, though, is very different from the festive world of Dodo. In Dodo's world, the characters escaped from the social constraints on individual thought and action, re-discovering the values of friendship and love in a "green world" from which destructive self-deceivers were excluded. By contrast, in Lucia's world the deceivers and the self-deceivers reign supreme. Riseholme, and Tilling, are communities that are built on artifice and peopled by credulous fools who allow themselves to be governed by Lucia, the Queen of masks and masquerades. Pretences and disguise are paramount

³⁰Hilary Spurling, review of Queen Lucia, Observer, 4 March, 1984, 23. The comment by Micheal Mac Liammoir is taken from his introduction to Queen Lucia (London: Wm. Heinemann Ltd., 1970), 8.

as individuals try to hide from themselves and others the reality of their physical and intellectual limitations. Those with genuine feelings and gracious attributes do not stay for long in Lucia's world. In the "Lucia" novels Benson is mocking everything he found offensive in society's philistine attitudes towards art and music and literature: the bourgeois impulse to know the price of everything and the value of nothing; the emphasis on the importance of appearances in manner, dress, and possessions.

While it is worth looking at each of the six novels in the "Lucia" series separately to see how Benson draws on earlier traditions in comic characterization, structure and narrative technique and how he adapts, abandons, subverts and inverts them in his management of multi-voiced discourses in each novel, at this stage it might be useful to point out some of the distinguishing features of the Lucia books. These pointers will serve as a guide through the ensuing discussion and indicate the scope and range of E.F. Benson's comic artistry. It is unlikely that at the outset, E.F. Benson thought that he would ultimately write six novels about this ill-assorted collection of middle-aged frauds and faddists, living in comfortable retirement. Nevertheless, from 1920 to 1939 he created a second comic sequence that was quite distinct from the "Dodo" trilogy. The "Lucia" novels, as they came to be known, showed not only the range of his comic inventiveness but also how flexible and polymorphic comedy is. Benson moves away from the "green worlds" of London parks, country-house parties and alpine meadows where Dodo and her friends express their feelings and thoughts with impunity, into the small, provincial enclaves of Riseholme and Tilling where there are no Liberty Halls. Dodo's energetic individualism

was redeemed ultimately by love and grace, but Lucia's primal, amoral urge for power is untouched by those tempering influences. In Lucia's middle-aged, middle-class world there is no genuine love of friends, nature or art; there are only ruthless rivalries in the social arenas of dinner-parties, garden parties and soirées. In Dodo's world feasts and festivals served to remind people of the continuity and splendour of civilized life. In Lucia's world feasts are turned into contests in which duplicitous aggression is paramount. In Riseholme and Tilling the acquisition and sharing of food is only one more round in the endless games of manipulation and exploitation endemic in those closed communities.

Not only does Benson create two distinct worlds in his two comic sequences, he also creates a new set of central characters. And in case his readers miss the point, he uses a common device in comedy, charactonyms, to denote their predominant traits and moral attitudes. Other authors have used comic appellations to indicate social or political pretentiousness, sexual hypocrisy or servile cunning: Ben Jonson's Sir Politic and Lady Would-be, William Congreve's Lady Wishfort, Fainall, Marwood, Foible and Mincing, William Wychereley's Pinchwife and Horner, Oscar Wilde's Ernest, and G.B. Shaw's Brassbound and Doolittle are well-known examples. Much of the humour in the "Lucia" novels comes from a similar ironic coincidence between the characters' names and natures. Mrs. Emmeline Lucas prefers to be called Lucia by her friends. It appeals to her aspirations as an Italian linguist, and underlines her public allegiance to Italian opera, which she considers the quintessence of culture. The Latin prefix in the name of her nickname also means vitality and

energy, her characteristic traits, and is also the prefix to that other vital amoral force, Lucifer. Like him, she is a vigorous element in the community, but her energies are as self-serving, her motives as egocentric as that proud archangel's. Her main antagonist, Miss Mapp, is, on the other hand, as earth-bound as her name suggests. Her solid frame, her unimaginative, mundane needs and love of food and physical comfort are in perennial conflict with Lucia's spirited opportunism. To match this female pair, Benson provides three potential suitors: Major Flint, Captain Puffin and Georgie Pillson. Flint is as testy and choleric as his name and Puffin as short-necked and slow as his namesake. Poor Georgie is as timid and as ineffectual as the boy in the nursery rhyme, "Georgie Porgie." Even the minor characters are given comic designations. The local dentist has a pretentious first name, Algernon, and an ironic second one, Wyse. Far from being wise, he is no match for the ostentatious Mrs. Poppit who pops in between the election and the hopes of the other women and wins matrimony with Wyse and an M.B.E. from the King. Diva Plaistow, unlike her Mercian namesake Godiva, distributes gossip and mischief around the community, not justice and largesse. Piggie and Goosie, the Miss Antrobus twins — relics of the comic pairs so popular in Shakespearean comedies — have self-explanatory names. Georgie's noisy, ungainly, sexually ambiguous sisters, Hermie and Ursy, have names connected with goddesses and constellations. The Reverend Kenneth Bartlett and Irene Coles are dubbed respectively and euphemistically the "Padre" and "Quaint Irene." The former has never been near a military encampment and the latter's unorthodox sexual interests do not endear her to the others. The only genuine person in these novels is

the opera singer Olga Bracely, whose last name might be a conjunction of "bracing" and "grace," as she clearly exhibits the refreshing good-will suggested by these words.

It is also possible to cross-reference Benson's comic characters with those in other comic works as far back as Aristophanes and Terence, though Benson's have their particular idiosyncrasies and compulsions. Lucia is both matrona and eiron, the acquirer of material possessions and the dissembling, wily rogue. Georgie is part parasite, part-flatterer, as well as being the zanni, the dupe. Miss Mapp is the "anus irata" the female version of the "senex iratus," driven by anger, greed and miserliness. Flint and Puffin are the alazons, the "milites gloriosi," boasting of their military and sexual exploits, but secretly timid and cowardly. The Reverend Bartlett with his fake Scottish accent is the pedant. The Wyse, Poppits, and Plaistows round out this menagerie of busy-bodies, clowns and fools. While young people and servants have a role in many comedies in upsetting the rigid order of the social world, in Lucia's world they are marginal. Foljambe and Withers have no say in the action and Isabel Poppit, Mrs. Poppit's daughter, is left to sun-bathe on the dunes. In Lucia's world, outsiders are fortunate to stay outside of Lucia's realm. Far from being scape-goats and malcontents, they provide a sane perspective on the internecine struggles for power. Olga Bracely is happy to remain outside the claustrophobic, narrow society of Tilling. While they may have particular names and character traits, Benson's creations function in a way that is consistent with characters in many other comedies.

Both Helen Gardner³¹ and Harry Levin³² distinguish between characters in tragedies who grow and develop in time and those in comedy who remain fixed. Levin summarizes the distinctions as follows:

But decorum, the observance of the properties is a set of dramaturgic as well as ethical norms, presupposing that everybody should speak and behave — and, if it is a comedy, should stay — in character. If it is a tragedy, he or she may change and grow and develop in accordance with the temporal span. Comic characterization seems to be more spatially oriented, by contrast, more static and two-dimensional. If there is any alteration, it is brought about through metamorphosis rather than growth: through sudden conversion or unmasked disguise or magical enchantment.³³

In all six books in the "Lucia" series the self-absorbed inhabitants of Riseholme and Tilling are ageless and changeless as they gossip, bicker and spy on each other.

Not only are there correspondences between Benson's characters and other comic types in earlier comedies, but the design of his comic plots also accords with the overall patterns and structures found in comedy. In the comedies of Terence, Shakespeare, Congreve, the action is usually driven by the pursuit of love and revolves around the mistakes and misunderstandings arising from the obstacles put in the way of new, productive relationships by rigid, elderly contrivers who frequently disguise their intentions. Comic theorists point out that there is no absence of conflicts, accidents, cross-purposes, anxieties or confrontations in comedy, only that

³¹Helen Gardner, "As You Like It" in More Talking of Shakespeare, edited by John Garrett (London: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd., 1959), 17-32.

³²Harry Levin, Playboys and Kill-joys: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Comedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

³³Ibid., 64-65.

these recurrent features of life are usually resolved by wit, energy and good-will. Benson's communities in the "Lucia" books are filled with such conflicts and duplicities, but the goal is never to create "brave new worlds," merely to replay the same old masquerades in the same old manner. There are no endings to the games; instead the anarchic individuals are reabsorbed, reintegrated into the society. The social goal is not to celebrate new life, but to reaffirm expedient forms, the polite modes and manners that keep social disintegration at bay, as well as excluding truth and beauty.

After this brief synthesis of the prevalent modes of Benson's comedy in the "Lucia" books, you might wonder how these books manage to be at all funny. The answer lies, of course, in the way the characters and actions are presented. Benson uses an increasingly complex, varied and allusive set of narrative levels and voices to entertain and instruct his readers. Before considering how these are laid out in each of the six novels it is useful to identify them. In all the novels there is a polyphony of voices: Lucia's egocentric interpretation of reality is interspersed with her manipulative baby-talk and Italianate affectation; Georgie's anxious, fretful self-analysis is penetrated by Mapp's vindictive scrutinies; Flint's bluster and braggadocio counterpoises Puffin's feeble grumbles; Diva's wheedling insinuations are a foil for Irene's abrupt and forthright expressions. Above and around all these is the pervasive mock-heroic voice of the implied narrator and in his absence the persuasive, frequently parodic, classical, historical and literary allusions that deflate the grandiose delusions of these foolish mortals in Tilling and Riseholme.

Known to her friends and admirers as Lucia, Mrs. Emmeline Lucas appears first in the firmament of Riseholme in Queen Lucia. She is aptly named Lucia for in many ways she is a female Lucifer, proud, wilful, energetic, determined to dominate the world, answerable only to her instincts and desires, and, unlike Dodo, unredeemed by a love of nature or humanity. Significantly, her face is an expressionless mask, registering no emotion, giving away nothing. The cool voice of the implied narrator describes Lucia's face:

Her face was otherwise unlined and bore no trace of the ravages of emotional living, which both ages and softens. Certainly there was nothing soft about her, and very little of the signs of age, and it would have been reasonable to conjecture that twenty years later she would look but little older than she did today. For such emotions as she was victim of were the sterile and ageless emotions of art; such desires as beset her were not connected with her affections. but her ambitions.³⁴

After making a comfortable fortune as a barrister in London, Philip Lucas with his wife, Lucia, has retired to Riseholme to fulfil their social ambitions. Leaving behind them the cultural wasteland of suburban life in Onslow Gardens, these middle-class, middle-aged, childless parvenus have chosen to live in a small provincial town where they can masquerade as an educated, talented upper-class couple. Philip writes pretentious little poems, and Lucia simulates a fluency in Italian and proficiency at the piano. The consummate deceiver indefatigable in her pursuit of power over the community, Lucia uses every disguise in speech and dress to avoid exposure and to gain advantage over others. And as she lives in a world where appearances, not moral values, are the only things that matter, she is extraordinarily successful.

³⁴E.F. Benson, Queen Lucia in Make Way for Lucia (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Inc., 1977), 10.

Her antagonists are a group of familiar comic characters: snobs, fools, gulls and fops and rogues, all struggling to disguise their own weaknesses, anxieties and greed. The inner circle consists of dumpy Daisy Quantock and her gluttonous husband, Robert, the former leaders of social life in Riseholme, now demoted since the arrival of the Lucases, and Georgie Pillson, Lucia's attendant lord, easily duped, confused about his loyalties and his sexuality, and ultimately afraid of emotion. The outer circle consists of the comic twins, Piggie and Goosie, the indistinguishable Misses Antrobus, left-over from Victorian England, or a novel by Trollope; the "miles gloriosus," the braggart Colonel Boucher; the garrulous widow, Mrs. Weston, the aristocratic Lady Ambermere, another absurd relic of England's Victorian and Imperial past, and her pathetic companion, the genteel Miss Lyall. Bolstered by secure financial investments, this middle-aged coterie in Riseholme is secure from the ills of poverty and work, but they cannot escape the normal aging process. They struggle vainly to preserve the charade that they are eternally youthful and active and have "faultless digestions and indefatigable energy."³⁵ They spend their time chasing each new fad in diet, medicine or philosophy. This season Christian Science is out, Yoga and Spiritualism are in. By the end of the novel a magic lozenge will have replaced Eastern mysticism and psychic phenomena as offering the promise of external satisfaction.

The only character who does not pretend to be someone she is not is Olga Bracely, the opera singer. Despite her upbringing in an orphan school in Brixton,

³⁵Benson, *Queen Lucia*, 49.

Olga's innate talent and hard work have resulted in genuine, world-wide success. She is a significant character in Queen Lucia because she provides an ironic perspective on the claustrophobic community of Riseholme. Her frank comments put into proportion the posturings and pretences of the other characters. She is an outsider whose presence, wit and talent threaten to upset the social and political order in this narrow community. In appearance, style and action she embodies the true spirit of the festive celebration of life, art and the imagination, in contrast to Lucia's spurious values.

The action in Queen Lucia occurs between the July of one year and the early Spring of the next and is organized around the social occasions that sustain as well as control this middle-aged group of self-absorbed characters. Throughout that time Lucia uses every devious stratagem to maintain her superior position in Riseholme against a deliberate coup d'état by Daisy Quantock and an unintentional rout by Olga Bracely. The events in this comedy of manners serve to emphasize the pettiness, gullibility and conceit of the characters as they earnestly compete to provide the most lavish hospitality, to wear the most flamboyant clothes and display their most extravagant possessions, while all the while disclaiming their ostentation. The traditional middle-class social gatherings — afternoon teas, dinner parties, church attendance — are arenas for contests in social pre-eminence, not occasions for communal festivity. All the characters, with the exception of Olga Bracely, go to extreme lengths to avoid the traditional disasters in the comic world: public exposure, social embarrassment and loss of face. Three outsiders threaten the delicate balance

of power in Riseholme: the Indian guru, imported by Daisy Quantock, as a reinforcement for her bid to oust Lucia; Olga Braceley, who becomes Georgie's ally in his attempt to disavow his allegiance to Lucia; and Princess Popoffski, the medium, replacing the guru as the source of all enlightenment and meaning for the Riseholmites. The humour in the social conflicts caused by these three outsiders arises from the Riseholmites' vain attempts to disguise their aggressive pursuit of power beneath the appearance of civility.

On a hot, July day Lucia returns from a visit to London to find that her position as leader and arbiter of the tastes and manners in Riseholme has been undermined in her absence. Throughout July, the community of Riseholme is excited by the manoeuvres and counter-manoevres of Lucia and Daisy to gain possession of the guru. Led astray by Daisy's perfidy, even Georgie is tempted to revolt against Lucia's rule by issuing, without consulting her, a luncheon invitation to the celebrated Olga Braceley. The first climax comes at Lucia's garden party when, for a while, it seems that the two star attractions, the guru and Olga Braceley, will not arrive in time to stem the flow of departing guests. However, at about half-past six the miracles begin; the guru emerges, now that Lady Ambermere, who knows India and Indians only too well, has left and Olga and Georgie arrive after their late lunch. So Lucia wins the first round by tenacity and cunning and the opportune exploitation of chance, as well as by the ultimate good-nature of Olga. Guruism now reigns supreme and Lucia is high priestess of the cult, having outwitted Daisy's challenge to her authority. The next threat to Lucia's supremacy comes from the revelation by Georgie's rough-

mannered sisters, Hermý and Ursý, of the true identity of the guru. He is not an Indian prince, but one of the cooks from the Calcutta Restaurant in Bedford Street. To avoid exposure, he escapes from Riseholme, taking with him some of Georgie's treasures as well as the Quantocks' silver. Lucia and her friends, eager to avoid the social humiliation that would result if it were known they have been taken in by a fraud, allow the "tipsy contriver of curry"³⁶ to escape prosecution, rather than face exposure.

In the world of comic action, one masquerade no sooner ends than another begins, and with it renewed possibilities of new accidents and opportunities. The next challenge to Lucia's social position occurs when Olga Braceley settles in Riseholme. Her highly successful, informal parties rival Lucia's static dinner-parties and tableaux vivants. Once again the community is on the verge of breaking up into factional cliques as Lucia loses control over information, social gatherings and the latest fad: she fails to distinguish between the Spanish Quartet and the inferior Brinton ensemble; she is the last to know about Mrs. Weston's engagement; she is not the first to adopt spiritualism and vegetarianism. All seems lost. Lucia has not a "rag of reputation left,"³⁷ when she is saved by Daisy's accidental discovery that the medium, Princess Popoffski, is a fraud, and by Olga's genuinely gracious magnanimity in handing back to Lucia power over this "delicious hole-in-the-corner, lazy back-water of a place."³⁸

³⁶*Ibid.*, 69.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 107.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 56.

Time and again, the action in this comedy comes close to the catastrophe of Lucia's fall from the grace of social eminence through the exposure of her masquerade as a scholar and linguist. She is saved by her energy, her refusal to despair and by her opportune use of chance. She is also helped by the fact that the community of Riseholme knows it can only survive if it keeps itself intact, by excluding external influences. By the end of the novel, friendships are salvaged and social embarrassment has been kept to a minimum. The Lucas', Quantocks and Westons all gather to feast at Georgie's Christmas party, to heal divisions and salve the wounds of damaged self-esteem. In a brilliant ending to this comedy of manners, the warring factions strain to preserve the veneer of social propriety over their animalistic anger and greed:

But half an hour ago, so Georgie reflected, they had all been walking round each other like dogs going on tiptoe with their tails very tightly curled, and growling gently to themselves, aware that a hasty snap, or the breach of the smallest observance of etiquette, might lead to a general quarrel. But now they all had the reward of their icy politenesses; there was no more ice, except on their plates, and the politeness was not a matter of etiquette.³⁹

The indirect discourse of this passage, in which Georgie's acerbic observations are thought not spoken, reinforces the fact that peace has been restored in the animal kingdom in Riseholme, at least for the moment. With its illusions about its status, significance and worth restored, the community settles back into its sheltered and familiar world. Olga departs from this "darling two-penny place which will all go

³⁹*Ibid.*, 135.

inside a nutshell"⁴⁰ and only Georgie finds life flat after her departure. The other Riseholmites have new excitements to absorb them: the first spring flower in Lucia's garden, and the wonderful new lozenges that are guaranteed to promote growth. The trivial material round and the common tasks of sleeping and eating, pretending and playing, do, indeed, provide them with all the satisfaction they need.

All comedies of manners are set in small, closed communities: the two or three county families in Jane Austen's Hampshire, the cathedral closes of Trollope's Barsetshire, the country estates and Mayfair drawing-rooms of Wilde's England in the 1890s. Benson was familiar with and not averse to codes and rituals, accepting that, at their best, they confirmed the value and continuity of social life. What he does implicitly criticize in his comic novels are the people who selfishly and arbitrarily use conventions and forms to stifle spontaneity and joy. In the "Lucia" books, written in the period after the First World War, Benson's settings are distinctly down-market: the converted cottages, the small hotels and parish halls of provincial towns. In order to keep up the appearance of being more important than they are, the inhabitants of these towns have an elaborate set of codes that are only known by the initiates. Only they know when it is appropriate to shop, what is meant by the division of social dress into "Hightum," "Tightum" and "Scrub,"⁴¹ when and what they should eat, when calling cards should be left, how long first visits should take. These absurd conventions are an exercise in bolstering self-importance in controlling new-comers

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 140.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 15.

and in excluding strangers; they are not made out of consideration for others or to preserve the social values of friendship. Lucia, once a usurper herself, uses the Tilling codes to protect her power. Critical of Olga's wildly successful buffet supper party Lucia says in her condescending manner:

I know it [Riseholme] a little better than dear Miss Braceley. Riseholme does not care for that sort of thing. It is not quite in our line.⁴²

She more than anyone perpetuates the charade that Riseholme is a carefree, busy community.

That was part of the charm of Riseholme; it was as if it contained just one happy family with common interests and pursuits.⁴³

In reality, the "family" of Riseholmites is only happy when they are in search of information to use against other "family" members or to protect or promote their own interests. The affectionate tags they use to greet each other are thin disguises masking their predatory, deceitful natures. As the implied narrator reminds us:

Humor in Riseholme was apt to be a little unkind; if you mentioned the absurdities of your friends, there was just a speck of malice in your wit.⁴⁴

Ultimately, they resist Olga's creative spontaneous parties⁴⁵ where for the first time they hear the chimes at midnight because they want no reminders of their true condition. And, although she is able to persuade Colonel Boucher to marry Mrs.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 89.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 85-88.

Weston⁴⁶ and by her singing reminds the Riseholmites, for a moment, of the potential joy and harmony in human existence, eventually they choose the familiar over the novel, the mediocre over the excellent, and limitation over infinite possibility. Like Georgie, they lack the courage to free themselves from the security of their petty preoccupations and venture out of their "back-water"⁴⁷ into the big things in the world: "Seas, continents, people, movements, emotions."⁴⁸ Benson finds it absurd that such a narrow, petty world should be sufficient but he had observed enough uncritical, self-serving people in positions of real power and influence to know his comic figures were not puppets.⁴⁹ Many years before, Henry James had advised Benson to remember that

a story is essentially a form, and that if it fails of that, it fails of its mission.... For the rest, make yourself a style. It is by style we are saved.⁵⁰

In this novel, E.F. Benson establishes his form and style in the comic antithesis between the triviality of his subject matter and his use of mock-heroic and multiple discourses to ridicule the pretentious lives of these shallow people. The objective and at times ironic tones of the implied narrator permeate the novel, though this is not the only voice in the novel. Several other dialogic voices combine to continue the

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 100-101.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 140.

⁴⁹R.H. Benson had called his brother's characters "puppets" (*Final Edition*, 104). This word occurs in a humorous account of an evening the Benson brothers spent parodying each other's style. R.H. Benson was not known for his discrimination or tact.

⁵⁰E.F. Benson, *Our Family Affairs*, 282.

masquerade of deception and self-deception as well as to demonstrate the absurdity of the ridiculous games of these foolish, fallible people. Throughout the novel the mocking, narrative voice of the implied author exposes the folly and futility of the characters' sterile pursuit of power and prestige. Dodo's innate selfishness had been redeemed by her love of her child David, and her respect for the independent paradigms of nature; Lucia's selfishness is unalloyed by love of others or nature. The inexorable voice of the implied narrator outlines the smallness and sterility of her ambitions:

Dynasty she had none, for she was childless, and thus her ambitions were limited to the permanence and security of her own throne as Queen of Riseholme.... As long as she directed her life at Riseholme, took the lead in its culture and entertainment, and was undisputed fountain head of all its inspirations, and from time to time refreshed her memory as to the utter inferiority of London, she wanted nothing more.⁵¹

The implied narrator takes us into the recesses of Daisy Quantock's mind to show what is behind her ingratiating greetings. Daisy Quantock's mindless response to each new situation in her foolish quest for significance is compared to the doomed and foolish attraction of a moth to a flame.

Mrs. Quantock's mind resembled in its workings, the manoeuvres of a moth distracted by the glory of several bright lights. It dashed at one, got slightly singed, and forgetting all about that, turned its attention to the second, and the third, taking headers into each in turn, without deciding which, on the whole, was the most enchanting of those luminaries.⁵²

⁵¹Benson, Queen Lucia, 10.

⁵²Ibid., 29.

The ironic voice of the implied narrator reminds us of the true nature of this happy family.

The hours of the morning between breakfast and lunch were the time which the inhabitants of Riseholme chiefly devoted to spying on each other. They went about from shop to shop on household business, occasionally making purchases which they carried away with them in little paper parcels with convenient loops of string, but the real object of these excursions was to see what everybody else was doing.⁵³

He also points out the spurious nature of their homes. Lucia's home, the Hurst, is as bizarre a mixture of the genuine and the spurious as Lucia is herself. Having remodelled and extended three Tudor cottages she sees herself as a latter-day Queen Elizabeth. The voice of the implied narrator penetrates Lucia's disguises, as with light but unmistakable irony, Lucia's new wing is described as

a shade more inexorably Elizabethan than the stem onto which it was grafted, for here was situated the famous smoking parlour, with rushes on the floor, and a dresser ranged with pewter tankards, and leaded latticed windows of glass so antique that it was practically impossible to see out of them.⁵⁴

The garden is as "inexorably" Elizabethan, though it is easier to see. Lucia's Riseholmite subjects are expected to salute the first flower in it, and they do just that, at the end of the novel, when the rebellions against her queenly authority have been crushed.

Most of the time, though, the implied narrator's voice does not intrude; he allows the characters to reveal their duplicitous and foolish pretensions in their own

⁵³*Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 5.

words. A simple walk from the station becomes a major public relations event, when it is recounted through the egocentric, patronizing narrative voice of Lucia,

After these four hours in the train, a short walk would be pleasant, but though she veiled it from her conscious mind, another motive, subconsciously engineered, prompted her action. It would, of course, be universally known to all her friends in Riseholme that she was arriving today by the 12:26, and at that hour the village street would be sure to be full of them. They would see the fly with the luggage draw up to the door of The Hurst, and nobody except her maid would get out.

That would be an interesting thing for them: it would cause one of those little thrills of pleasant excitement and conjectural exercise which supplied Riseholme with its emotional daily bread. They would all wonder what had happened to her.⁵⁶

Ironically, Lucia is not over-dramatizing the situation. Riseholmites, lacking all spiritual or moral dimensions, are sustained by worldly appearance and show. Their daily bread is the real or supposed trespasses, appearances and possessions of others. Lucia, the consummate deceiver and self-deceiver, uses her dress, manner, expressions, even the furnishings of her home, to continue the masquerade. Lady Ambermere is not impressed by Lucia's remodelled manor. Her frequent use of the adjective "little" reveals her condescension in her "majestic monologues."

"You have a pretty, little garden here, Mr. Lucas," she said, "though perhaps inconveniently small. Your croquet lawn does not look to me the full size, and then there is no tennis court. But I think you have a little strip of grass somewhere, which you use for bowls."⁵⁶

Mrs. Antrobus' conversation is a collection of irrelevancies and digressions in among which are some useful pieces of information which make her "the best observer in

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 59.

Riseholme."⁵⁷ Olga Braceley's speech is as unpretentious as she is. Unimpressed by Lady Ambermere, she notes her rigidity and rudeness.

They were actually going into dinner when we came, a mournful procession of three motheaten men and three whiskered women.... We dined in the family vault and talked about Lady Ambermere's pug.... Then she looked at my pearls and asked if they were genuine. So I looked at her teeth, and there was no need to ask about them.⁵⁸

In direct contrast to Olga's directness is Lucia's ingratiating, social babble,

One little song, Miss Braceley. Just a stanza? Or am I trespassing too much on your good nature? Where is your accompanist? I declare I am jealous of him: I shall pop into his place some day! Georgino, Miss Braceley is going to sing us something. Is not that a treat? Sh-sh, please, ladies and gentlemen.⁵⁹

This passage occurs at the end of the novel when Lucia has regained power, and she can once more wear the mask of queenly authority and civility with ease, sitting

with the farthest-away expression ever seen on a mortal face, while she trespassed on Miss Bracely's good nature.⁶⁰

Now she is secure, Lucia reverts to her familiar pattern of speech, the childish repartee, the pet names, the whimsical phrases that disguise her condescension and glee. The Riseholmites have come home "like sheep that have been led astray"⁶¹ and do not intend to leave the secure fold where they can pursue their illusions that they are in control of all that is needed for happiness and fulfilment. Only Georgie is

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 57.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 139.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*

momentarily dissatisfied with the spurious epiphanies of Riseholme life, "Tommy Luton's measles, the Quantocks's secret, Elizabeth's lover,"⁶² but even he is soon brought back into the fold by the amazing new lozenge that promises to increase his height.⁶³

The ridiculous scale of the delusions of the eponymous heroine of Queen Lucia, the middle-class wife of a retired lawyer from Onslow Gardens, are conveyed through pervasive mock-heroic political and military allusions. Lucia, by ousting Daisy Quantock, has assumed the position of the leader of the social life of Riseholme, ruling triumphantly over this community of aging people on diminished and diminishing incomes. As long as she can be a little more inventive, strong-willed and well-informed than they, she can command them. In an absurd political reference, the implied narrator characterizes the self-aggrandizing delusions of Lucia and this group of hypocrites.

Riseholme might perhaps, according to the crude materialism of maps, be included in the kingdom of Great Britain, but in a more real and inward sense it formed a complete kingdom of its own, and its queen was undoubtedly Mrs. Lucas, who ruled it with a secure autocracy pleasant to contemplate at a time when thrones were toppling, and imperial crowns whirling like dead leaves down the autumn winds. The ruler of Riseholme, happier than he of Russia, had no need to fear the finger of Bolshevism writing on the wall, for there was not in the whole of that vat, which seethed so pleasantly with culture, one bubble of revolutionary ferment. Here there was neither poverty nor discontent nor muttered menace of any upheaval: Mrs. Lucas, busy and serene,

⁶²*Ibid.*, 140.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 142.

worked harder than any of her subjects, and exercised an autocratic control over a nominal democracy.⁶⁴

Written only three years after the Russian revolution, this reference to Bolshevism is very topical. Comparing the petty social wars in Riseholme to these major world forces increases the ludicrous nature of the Riseholmites' actions. The political allusion is repeated to underscore the pettiness of the rivalries in Riseholme. Lucia returns from a brief holiday to find her power challenged. Both Daisy and Georgie are potential rivals, particularly as they have access to new people and ideas that might provide the focus for discontent.

The red star had risen in Riseholme; Bolshevism was treading in its peaceful air, and if Mrs. Quantock was going to secrete her Guru, and set up her own standard on the strength of him, Georgie felt much inclined to ask Olga Bracely to dinner, without saying anything whatever to Lucia about it, and just see what would happen next. Georgie was a Bartlett on his mother's side, and he played the piano better than Lucia, and he had twenty-four hours' leisure every day, which he could devote to being king of Riseholme.... His nature flared up, burning with a red revolutionary flame, that was fed by his secret knowledge about Olga Bracely. Why should Lucia rule everyone with her rod of iron? Why, and again why?⁶⁵

All the ensuing social events, where Lucia struggles to re-establish her control over the community, are described in military terms. Party invitations issued by rival factions are described as "manoeuvres,"⁶⁶ "hostilities"⁶⁷ are declared when one or other of the groups seems to be gaining the upper hand, social events are planned

⁶⁴Benson, Queen Lucia, 4-5.

⁶⁵Ibid., 34-35.

⁶⁶Ibid., 91.

⁶⁷Ibid., 110.

that constitute "declarations of war."⁶⁸ Throughout all the engagements Olga Bracely has no real "revolutionary designs"⁶⁹ on Lucia's "throne"⁷⁰ but Lucia doesn't realize that. And anyway, Olga's talent and style, as well as her refusal to take seriously all the political machinations of this "darling two-penny place,"⁷¹ threaten the community that needs its illusions and delusions that it can survive, perpetually "lean, and young and internally untroubled."⁷² Georgie Pillson is the one member of that community who might escape, who glimpses greater possibilities in relationships, but he resists, retreating to the safety of pretence. Mock-heroic metaphors⁷³ describe his passion for Olga and his rebellion against the malicious mediocrity of Lucia's perceptions. For a while he struggles to detach himself, but ultimately Lucia is too powerful. At the end of the novel, Georgie like the others cannot escape the attractions of mediocrity and delusion that Lucia offers. Genuine insights into his nature or any world outside the familiar are all too frightening, so he returns to Lucia's kingdom, seeking the reassurance of new snares and delusions. In response to Mrs. Quantock's invitation

Lucia put on the far-away look which she reserved for the masterpieces of music, and for Georgie's hopeless devotion.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 84.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 140.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 23.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 68.

"Lovely! That will be lovely!" she said. "Most interesting! I shall come with a perfectly open mind."

Georgie scarcely lamented the annihilation of a mystery. He must surely have imagined the mystery, for it all collapsed like a cardhouse, if the Princess was coming back. The séances had been most remarkable, too; and he would have to get out his planchette again.

"And what's going to happen on Wednesday?" he asked Lucia. "All I know is that I've not been asked. Me's offended."

"Ickle surprise," said Lucia. "You're not engaged that evening, are you? Nor you, dear Daisy That's lovely. Eight o'clock? No, I think a quarter to. That will give us more time. I shan't tell you what it is."

Mrs. Quantock, grasping her lozenges, wondered how much taller she would be by then. As Lucia played to them, she drew a lozenge out of the box and put it into her mouth, in order to begin growing at once. It tasted rather bitter, but not unpleasantly so.⁷⁴

Those who imagine themselves wealthier, handsomer, more powerful or more virtuous than they really are, have long been the object of ridicule in comedy.⁷⁵ If the self-deluded have real political power, their choices and decisions can be devastating, but in the world of comedy consistently false conceptions about worth and status are a source of amusement not terror. In E.F. Benson's comic works, the self-deceivers have little real power or authority, though they imagine they are immortal, all-powerful and invincible. They are, therefore, ludicrous, not hateful or dangerous. Those they command are equally ludicrous, because they consistently prefer the security of being governed by those as vain, petty and self-deceived as themselves. The kingdom of Riseholme gets the monarch it deserves.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 143-144.

⁷⁵Plato, *Philebus* in *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, edited by D.J. Palmer (London: Macmillan, 1984), 26.

Miss Mapp: "The Kill-joy of Tilling"

When he first moved to Rye permanently E.F. Benson was amused by the codes and rituals of this ancient community. With elegant understatement, he recounts how the observance of form prevented him from having tea, but the occasion did provide him with a clear insight into how this tight little society worked.

The Vicar left his card one day but I was out, and once the son of an old friend of my father's asked me to tea. His wife had not come in at the appointed hour, and it was not permissible that tea should be brought up till she arrived. So we admired her budgerigar which flitted screaming about the room, and after we had talked very pleasantly for some while about Henry James, I went back to Lamb House and had tea there. This little incident pleased me immensely: somehow I felt it was Rye, the inner life of Rye.⁷⁶

Rye, and the inner life of its inhabitants, soon became a source of inspiration. From the window of Lamb House he watched

the ladies of Rye, doing their shopping in the High Street every morning, carrying large market baskets, and finding a great deal to say to each other.⁷⁷

Because the "preposterous Lucia"⁷⁸ of Riseholme already had "decent and devout"⁷⁹ following, Benson decided to create a worthy adversary — an "elderly atrocious spinster,"⁸⁰ who is "abhorred and dominant"⁸¹ and "invent a new set of

⁷⁶Benson, *Final Edition*, 161-2.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 162.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 171.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹*Ibid.*

characters who would evolve around the two fussy eager and alert and preposterous women."⁸² Benson like Puck also enjoyed the sight of foolish mortals caught up in action that "befalls preposterously."

There are many prototypes for Miss Mapp and her coterie in Benson's early works, and in his life. An early precursor of Miss Elizabeth Mapp was probably Aunt Elizabeth Grimson in The Climber (1900). Another prototype may be the amorous Miss Machonochie in Benson's semi-autobiographical book, Up and Down (1918).⁸³ There were a great number of retired military men living in Rye at this time. Major Benjamin Flint might have been modeled on a Major Reeves, who was secretary of the Golf Club and Captain Puffin on a Captain Bendall of Oak House Tea Rooms. Algernon Wyse is very similar in manner and appearance to H.E. Luxmoore, a friend of E.F. Benson and his brother, Arthur. And his friend Francis Yeats-Brown used to hail his Indian servants with the words, "Qui-Hi."⁸⁴

It is possible to identify the models of E.F. Benson's comic characters from among his family and friends, but they also have literary ancestors in Greek, Roman and Elizabethan literature. In Miss Mapp, the eponymous heroine is the resident kill-joy, the anus irata and her potential swains in Tilling are the two military swaggerers, the "milites gloriosi," Major Flint and Captain Puffin. Flint is as insensitive and

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³The predatory unmarried women living in Capri who were also satirized by Compton Mackenzie in Vestal Fire (1922) and Extraordinary Women (1928).

⁸⁴The close parallels between the actual town and inhabitants of pre-war Rye, Sussex, and the fictional town of Tilling are examined in Cynthia and Tony Reavell's book E.F. Benson: Mr. Benson remembered in Rye, and the World of Tilling (Rye: The Martello Bookshop, 1984), 73-98.

irascible as his name, and Puffin as clumsy and ungainly on land as his namesake. There is even the classic pedant, Mr. Bartlett the padre, with his phoney Scottish accent and his pretensions to learning. Mrs. and Miss Poppit and the Wysees are the parvenus, the newly-rich representatives of the professional classes who are a serious threat to the older families with their, albeit, tenuous ties to the landed aristocracy. Mapp regards Mrs. Godiva Plaistow as a sexual rival, though she is nowhere near as seductive as her name. Irene Coles, the artist, she dubs "Quaint Irene," to trivialize and minimize her views and influence. Too often, in his earlier works, E.F. Benson's comic characters, though vital, were less significant than the serious ones, appearing only to offer comic contrast. In the "Lucia" books the comic characters are the central agents in the finely integrated patterns of action. They also owe as much to their literary prototypes as their real-life ones.

Prompted by the success of Queen Lucia, Benson set about creating a worthy rival. Daisy Quantock and Georgie Pillson were not in Lucia's league, and Olga Bracely lived in different realms. In creating Miss Elizabeth Mapp, the kill-joy, he was creating a worthy antagonist for Lucia, the play-girl,⁸⁵ whose games are in deadly earnest. The characters do not engage until Mapp and Lucia, published almost a decade later in 1931, but already Mapp's suffocating vindictiveness is clearly antithetical to Lucia's ingenious vitality. In Final Edition, Benson described the genesis of Miss Mapp,

⁸⁵Harry Levin, Playboys and Kill-Joys. In this original study, Harry Levin distinguishes two central aspects of comedy: the ludicrous and the forbidding. In Benson's "Lucia" comedies Lucia and Miss Mapp exhibit these qualities in their conflicts.

She should be the centre of social life, abhorred and dominant, and she should sit like a great spider behind the curtains in the garden-room, spying on her friends.⁸⁶

He sets his spider in Rye, which he renames Tilling, but "no-one could mistake where the scene is laid."⁸⁷ By placing his comic characters in this realistic setting their absurdities and eccentricities seem more credible. Benson deliberately selects the trivial events of everyday life in Tilling because,

"of course, it would all be small beer, but one could get a head upon it of jealousies and malignities and devouring inquisitiveness. Like Moses in Pisgah, I saw a wide prospect, a Promised Land, a saga infinitely unveiling itself."⁸⁸

The mock-heroic tone and allusive parallels that permeate the Lucia series are evident in this passage. Were he alive today, Benson would probably enjoy the irony that the "Promised Land" of an enduring literary reputation is based on those chronicles of "small beer."

In contrast to Lucia, whose name is associated with light, cunning and versatility, Miss Elizabeth Mapp is firmly anchored on earth. Georgie describes her as "globular, like a map of the world."⁸⁹ While Lucia's strength is that she is devoid of emotion, her desires only connected to her ambitions, not her affections, Miss Mapp's vivifying emotions are chronic rage and curiosity.

⁸⁶Benson, Final Edition, 162.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid., 163.

⁸⁹E.F. Benson, Mapp and Lucia in Make Way for Lucia (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977), 460.

Anger and the gravest suspicions about everybody had kept her young and on the boil.⁹⁰

Much of Miss Mapp's spleen is vented against the reduction in quality and style of life that people in her class had to endure after the First World War. Faced with a diminishing income, lacking the knowledge or ingenuity to capitalize on the lucrative opportunities for speculation, she shelters behind the pretence of moral scruple. She does not have enough gold to gloat over it as Volpone did, instead she spies on her neighbours from the large bow window of her pre-eminent house, speculating on their motives, feelings and actions. Greedily, she collects intimate details about her neighbour's lives — when they brush their teeth, what they eat for breakfast, when they go to bed — hoping, thereby, to gain power by subterfuge. Such activity is indispensable in the Gulag; in comedy it is exposed and ridiculed.

V.S. Pritchett called the characters in E.F. Benson's comedies "sexless."⁹¹ While it is true that many of the characters in the "Lucia" series sublimate their sexual energies in the pursuit of money, power and place, throughout this novel Miss Mapp is in sexual pursuit of the hapless Major Flint, although she is too prudish to admit to such disgusting feelings. Much of the comic conflict arises from Miss Mapp's struggles to outwit two potential rivals, Godiva Plaistow, and the widowed Mrs. Poppit, the Contessa Faraglione and even Quaint Irene, who is much more inclined towards the love that dares not speak its name. Using the traditionally female wiles

⁹⁰E.F. Benson, Miss Mapp in Make Way for Lucia (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977), 293.

⁹¹V.S. Pritchett, "E.F. Benson," The Tale-Bearers: Literary Essays (New York: Random House, 1980), 19.

of making herself physically attractive and of providing food for the male, Miss Mapp competes with her most immediate rival, Diva, for dresses and recipes. Each tries to outwit and expose the other in order to win the attention of the choleric Major. The female rivalry over appearance and food may seem petty but the emotions roused are not, because the stakes, the social prestige of marriage, are high.

The first round in the sexual wars takes place at Isabel Poppit's bridge party. Partnered by Major Flint, Mapp is an ineffectual player, and the game is won by Irene and the padre. Having eaten too much of the red-currant fool that is generously laced with champagne and brandy, Miss Mapp drops all pretence at civility, and the afternoon game disintegrates into a primeval contest. In a scene that is a parody of the Tranby Croft affair of 1891,⁹² charges and counter-charges of cheating fly round the card table and the game continues far into the night. The vicar does manage to fit in a baptism between games, as Isabel's house is near the church, but for the most part he and the others are oblivious of time, duty and responsibility. Miss Mapp loses the game of cards, but wins the company of the eligible bachelors who escort her home. Her social victory, though, is short-lived. Isabel Poppit's mother has received the M.B.E.⁹³ for her community work and has valuable information about the Prince of Wales's visit to nearby Ardingly Park. So at the end of round one, Miss Mapp has lost the card game, lost face by becoming tipsy, and

⁹²E.F. Benson, "Two Scandals" in *As We Were: A Victorian Peep-Show* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), 206-221.

⁹³E.F. Benson was awarded the M.B.E., so there is a touch of self-parody here.

lost, for a while, the preeminent position of knowing everything that is going on in the community.

The next round in the sexual contest between the middle-aged women is over appearance. The ladies of Tilling refuse to admit that their reduced incomes drive them to make petty economies: instead, they pretend they are ingenious and thrifty. Diva Plaistow intends to appliqué roses cut from old chintz curtains on to a jacket and skirt and impress the others at the next bridge party. Not to be out-done, Elizabeth Mapp uses poppies from her old chintz curtains to similar effect, though she makes her maid, Withers, do the work. Their struggle for power is dubbed, mock-heroically, "The Wars of the Roses."⁸⁴ Elizabeth's dress is finished before Diva's and she parades triumphantly down the High Street wearing it. Diva, in a brilliant manoeuvre that negates Elizabeth's triumph, gives her rose-covered dress to her maid, Janet. Consequently, Elizabeth now is not a fashion leader of the middle-classes, instead she is classified as wearing servant's garb. Elizabeth is outraged at her friend's deception and cunning. Not acknowledging her own duplicity, she quarrels with Diva, but the conflict is short-lived as both women want to wear their dresses. The duel over dresses is not over though. Unknown to each other, Elizabeth and Diva have engaged dress-makers to copy a fashionable dress in king-fisher blue material worn by Mrs. Trent, a society hostess. Both turn up in identical outfits at Elizabeth's autumn afternoon bridge-party. Basking in Major Flint's compliments, Elizabeth is horrified to

⁸⁴Benson, *Miss Mapp*, 359.

find Diva in the same "staggeringly lovely costume."⁹⁵ The men attempt to be gallant, but these mismatched "twins" are not amused.

Naturally the malice of the cards decreed that Miss Mapp and Diva should sit next to each other as adversaries at the same table, and the combined effort of two lots of king-fisher blue was blinding.⁹⁶

The comedy of errors continues as each woman dyes her dress, both unfortunately choosing the same colour, crimson. Mapp arriving late to Mrs. Poppit's party finds Diva in front of her in

the crimson lake of Mrs. Trent's second toilet, which had rendered Newport like the queen of Sheba, with no spirit left in it. There is a fatality about great beauty, and Mrs. Trent's second toilet had caused devastation again, this time in Tilling.⁹⁷

The implied narrator's exaggerated tone, excessive use of alliteration, and grandiose allusions heighten the comic effect of the disproportion between the triviality of the incident and the extreme embarrassment each woman feels. Having no inner life, their self-esteem is based solely on their exterior appearance and, consequently, they are devastated when they look foolish.

Diva is not Elizabeth's only rival in her sexual intrigues. The social-climbing Susan Poppit is also a threat, with her sables and her Rolls-Royce. When Elizabeth notices, though, that Susan's sables are draped frequently over Mr. Wyse's chairs, it is clear that she is out of the running as a serious rival for Flint's attentions. For a while, Wyse's sister-in-law, the Contessa Faraglione, distracts and excites Flint, but

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 378.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 405.

fortunately her departure for Capri prevents any further dalliance. In her obsessive pursuit of Major Flint, Elizabeth even thinks that Quaint Irene might be a rival. Her blatant, if ambiguous, sexuality directly contrasts with the lady-like prudery of Elizabeth and Diva. Elizabeth thinks Irene is the "Disgrace of Tilling and her sex, the suffragette, post-impressionist artist...., the socialist and germanophile"⁹⁸ because she wears trousers, dresses, smokes, and paints nude men and women and lives "in a queer way" with her "gigantic maid."⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the men like Irene's directness and humour and ignore Elizabeth Mapp's veiled slanders.

In comedy, the pattern of events is often repetitive, reflecting the narrowness and folly of the character's lives as well as their inability ever to change. In Miss Mapp, the absurd rivalries of the women over their appearance and social prominence is paralleled by the men's competitiveness over golf and their professional reputations. In a spirit of camaraderie Major Flint and Captain Puffin decide to share their evenings studying and drinking, in an attempt to withstand attentions of their "fair friends."¹⁰⁰ Their cordiality, though, is short-lived. They are well-aware of the frailties of the "pert little fairies"¹⁰¹ who "have a pretty, sharp eye for each other's failings. They have no sooner finished one squabble than they begin another,"¹⁰² but they are oblivious to their own greed, vanity and contentiousness. During their

⁹⁸ibid., 304.

⁹⁹ibid., 305.

¹⁰⁰ibid., 348.

¹⁰¹ibid.

¹⁰²ibid.

convivial evenings more time is spent drinking and bragging about their youthful vigour, sexual prowess and professional achievements than in working. Inevitably the camaraderie disintegrates into recriminations, as each man surreptitiously tries to take more than his fair share of whisky. In an outburst of self-righteous manliness, Flint, foolhardily, challenges Puffin to a duel. Both men try to escape by the dishonourable recourse of taking the early morning train to London. To avoid public humiliation, the men make a pact to hide their cowardice from the world, an action that is similar to Diva's and Elizabeth's truce at the end of the "Wars of the Roses." The parallelism in the events in Miss Mapp reinforces the comic spectacle of the childish behaviour of middle-aged adults competing futilely to maintain the illusion of genteel, scholarly behaviour. Naturally, Puffin's and Flint's movements have not gone unnoticed. A network of informants, servants and neighbours have seen their early morning excursion and offer a range of interpretations to explain their unprecedented actions. The Reverend Bartlett feels bound to search for the two men, who, it is rumoured, are fighting a duel on the dunes. Instead of finding bloodied corpses, he stumbles across the men engaged in a friendly game of golf. The comic effect of this anti-climax is intensified when the community believes the men were fighting for the love of Elizabeth. Only she suspects the truth, that whisky was more important to Flint and Puffin than women. Her suspicions are confirmed after an embarrassing encounter late one night with the two intoxicated men who catch her spying on them. To protect her reputation as the object of two men's desire, she spreads the word that they are cowards, and forces an apology from the hapless Major Flint. Mapp's

reputation is also saved by two other incidents over which she has no control: the departure of the Wyse and the Contessa for the warmer climate of Capri, and the accidental death of Captain Puffin.

All his life Benson was intrigued and amused by small communities of people, similar in age, class, interests and ambitions, whether in public schools, in the upper ranks of Mayfair society, in Lambeth palace, Bayreuth, or Capri. He frequently wrote about the absurd struggles by the schoolboys, hostesses, clerics, musicians and writers to maintain their prestige and to preserve their exclusivity by deterring outsiders. In Queen Lucia, the comic world was Riseholme; in Miss Mapp he creates the comic microcosm of Tilling to mock the codes and conventions of those other enclosed societies, where often manners were divorced from morals. Throughout Miss Mapp there are references to the "Cosmic Consciousness" of Tilling and the Tilling Code. Although Tilling has a recognizable, geographic model, Rye, the consciousness of Tilling is an imaginative construct of a society where spurious forms have long ago replaced the substance of civility and harmony. Tillingites claim to value restraint, courtesy and good manners in social behaviour, but their social niceties, trite phrases and code-words, "Qui-Hi," "Au reservoir" "Scriggle" and "Any News," mask their innate aggression. Tillingites cling to what they imagine are genteel ways. They wear old clothes, disdain automobiles, entertain unostentatiously, pretending that this is the proper way for ladies and gentlemen to conduct themselves. They never admit that the real reason for these stratagems is that they do not have the income to sustain a more extravagant life-style. They struggle to

keep servants, as this is an indication of status, but pay them poorly and treat them badly. Tillingites claim not to be snobbish, but they surreptitiously dress in their best clothes, buy flags and wait expectantly at the station in anticipation of a Royal visit. Although she claims to scorn such sycophantic behaviour, when Elizabeth hears that the Prince sat on her step and smoked a cigarette, she searches feverishly for the royal relic. When Susan Poppit receives the coveted distinction of an M.B.E, the envious Tillingites minimize the achievement by insisting that it is not polite to talk about honours, prizes and distinctions. Above all, they claim to despise gossip, and then promulgate it at every opportunity. Their conduct is an inversion of the chivalric codes of courtesy, duty, grace and honour that were the hall-marks of English gentility. In reality, the Tillingites are selfish, greedy, hypocritical and parsimonious.

The petty, foolish conflicts of the inhabitants of Tilling are played out against the ordered and serene background of the changing seasons, a contrast that highlights the vanity of human preoccupations. In this novel, Benson uses descriptions of nature to register this discrepancy. Tilling, itself, is peaceful and inspiring.

There is not in all England a town so blatantly picturesque as Tilling, nor one, for the lover of level marsh land, of tall reedy dykes, of enormous sunsets and rims of blue sea on the horizon, with so fortunate an environment.¹⁰³

But the Tillingites are oblivious to aesthetic and spiritual values. Though they listen devoutly to the Padre's sermons about the brevity of life and the importance of

¹⁰³*ibid.*, 305.

matters eternal,¹⁰⁴ they merrily engage in trivial rivalries and self-deception, even in church.

"Peace on earth and mercy mild," sang Miss Mapp, holding her head back with her uvula clearly visible. She sat in her usual seat close below the pulpit, and the sun streaming in through a stained-glass window opposite made her face of all colours, like Joseph's coat. Not knowing how it looked from outside, she pictured to herself a seat of celestial radiance coming from within, though Diva, sitting opposite, was reminded of the iridescent hues observable on cold boiled beef."¹⁰⁵

The agile shift from direct discourse to indirect discourse in this passage underlines Elizabeth's self-delusion about her beauty and spirituality, and Diva's more vindictive interpretation of the scene.

In general the residents of Tilling are indifferent to the world of the spirit, or of nature. Occasionally they affect a regard for nature under the guise of gentility and innocence. Elizabeth, relentless in her pursuit of information about who has been invited to the Poppit's bridge-party, chatters sweetly to the Padre and Diva that "the white butterflies were enjoying themselves so in the sunshine of my garden. And the swallows."¹⁰⁶ The Padre wastes time with his archaic banter about Elizabeth's butterflies, but eventually he is manoeuvred into revealing his social plans for the afternoon which was the real purpose behind Elizabeth's opening greeting. On this occasion another insect in the animal kingdom is called into service,

¹⁰⁴*ibid.*, 371-372.

¹⁰⁶*ibid.*, 427.

¹⁰⁸*ibid.*, 302.

"Busy B? Busy Bartlett, quo' she! Yes, I'm a busy B today, Mistress Mapp. Sermon all morning, choir practice at three, a baptism at six. No time for a walk today, let alone a bit turn at the gowf."

Miss Mapp saw her opening, and made a busy beeline for it.

"Oh, but you should get regular exercise, Padre," said she. "You take no care of yourself. After the choir practice now, and before the baptism, you could have a brisk walk. To please me!"

"Yes. I had meant to get a breath of air then," said he. "But ye guid Dame Poppit has insisted that I take a wee hand at the cartes with them, the wifey and I. Prithee, shall we meet there?"

("That makes seven without me," thought Miss Mapp in parenthesis.)¹⁰⁷

When convenient, Elizabeth Mapp assumes a sentimental regard for God's creatures, but she has no illusions about their capacity to be "red in tooth and claw." After Captain Puffin's death, having successfully beaten off her rivals for Flint's attention, she moves in for the "coup de grâce," like the predatory starling who had devoured the carefree, pretty butterfly.

It was not a white butterfly, but a tortoiseshell, very pretty, and in order to let it enjoy itself more, she opened the window and it fluttered out into the garden. Before it had flown many yards, a starling ate most of it up, so the starling enjoyed itself, too.

Miss Mapp fully shared in the pleasure first of the tortoiseshell and then of the starling, for she was enjoying herself very much, too, though her left wrist was terribly stiff. But Major Benjy was so cruel; he insisted on her learning that turn of the wrist which was so important in golf.

"Upon my word, you've got it now, Miss Elizabeth," he had said to her yesterday, and then made her do it all over again fifty times more. ("Such a bully!") Sometimes she struck the ground; sometimes she struck the ball; sometimes she struck the air. But he had been very much pleased with her. And she was very much pleased with him. She forgot about the butterfly and remembered the starling.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 432.

Using nature as her exemplar, Elizabeth appears to restore Flint's zest for life, playing golf with him and adorning him with snowdrops, Nature's sweet reminders of life's regenerative powers, but in reality he has been snapped up by Miss Mapp as swiftly as the starling devoured the butterfly.

In the comic world of Tilling, only appearances matter, so it is inevitable that dress, food and drink play a central role in Tilling's social and sexual contests. Each time the group meets for bridge, or tea, or dinner, each member vies for attention and influence. The one with the most attractive clothes, the original menu or the means to order exotic food is the one who wins. In civilized communities, and in festive comedies, the sharing of food and drink is associated with the renewal of friendships. In the comic world of Tilling, the reverse is the case. Feasts and festive occasions are not times for refreshment, they are occasions for manipulation and exploitation.

Elizabeth and Diva squabble over the right to use Elizabeth's "ancestral" recipe for iced red-current fool, which in fact, is her own concoction, not her grandmother's. By withholding the recipe, or by only giving away part of it, Elizabeth hopes to embarrass Diva while she, herself, appears generous and kindly. In a classic example of ironic reversal, Elizabeth drinks Diva's potent version of the recipe and is the one made to look foolish. In comedy, no one character is necessarily better than any other. Diva, in her turn, uses food to get revenge. Her feast of crab and port is sufficient to elicit information from the *Padre* about the aborted duel between Elizabeth's supposed rival suitors Flint and Puffin. Elizabeth resents Miss Susan

Poppit's extravagant hospitality of those "incessant lunches and teas"¹⁰⁹ that have fed Tilling into submission, not because they are ostentatious but because she cannot compete with them. Mr. Wyse uses courtly luncheons of quail and figs, imported from Capri, to ingratiate himself into Tilling life, and to secure the affections of the wealthy Susan Poppit. The women try to steal each other's recipes and the men each other's whisky.

Miss Mapp's surreptitious hoarding of food, in anticipation of shortages that might result from threatened strikes, is the most dramatic representation of how important food is to these selfish, hypocritical people, and how they greedily pervert its function as a main-stay of life and an occasion for celebration into a means of vengeful exploitation. Diva detects that Elizabeth is hiding the illicit tins of meat, milk, jam, and fruit and the bags of flour behind a false bookcase, which in itself is a pleasing irony, as Mapp is always more interested in the matters physical than intellectual. During a bridge game, Diva publicly reveals Elizabeth's duplicity and greed, by surreptitiously unlatching the door to the secret cupboard. Elizabeth, though, escapes opprobrium because, in Tilling, a hypocritical preservation of the social order is much more important than truth. So Elizabeth's excuse that she is collecting the food to distribute to needy parishioners is unchallenged. And though to believe this required "a faith so childlike as to verge on the imbecile,"¹¹⁰ the

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 298.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 346.

group tactfully avoids any discussion of strikes, or food hoarding, and continues playing the game of bridge.

The ultimate ironic reversal of the normal expectation that food is life-sustaining is when Captain Puffin drowns in his soup. The black humour of this incident is not lost, even on the mousy Mrs. Bartlett, although, typically, her first thought is for herself,

"Lungs are full of ox-tail. Oh, dear me! A stroke first, and he fell forward with his face in his soup plate and got his nose and mouth quite covered with the soup. He was drowned. All on dry land and in his bedroom. Too terrible. What dangers we are all in!"¹¹¹

E.F. Benson's ironic, mock-heroic tone and his pervasive use of classical, historical and literary allusions in the novel heighten the incongruity between the puniness of the characters quarrelling over food, sex, and drink and the grandiose view they have of themselves. In the morning ritual of shopping in Tilling, armed with the baskets that are the emblems of their authority, the women buy and sell information as well as provisions. If the "tide in the affairs of Tilling"¹¹² is taken at the flood all will be revealed about who is entertaining whom to dinner or tea. The political destinies of Tilling society are determined not by conquest, but by gossip. Miss Mapp's recipe is an "ancestral"¹¹³ dish. Her plan to watch the Prince's arrival, but not appear sycophantic, takes on the grandeur of a "Euclidian proposition."¹¹⁴

¹¹¹*ibid.*, 431.

¹¹²*ibid.*, 299.

¹¹³*ibid.*, 297.

¹¹⁴*ibid.*, 391.

Diva's intuition that Mapp is hoarding food is compared in significance to Newton's insight into the laws of gravity.¹¹⁵ Elizabeth regards Diva's action in dressing her maid in the costume Elizabeth had copied as an act of treachery and low cunning that is unrivalled in all "the records of history."¹¹⁶ The petty contest between the women is dubbed "The War of the Roses,"¹¹⁷ likening their absurd stitchings to a dramatic epoch in English history. When Mapp's private hoard of food cascades down in front of her bridge-party guests, Diva feels like Christina Rossetti; "The birthday of her life had come."¹¹⁸ Her plan to divine the truth about the duel between Puffin and Flint springs into her mind like "Athene," "full grown and panoplied from the brain of Zeus."¹¹⁹ A Hardy-esque indifference of nature to the suffering individual is parodied in the description of Mapp's feelings as she watches Diva's maid sporting the rose-chintz outfit.

A light, autumnal mist overlay the miles of marsh, but the sun was already drinking it up, promising the Tillingites another golden day.... All those things were pitilessly unchanged, and Miss Mapp noted them blankly.¹²⁰

Despite the increasing complexity of E.F. Benson's narrative techniques, the comic inventiveness of his characterization, his stylish parody of the manners that

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 332.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 339.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 359.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 345.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 362.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 339.

mask hypocrisy and malice, Miss Mapp was not as favourably reviewed as Queen Lucia. There was also the same distrust of his wit, the same demand for a more high-minded, serious novel. The Spectator was condescending about Benson's style and impatient with his subject matter.

Not even the smart and natty writing of Mr. Benson can galvanize any life into the futilities of his Sussex Tilling.¹²¹

The reviewer in The Times Literary Supplement noted Benson's ability to make him laugh but he was almost ashamed of finding such petty, jealous, malicious people amusing. He also thought his characters unappetizing.

Mr. Benson is playing a game, and a game that he has long been known to play better than most — the game of mimicking stupid and illbred people. They make good flavouring, but poor food.¹²²

Even the transatlantic reviewers were unsettled by Benson's portrayal of unredeemed and irredeemable vision of humankind. Gerald Gould in Saturday Review noted

Mr. Benson is a satirist. He invents prodigiously mean and silly people and then, by exposing them in ridiculous situations, rubs in how silly and mean they are. But, as he never credits any of them with even the smallest degree of sense, pluck or kindness, the satire entirely fails of its effect. The whole book is utterly unworthy of Mr. Benson's considerable reputation.¹²³

¹²¹Review of Miss Mapp, The Spectator, 23 December, 1922, 975.

¹²²Review of Miss Mapp, The Times Literary Supplement, 5 October 1922, 630.

¹²³Gerald Gould, review of Miss Mapp, Saturday Review, 4 November, 1922, 684.

The New York Times, the reviewer noted the "small souls"¹²⁴ of these mean-spirited and snobbish people, finding Miss Mapp "excessively disagreeable."¹²⁵ He thought the characters were credible, the style amusing and clever, but regretted the absence of a sequential plot.

There is not even the slenderest thread of a plot, but is rather a chronicle of the more or less unrelated doings of Tilling society in general, and of Miss Elizabeth Mapp in particular.¹²⁶

And he was glad not to be anywhere within the ambit of Miss Mapp. The power and extent of Mapp's vindictiveness¹²⁷ was clear to Michael Mac Liammoir writing in 1970. He also remarked on the verisimilitude as well as the timelessness of the characters, who like Benson himself had been young in the 1890s.

Their youthful bloom in fact belonged to the Beardsley period, although healthy, right-minded moralists of the Mapp type would have scorned to have anything to do with the world created by that remarkable young man. Maturity descended more swiftly on people in those days before Sigmund Freud or Elizabeth Arden had been invented, for in the years preceding 1918 nobody drank orange juice or bothered their head about calories or complexes.¹²⁸

Perhaps when seen in isolation the unrelenting malevolence of Miss Mapp, barely masked by her hyena-like smile and feigned affection and the apparent triviality of her masquerades, is too dark a view of human nature to be easily assimilated.

¹²⁴Review of Miss Mapp, The New York Times Book Review, 4 February, 1923, 14.

¹²⁵Ibid.

¹²⁶Ibid.

¹²⁷Michael Mac Liammoir, Foreword in Miss Mapp by E.F. Benson (London: William Heinemann, 1970), 1-6.

¹²⁸Ibid., 1.

Nevertheless, when this novel is set in the context of the others in the "Lucia" sequence, Miss Mapp's malevolence is offset by Lucia's spirited egoism, and both are tempered by the constraints of the community and the vision of a world outside the environs of Tilling, provided by Olga, and even Georgie.

In his next but one novel, Mapp and Lucia, E.F. Benson wisely brought together both the best and the worst of Riseholme and Tilling. In the meantime he returned to his earlier, more attractive creation, Lucia, changing her setting, but not her soul.

Lucia in London — "Rus et urbe"

Because comedy usually celebrates the conservation and continuity of life, there is the endless opportunity for the comic artist to write sequels. There is rarely a sense of finality in comic literature; the protagonists usually survive, the conflicts resolved, or contained, and the society changed or made more accommodating. Of course, there is a danger that sequels will lack the vitality and freshness of the initial work. Most of the critics and reviewers made a point of noting that Benson's sequels usually avoided that hazard. Gilbert Seldes wrote

Mr. Benson's achievement will always be a trap to novelists who imagine that they can break the tradition of sequels. It is a formula of reviewing that sequels are never as good as the first work, but after writing "Queen Lucia" Mr. Benson wrote "Lucia in London," and then, introducing Miss Mapp in a volume devoted entirely to herself, wrote a sequel in both series, and, as if that were not enough, published last season, fifteen years after the first of this series, "The Worshipful Lucia," and they are all so magnificently done that it is hard to say, even with all the sentiment in the world in favor of a first appearance, that any one is better than any other.¹²⁹

After the popular success of Queen Lucia and Miss Mapp, Benson allowed his comic heroine an adventure in the metropolis, before consigning her permanently to the country.

Lucia in London was published in 1927 five years after Miss Mapp. In the interim Benson had not been idle. During these years, he wrote two books of ghost stories, Visible and Invisible (1924), reminiscences of undergraduate life, David of King's, five serious novels, Peter (1922), Colin (1923), Colin II (1925), Alan (1924),

¹²⁹Gilbert Seldes, "The Lucian Order" in All About Lucia. Four novels by E.F. Benson: Queen Lucia, Miss Mapp, Lucia in London, Mapp and Lucia (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co. Inc., 1936), lix-xiii.

and Rex (1925), two social satires, Mezzanine (1926), and Pharisees and Publicans (1926), and a nostalgic, affectionate portrait of Mary Benson, Mother (1925). The same year that Lucia of London was published, his biography of Sir Francis Drake was issued.

Making fun of those who live in the country, or those who come from the country to the metropolis, is a feature of many comic plays and novels. County dwellers are usually depicted as cloddish, socially inept or innocent. When they move to town they are either exploited or educated, losing or gaining money, position and sexual authority. William Wycherley's play The Country Wife (1675) best exemplifies the tradition of the comic contrast between town and country manners. By the end of the play, the ingenue Margery has been taught the ways of the world and is an accomplished deceiver. In his play The Importance of Being Earnest, Oscar Wilde turns the pastoral tradition on its end with witty paradoxes. Lady Bracknell protests that the ingenue, Gwendolen, "a girl with a simple unspoiled nature," "could hardly be expected to reside in the country."³⁰ E.F. Benson, in Lucia in London, also takes the tradition, exploits and adapts it. Lucia is no ingenuous country girl, in fact, she is a study in disingenuousness. Fresh from the triumphs of the Riseholme insurrections in Queen Lucia, and fuelled by a substantial legacy from Philip's aunt, the heiress prepares to conquer London society.

Portraits of ambitious social climbers appear in many of Benson's earlier novels. In the Dodo series parvenus like Dorothea Vane give jaded society spontaneity and

³⁰Oscar Wilde, "The Importance of Being Earnest" and Other Plays (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1986).

vigour. Less appealing "nouveaux riches" appear in The Climber (1908) and in Benson's comic menagerie, The Freaks of Mayfair (1916). This gallery of grotesques includes the following: the compleat snob, who replaces the compleat gentleman as the model of excellence; hermaphrodite men and gossiping women searching for meaning in fads and fantasies; titled relics, clinging to archaic mores; sexually inhibited maidens as well as promiscuous, aging "grizzly kittens;" Christian pastors who are muscular and materialistic, and two kinds of social climbers, the horizontal and the perpendicular. The horizontal climber never makes it to the top of the "Tree of Society" because "unlike the happier apes who have a *flair* for altitude and bird-song, these less fortunate sisters have only a *flair* for clinging and proceeding."¹³¹ They cultivate the "wrong people" and ignore those who have helped them begin their ascent. The perpendicular climber selects a mentor from the "right class" and then proceeds with patience, tact and purpose to climb to the topmost branches. The successful social climber "never gave herself airs, nor was she grovellingly humble, she merely enjoyed herself enormously."¹³² Lucia Grimson in The Climber, one of the few novels that Benson did not regret writing, is similar to Dodo and Emmeline Lucas. An unashamedly materialistic young woman, she manages to snare a titled husband. As she grows older, her lack of feeling for others and shallow preoccupations isolate her from other people. In this novel which is more a cautionary

¹³¹E.F. Benson, The Freaks of Mayfair, Illustrations by George Plank (London: T.N. Foulis, 1916), 146.

¹³²Ibid., 177.

tale than a comedy, the egocentric heroine through her own folly ends her days in the bleak, ugly, suburban world she had tried to escape from when she was young.

Mrs. Emmeline Lucas is neither a grotesque, nor an exemplar in a moral fable. She is the comic heroine, a wilful, energetic force capable of turning death, disgrace and social defeat to her advantage. In her world, illness and death are occasions for envious calculations about income and bequests, not times for communal grieving. The death of Philip's octogenarian Aunt Amy, the opening incident in the novel, even allows Lucia a respite from social contests which she was in danger of losing and allows her to put on a show of emotions she can never feel. It also sets in motion a round of comic calculations by Georgie Pillson, Daisy and Robert Quantock and the rest of the "parliament" of Riseholme about the location, size and extent of Aunt Amy's property. In their feverish quest to discover the amount of the bequest Georgie, whose sole aim in life is his physical comfort, allows his bath water to run cold,¹³³ and Daisy, whose housekeeping is meticulous, trails garden dirt into her drawing room in her haste to work out Lucia's financial gains.¹³⁴ Meantime Lucia is masquerading as the grief-stricken niece, burdened with the responsibility and worry of owning property in London. In a series of "eloquent, well-ordered sentences"¹³⁵ she prepares Riseholmites for the "live bomb"¹³⁶ that she is going to leave Riseholme.

¹³³E.F. Benson, *Lucia in London* in *Make Way for Lucia* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977), 151.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 152.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, 158.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, 159.

The community of Riseholme has not changed. It is the same as it was in Queen Lucia. Still searching for the ultimate diet, the latest information, or the most novel pastime, the Quantocks, Antrobuses and Georgie are bound together by their contiguity of age, class and experience. Unsettled by the news of death, for they believe themselves immortal, they quickly dispense with the conventional expressions of condolence, and set about the far more significant business of trying to find out exactly how much Lucia and Philip have inherited. The Riseholmites prepare to make new alliances, and abandon old ones, as they hope to share in the Lucas' social and financial advancement. Lucia, feigning grief and indifference to mercenary matters, observes their intrigues with her "gimlet"¹³⁷ eye. In fact, she is preparing to abandon Riseholme. All the while, she is praising Riseholme's "lovely seriousness and its gaiety, its culture, its absorption in all that is worthy in art and literature, its old customs, its simplicity,"¹³⁸ she is already adopting the styles fashionable in the metropolis, in preparation for her abandonment of this small town. She has her hair shingled, her skirts shortened, replaces Beethoven's music with Stravinsky's, buys a wireless and learns to play auction bridge. Supported by Aunt Amy's bequest of £3,000 per annum and a house in Brompton Square, Lucia has ample opportunity to cultivate her twin passions for power and self-promotion. Lucia conducts calculated raids on London society with the same audacity and success that Sir Francis Drake used to harass and pillage the Spanish fleets. But, just as Drake had to accommodate

¹³⁷ibid., 158.

¹³⁸ibid., 171.

himself to the demands of English society, Lucia learns to respect the community of Riseholme and recognize the limits of her funds and energies in the upper reaches of London life. Initially, she makes the mistakes of a horizontal climber, turning her back on the Riseholmites when her London friends visit her at the Hurst, and cultivating people in London who are not significant. Eventually, though, she learns from her mistakes and triumphs over Nemesis, and the Luciaphils.

By transferring Lucia to a new setting, Benson is able to introduce a new set of pretentious characters. Marcia, Duchess of Whitby, Adèle Brixton, Mrs. Garroby-Ashton, Mrs. Alingsby and Mr. Stephen Merriall, who writes the society column under the pseudonym of Hermione. They occupy more prominent social positions, but the only difference between these metropolitans and the provincial Riseholmites is in rank and range of activity: Marcia and Adele are only more adept social climbers than Lucia; Mrs. Alingsby, who "hates all art that was earlier than 1923," thinks Bach decadent and only reads novels without stories and poems "without meter or meaning,"¹³⁹ pursues each new fad in London as vehemently as Daisy Quantock in Riseholme eats sour milk and deciphers automatic writing; Stephen Merriall is as sexually ambiguous and as vain as Georgie; Lord Limsfield is as timid. Both groups are preoccupied with their solipsistic and indulgent amusements, forever seeking novel distractions and physical gratification. When the town group meets the country group in Riseholme, only Georgie has the faint perception that they are mirror images of each other. By using the comic techniques of pairing and juxtaposition, Benson points out

¹³⁹*ibid.*, 202.

that self-delusion, vanity, greed, hypocrisy and the struggle for power are universal in the human species. They are not particular to place, position or age.

Comic plots are often made up of happy accidents and sudden coincidences that are capitalized on by the ingenious, and Benson's books about Lucia follow this pattern. After a triumphant operatic tour, Olga Braceley the woman who has genuine talent takes a London house opposite Lucia's and invites Georgie to stay. Although Lucia has ignored Georgie and the Riseholme community in her attempt to infiltrate London social life, she now uses their friendship to ingratiate herself into Olga's set. At one point she nearly loses face in front of Georgie because she pretends to know a princess on a first-name basis, but she is saved from exposure by a convenient telephone call.¹⁴⁰ The inclusion of her name in Hermione's account of Olga's post-performance party marks the successful climax of her first ascent. But that success is short-lived as Lucia commits the cardinal error of the "horizontal climber": she ignores her former associates and cultivates the wrong people. Lucia also likes to sustain the myth that country life is more wholesome, more decent and free of the hypocrisies of metropolitan life. That is her first mistake. Her second is that she tries to keep the two worlds apart. She invites her London friends to The Hurst, and does not include the Riseholmites in the party. Miscalculating the strength of the community's outrage, she is taken aback by the snubs and silence that greet her attempts to make peace. The community rallies round Olga, who, by chance, is visiting Riseholme with Princess Isabel, a relative of Lady Ambermere. So in one

¹⁴⁰*ibid.*, 201.

afternoon, Lucia is out-ranked and out-smarted and Riseholme's honour is redeemed.

The sanctimonious tones of community opinion resonate in the following passage.

It was quite right and proper that Lucia should be punished, and of course Riseholme would know all about it, for indeed Riseholme was administering the punishment.¹⁴¹

And she is left "like Marius among the ruins of Carthage."¹⁴² Unlike Marius, though, Lucia never succumbs to disillusionment, self-doubt or guilt. In addition, she is saved by the fortuitous and flattering mis-representation of her weekend house-party reported in The Evening Gazette by Hermione. For a while it looks as though Lucia is defeated, but as irrepressible and incorrigible as many other comic heroines, Lucia's morals do not improve, only her "modus operandi." Lucia's self-assessment is given in free indirect discourse.

If you meant to progress, you must never look back (the awful example of Lot's wife!) and never, unless you are certain it is absolutely useless, kick down a ladder which has brought you anywhere....

It had been a mistake to kick Riseholme down, a woeful mistake, and she would never do such a thing again. It was a mistake also to be sarcastic about anybody until you were sure they could not help you, and who could be sure of that.¹⁴³

She seizes the opportunity of a last minute invitation to the Duchess of Whitby's party to climb further up the social ladder. The guests at Marcia Whitby's party are the fashionable celebrities of the day. For much of his life E.F. Benson had enjoyed many

¹⁴¹*ibid.*, 216.

¹⁴²*ibid.*, 220.

¹⁴³*ibid.*, 228.

such parties,¹⁴⁴ but he was never taken in by the sham or the spurious. Marcia's party has the usual collection of movie stars, novelists, adventuresses who had "crossed the Sahara twice on foot" or "swum the Atlantic twice,"¹⁴⁵ soft-spoken pugilists, a woman who "astounded the world by her scandalous volume of purely imaginary reminiscences"¹⁴⁶ and society caricaturists. For a while Lucia's gall and her snobbery amuse the fashionable hostesses, Marcia Whitby and Adele Brixton, who dub themselves "Luciaphils," but to retain her position in society, Lucia needs other antics.

The notoriety of Babs Shyton's divorce case is the exemplar Lucia is looking for. Indifferent to Philip's feelings, or those of the putative lover Stephen Meriell, she sets about acquiring the reputation that she has a lover, though she is not at all interested in any real emotional entanglement. If it is expedient to ignore friends and betray husbands in the climb to social prominence, then Lucia has no compunction about using these means. Constantly on the look-out for a new guise, a new masquerade, she begins the pretence of seducing Stephen. Marcia and Adele are not deceived, unlike Stephen, though they admire her audacity and her quest for publicity. Stephen is shocked that he had excited such interest, though he begins to perceive that Lucia's tweaks of endearment are only made in public. Gradually, though, even

¹⁴⁴Viola Banks in her autobiography *Why Not?* (London: Jarrolds, 1934) gives a vivid account of society parties in England and on the Continent. She also expresses her enjoyment of E.F. Benson's wit and kindness (74-75, 112-113).

¹⁴⁵Benson, *Lucia in London*, 229.

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 229.

the Luciaphils tire of her over-reaching ambitions and vain-glory, or perhaps they resent her success. Marcia, the Duchess of Whitby, does not send Lucia an invitation to her end-of-the season ball, until Lucia has left London, apparently routed. By happy chance the invitation is sent on from London and Lucia, defying the logic of time and space, using all her "raw, blatant, savage energy,"¹⁴⁷ arrives at the ball like a belated Cinderella just in time to greet the guests, condescendingly, as though she were the guest of honour in this titled, exclusive gathering. Her flair and indefatigable gall is expressed in direct discourse.

"Just up from Riseholme, dearest Adèle," she said, "I feel quite rested — How are you, Lord Tony? — and so I made a little effort. Peppino urged me to come. How nice to see your Excellency! Millie! Dearest Olga! What a lot of friends! How is poor Princess Isabel? Marcia looked so handsome. Brilliant! Such a delicious drive; I feel I had to pop in."¹⁴⁸

Lucia having conquered the limits of space and time, is invited to a country-house party after the ball. This gives her the opportunity to defy Nemesis. In the Arcadian simplicity of spacious rooms and paved terraces, Lucia flirts with Stephen, ingratiates herself with the Prime Minister and plays the piano for the Stravinsky expert Greatorex. She thinks she has entered Nirvana when she exchanges pleasantries with Marcia and Adèle in the Duchess's bedroom. Nemesis nearly succeeds when Lucia mistakenly enters Stephen's bedroom, but the good fortune of her husband's illness allows her to avoid exposure and social embarrassment and, instead, treat the Riseholmites to a self-deluded account of her social successes. Safely back in

¹⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 256.

Riseholme, Lucia reverses all her former arguments and persuades Philip to sell their London home. London life has been too expensive. She easily resumes her leading role in Riseholme, becoming adept at golf, finding out the market value of Queen Charlotte's mittens so Lady Ambermere can be reimbursed after a convenient fire has destroyed the paltry relics. She soon dominates the spiritual, as well as the material world, taking over Daisy Quantock's séances. By the end of the novel she is once more in control of all the elements of a microcosm that is less expensive to manage, but not in essence any different from the macrocosm of London. Riseholme has forgiven her, and acknowledged its need for her guiding vitality. She, not Daisy, is able to keep them safe from harm by turning all experience to her advantage.

Nancy Mitford in her introduction to the collection of six novels featuring Lucia, published in 1977, thought that "the art of these books lies in their simplicity,"¹⁴⁸ but there is very little that is simple about E.F. Benson's characterizations, structure or style. He uses the familiar comic techniques of pairing characters and situations to underline the universality and perpetuity of the drive for power and possessions in human beings. And he heightens the discrepancy between the ordinary nature of these pursuits and the extraordinary significance that egocentric individuals invest them with by using wry literary allusions, incongruous classical parallels and a variety of narrative voices to overdramatize the petty intrigues and strategies of Lucia and her clan.

¹⁴⁸Nancy Mitford, Introduction, Make Way for Lucia by E.F. Benson (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977), vii.

Georgie Pillson, at the beginning of the novel, is charged by Daisy Quantock to discover the exact worth of Aunt Amy's estate when Lucia returns from the funeral in London. This aging, balding celibate is more concerned about the cut of his trousers than Lucia's good fortune. Georgie's contemplation of his trousers does not induce the self-doubt that assailed J. Alfred Prufrock.

There was a new suit which he had not worn yet, rather daring, for the trousers, dark fawn, were distinctly of Oxford cut, and he felt quite boyish as he looked at them.¹⁵⁰

Daisy Quantock, on the other hand is so enviously obsessed with assessing Lucia's inheritance that she is oblivious to Georgie's new clothes

She seemed quite blind to the Oxford trousers, and Georgie wondered whether that was from mere feebleness of vision.... Or was Daisy's unconsciousness of his trousers merely due to her preoccupation with Lucia's probable income?.... Or were the trousers, after all, not so daring as he had thought them? He sat down with one leg thrown carelessly over the arm of his chair, so that Daisy could hardly fail to see it.¹⁵¹

The comic motif of Georgie's trousers is repeated later in the novel to underline the parallel between the town and country dandies, Georgie Pillson and Stephen Merriall, alias Hermione. Through a pair of opera glasses that are conveniently at hand, Georgie watches the arrival at The Hurst of Lucia's smart London friends.

Finally there emerged a tall, slim, middle-aged man in Oxford trousers for whom Georgie instinctly conceived a deep distrust. He had thick auburn hair, for he wore no hat, and he moved his arms about in a silly manner as he talked. Over his shoulder was a little cape.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰Benson, Lucia in London, 151.

¹⁵¹Ibid., 153.

¹⁵²Ibid., p. 208.

Georgie's instant and deep distrust arises from the fact that he subconsciously recognizes his doppelganger.

Other literary and classical references reinforce the self-aggrandizing pretensions of these characters. Allusions to Shakespeare and Beethoven¹⁵³ are abandoned in favour of references to Freud and Stravinsky,¹⁵⁴ as Lucia courts London society. Although covertly envious of Lucia's "pushing" and "shoving," gradually the Riseholmites came to relish the reflected glory of Lucia's conquests. In their minds she has out-ranked Caesar; "She had come, and almost before she had seen, she was conquering."¹⁵⁵ Soon after, though, Lucia, caught up in the hubris of her achievements in London, miscalculates the strength of public opinion in Riseholme.

Feeling ran stormy high against Lucia, and as usual when Riseholme felt a thing deeply, there was little said by way of public comment, though couples might have been seen observed with set and angry faces and gabbing mouths.¹⁵⁶

Fortunately for her, she is a comic heroine not a tragic one, so while she is exposed and humiliated by the community, she is also given a second chance by them. For a while Lucia retreats to Riseholme rather than face further humiliation in not being included in the Duchess of Whitby's end-of-season ball. But when the opportunity arises of taking advantage of Marcia Whitby's last minute invitation, motivated by good will more than anything else, Lucia moves heaven and earth to arrive in time to

¹⁵³*Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 261-262.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 209.

greet the constellation of seven "royal personages." Not content with this singular triumph, in deciding to drive down to Leily Brixton's week-end party with Stephen Merriall rather than her husband, she engages with a heretofore unconquerable rival.

At the moment of that vainglorious thought it is probable that Nemesis fixed her inexorable eye on Lucia.¹⁵⁷

As Lucia courts social and sexual disaster, "Nemesis licks her dry lips"¹⁵⁸ unaware that Lucia's masquerade of pretence, flattery and deceit is just what the Luciaphils have asked for.

There was Nemesis, you would have thought, dealing thrusts at her, but Nemesis was no match for her amazing quickness. She parried and thrust again, and here — what richness of future reminiscence — was Mr. Greatorex playing Stravinsky to her, before no audience but herself and Adele, who really didn't count for the only tune she liked was "Land of Hope and Glory"....Great was Lucia!¹⁵⁹

By the end of this momentous week-end, Lucia feels she has reached Nirvana,¹⁶⁰ the ultimate state of blissfulness and enlightenment, but Nemesis¹⁶¹ manages a last parry, when Lucia and Stephen meet face-to-face on their way to breakfast after the embarrassing misunderstandings of the night before.

In this novel, the voice of the community is particularly prominent. It registers first disbelief, then outrage and finally dismay that Lucia can so readily abandon old

¹⁵⁷*ibid.*, 257.

¹⁵⁸*ibid.*, 258.

¹⁵⁹*ibid.*, 262. As the words to Edward Elgar's celebrated tribute to British nationality were written by E.F. Benson's brother, Arthur Christopher, this allusion is something of an in-joke.

¹⁶⁰*ibid.*, 264.

¹⁶¹*ibid.*, 267.

ties and loyalties. At first the Riseholmites think that Lucia is wasting her inheritance,¹⁶² but when they read that she has been presented at court

The vow of silence could no longer be observed; human nature was human nature, and Riseholme would have burst unless it had spoken.

....

"Georgie, come round a minute," called Daisy. "Have you seen it?"

"Yes," said Georgie, "I have. And I'll come."

Mrs. Boucher was talking in her loud emphatic voice, when he arrived.

"As for pearls," she said, "I can't say anything about them, not having seen them. But as for diamonds, the only diamonds she ever had were two or three little chips on the back of her wristwatch. That, I'll swear to."

The two ladies took no notice of him: Daisy referred to the description of Lucia's dress again.

"I believe it was her last dinner gown with a train added," she said. "It was a sort of brocade."

"Yes, and plush is a sort of velvet," said Mrs. Boucher. "I've a good mind to write to the *Times*, and say they're mistaken. Brocade! Bunkum! It's pushing and shoving, instead of diamonds and pearls. But I've had my say, and that's all. I shouldn't a bit wonder if we saw the King and Queen had gone to lunch quite quietly at Brompton Square."¹⁶³

In Dodo the Second, Dodo had made fun of the gossip columnists who scavenged information and fed it to a gossip-hungry public. In Lucia in London, Lucia exploits the popular press to inflate her social position, and impress her old, and new, friends. She announces her arrival in London in The Times and a ludicrous version of her social background and talents appears in a column in Five O'clock Chit Chat. Benson parodies the gushing prose of the society columnist, Hermione. Lucia has come from "her Elizabethan country seat" to her "veritable treasure house of exquisite

¹⁶²ibid., 181-2.

¹⁶³ibid.

furniture" in Brompton Square, with its "charming music room." "Mrs. Lucas (one of the Warwickshire Smythes by birth) was, as all the world knew, an accomplished musician and Shakespearean scholar."¹⁸⁴ The facts that her country seat is three converted artisans' cottages, and her knowledge of music and Shakespeare amounts to a few chords and some random quotations, are transformed into this masquerade of deception. On the basis of Hermione's announcement, paid for by Lucia, that she is a "brilliant, beautiful and witty hostess,"¹⁸⁵ Lucia begins her ascent of the "Tree of Society." She goes to the opera, gate-crashes parties, makes sure she is seen in the right places — Bond Street, Henley, St. James' Park — and that Hermione reports all her activities. Initially, Riseholmites have felt outraged by Lucia's betrayal of them, and by her failure to invite them to her London parties. Nevertheless, they have a grudging admiration for the way Lucia "has stepped straight from the sheltered and cultured world of Riseholme straight into the great busy feverish world."¹⁸⁶ Even Georgie, who receives her effusive letters, but no invitations to her house in Brompton Square, cannot help admiring her will-power and perseverance. In fact, Riseholme is impoverished by Lucia's departure. Daisy hasn't the imagination or verve to inspire the community. In her hands, the Ouija board and the Museum are tedious enterprises.

¹⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁸⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 182.

E.F. Benson humorously juxtaposes the sycophantic voice of the gossip columnist, Hermione, as it freely misrepresents reality, with the resentful voices of the Risholmites as they reveal their envy.

....She had come up, so Hermione told countless readers, from her Elizabethan country set at Riseholme (where she was a neighbor of Miss Olga Bracely) and was settling for the season in the beautiful little house in Brompton Square, which was the freehold property of her husband, and had just come to him on the death of his aunt. It was a veritable treasure house of exquisite furniture, with a charming music room where Lucia had given Hermione a cup of tea from her marvellous Worcester tea service.... (At this point Daisy, whose hands were trembling with passion, exclaimed in a loud and injured voice, "The very day she arrived!") Mrs. Lucas (one of the Warwickshire Smythes by birth) was, as all the world knew, a most accomplished musician and Shakespearean scholar, and had made Riseholme a centre of culture and art. But nobody would suspect the blue stocking in the brilliant, beautiful, and witty hostess whose presence would lend an added gaiety to the London season.

Daisy was beginning to feel physically unwell.¹⁸⁷

It is through these several voices that E.F. Benson ridicules the human capacity for vanity, insincerity and envy. Insincerity under the guise of friendship reaches its apogee in Lucia's account of London life to Georgie. In a self-revealing letter, that recalls Jane Austen's skill in representing Mr. Collins's hypocrisy, Lucia feigns a longing for Riseholme and a weariness with the social whirl she has so assiduously pursued.

We have done a little entertaining, too, already — just a few old friends like our member of Parliament, Mr. Garroby-Ashton. ["She met him once," thought Georgie in parenthesis.] He insisted also on our going to tea with him at the House of Commons. I knew that would interest Peppino, for he's becoming quite a politician, and so we went. Tea on the terrace, and a pleasant little chat with the Prime Minister, who came

¹⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 181.

and sat at our table for ever so long. How I wanted you to be there and make a sketch of the Thames; just the sort of view you do so beautifully! Wonderful river, and I repeated to myself, "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song." Then such a scurry to get back to dine somewhere or other and go to a play. Then dearest Aggie (such a good soul) had set her heart on presenting me and I couldn't disappoint her. Did you see the description of my dress? How annoyed I was that it appeared in the papers! So vulgar all that sort of thing, and you know how I hate publicity, but they tell me I must just put up with it and not mind.¹⁶⁸

Lucia's voice is less ebullient after she has mistakenly entered the wrong bedroom and encountered Stephen "voluptuous in honey-colored pyjamas."¹⁶⁹ Through the indirect discourse of Lucia's thoughts, E.F. Benson shows how she takes stock of adversity.

She sat down on her bed in a state of painful agitation. Her excursion into the fatal chamber had been an awful, a hideous mistake; none knew that better than herself, but how was she to explain that to her lover? For weeks they had been advertising the guilt of their blameless relationship, and now it seemed to her impossible ever to resume it. Every time she gave Stephen one of those little smiles or glances, at which she had become so perfect an adept, there would start into her mind that moment of speechless horror, and her smile would turn to a tragic grimace, and her sick glance recoil from him. Worse than that, how was she ever to speak of it to him, or passionately protest her innocence?¹⁷⁰

Then she turns adversity to advantage, and in the process punishes Stephen for having the audacity not to desire her.

Then, with a flash of genius, there occurred to her the interesting attitude to adopt in the interval. She would give the impression that there had been a lovers' quarrel. The more she thought of that, the

¹⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 265.

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 266.

more it commended itself to her. People would notice it, and wonder that it was all about, and their curiosity would never be gratified, for Lucia felt sure, from the horror depicted on Stephen's face, that he as well as she would be for ever dumb on the subject of that midnight encounter. She must not look unhappy; she must on the other hand be more vivid and eager than ever, and just completely ignore Stephen. But there would be no lift for him in her car back to London; he would have to go by train.¹⁷¹

In her direct discourse, of course, Lucia is faultless in by indirection finding direction out, whether it is prying information out of Georgie about how to reassert herself in Riseholme society, or in concealing the truth about the disastrous fire at the museum.

"Georgie, you *are* dull this morning!" she said. "Don't you see? Poor Daisy's meddling has made the reputation of Vittoria and crumpled up Abfou. Fire, water, moonlight: Vittoria's prophecy. Vittoria owes it all to poor dear Daisy!"

Georgie's laughter set Lucia off again, and Peppino coming in found both at it.

"Good Morning, Georgie," he said. "Terrible about the Museum. A sad loss. What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing, *caro*," said Lucia. "Just a little joke of Daisy's. Not worth repeating, but it amused Georgie and me. Come, Georgie, half an hour's good practice of celestial Mozartino. We have been lazy lately."¹⁷²

Once again order is restored, the Lucian order in which lies, deceptions and evasions are the only ways to protect and enhance reputation and power.

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*

¹⁷²*Ibid.*, 290.

Mapp and Lucia — "The Rivals"

It takes another four years for the inevitable conjunction of Elizabeth Mapp and Emmeline Lucas to occur. In the meantime, Benson wrote a darker comedy, Paying Guests (1929), a short story, The Male Impersonator, featuring Elizabeth Mapp once again, (1929), a biography, Ferdinand Magellan (1929) and a lively record of family and national life, As We Were: A Victorian Peep-show (1930). In Mapp and Lucia, he returns to the world of Tilling, and in this novel reveals the maturity of his comic style. Wylie Sypher points to an organizing principle of comedy when he says,

Comedy is built on double occasions, double premises, double values....
Where savage eyes glare beneath the social simper.¹⁷³

Duality in occasions, premises and values is the significant paradigm for Mapp and Lucia. Over the period of a year, the two monarchs of masquerade, Lucia, the extravagant life-force, and Mapp, the vindictive kill-joy, pit all their wits against each other in the contest for prestige, property and men. By likening the dumpy Elizabeth Mapp and her rival, the widow Lucas, to mythic archetypes, Artemis¹⁷⁴ and Arachné,¹⁷⁵ Benson heightens the ironic discrepancy between the civilized manner of the women and the ferocity of their contest. Occasionally Lucia's gimlet eyes glare beneath the "social simper" but, on the whole, she, like Mapp, masks her true feelings

¹⁷³Wylie Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy" in Comedy, Wylie Sypher, ed. (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1956), 193-258.

¹⁷⁴E.F. Benson, Lucia in London in Make Way for Lucia (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977), 231.

¹⁷⁵-----, Mapp and Lucia in Make Way for Lucia (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977), 515.

beneath a barrage of pleasantries. In the tradition of comedies of manners, in Mapp and Lucia, polite demeanour covers savage intention.

In the comic realm, death is usually an opportunity, not an occasion for grief. The novel opens a year after the real death of Lucia's husband and closes with the assumed deaths and miraculous resurrection of Mapp and Lucia. The death of a husband after twenty-five years of marriage offers a chance for Lucia to acquire more deference and attention than usual. Weakened by his wife's exhausting social round in London, Philip Lucas has expired and Lucia has readily adapted to her new role as grieving widow, especially as black is a flattering colour for her. Although she has shunned society, she has not withdrawn from life. She keeps fit by surreptitiously doing callisthenics, the 1920s version of aerobics, in the back-garden. Typically, all Lucia's responses to Philip's death are consciously a matter of appearance not an expression of genuine feeling: she plays Beethoven's Funeral March instead of the Moonlight Sonata; she shuts herself in the garden, reading Peppino's poems, conveniently interleaved with a copy of the Times. While giving the appearance of grief, she is planning how to make the most of her new freedom. After a year of this pretence at emotion, she is more bored than grief-stricken, having grown tired of her Elizabethan masquerade as Queen of Riseholme. In search of "fresh woods and pastures new," she rents Miss Mapp's Georgian house, Mallards, in Tilling, for the summer. Initially, she defers to Miss Mapp as the arbiter of all things social, though she insists on being an equal citizen of "a noble republic where art and literature and

all the manifold interests of the world are our concern."¹⁷⁶ However, she drops the pretence of deference and engages in an intense rivalry with Mapp.

The comic action builds around the dichotomy between appearance and reality as the two women manoeuvre for social control over the community. In the initial encounter with Lucia, Mapp's perpetual shower of flattering and agreeable trifles disguises her inner thoughts that are preoccupied with mercenary and material interests. Mapp's public persona is to appear naive, girlish and sentimental. A recurrent adjective in her vocabulary is "little." Her extensive garden is a "little plot," containing "little nooks" and "little" paved walks. She never walks or looks, she "pops" and "peeps."¹⁷⁷ Her speech and demeanour are calculated to make her appear charming, self-effacing, agreeable. However, the more she smiles, the more dangerous she is. In private, she is predatory and calculating. Appearing to be naive and unworldly, Miss Mapp is determined to exploit the new-comer. While she and Lucia exchange civilities during afternoon tea, Mapp is rapidly calculating how to increase Lucia's rent, keep the garden produce herself, yet make Lucia pay for the gardener's services. In fact, the whole community is dependant on the outcome of this lady-like tea-party. To survive, the Tillingites have to economize, but would never admit this. Instead they construct an elaborate set of business relationships which are a parody of the great Chain of Being. If Mapp lets her house for fifteen guineas, she will then take Diva's for eight guineas; Diva will then rent Irene's for five guineas

¹⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 486.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 464.

and Irene will take a labourer's cottage for two. In this smug, middle-class world, no-one cares what happens to the labourer. The financial interdependencies of this small community, and the friction they cause, is Benson's comic way of showing the inescapable connections between human beings in society and how they jostle for place and security when faced with change. It is also a comic paradigm for how people are judged and valued in the world. At the top of society are those who have the most possessions, and the bottom, those with the least. E.F. Benson is not in sympathy with this way of assessing people, but he is aware of the extraordinary lengths people will go to ensure their position in the pecking order.

During the tea-party, Lucia has not been duped by Mapp's manner, knowing that Mapp wants "to run her, to sponsor her, to arrange little parties for her."¹⁷⁸ In fact, Lucia's fundamental strength is that she is never deceived by the disguises of others. When she takes up residence in Tilling, fresh from the triumph of the Elizabethan fête at Riseholme, she is ready for Mapp. The next contests deal with matters domestic and foreign: how to exclude Mapp from having unlimited access to Mallard's and how to control the gardener's allegiance. Lucia withstands Mapp's patronizing attempts to control every aspect of her existence, calling her "Lulu," genteelly criticizing her taste in furnishings, guests and food, by excluding Mapp from her initial round of dinner parties, and by putting a chain on the front door of Mallards. Lucia successfully woos the Tillingites by flattering their tastes, providing expensive chocolates for Diva and exotic curries for the Major, by disguising her skill in playing

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 482.

cards, and by offering the garden for the hospital fund-raising event. Her blandishments and deceits pay off; she is judged unselfish, gracious and modest. She is as duplicitous as Mapp, but she has more style, self-knowledge and calculated generosity.

Not to be out-done, Mapp mounts a parallel campaign, organizing a jumble sale to raise funds for the hospital. She is no match, though, for the Athena-like Lucia. By contrast, Elizabeth sits like the over-ambitious Arachne, in the "web of crippled fire-irons and napless rugs like a spider, meditating reprisals."¹⁷⁹ She is defeated by her own mean-spirited and dishonest actions, selling off Georgie's gift of a painting, and returning Lucia's and Georgie's entries to the art exhibition without consultation with the other members of the, ironically named, hanging committee.¹⁸⁰ In her desire for revenge she over-reaches herself and includes a type-written rejection slip in the package containing the rejected paintings. This gives Lucia the evidence necessary to blackmail Mapp into complete submission. Throughout the summer, Lucia reigns supreme, but her absolute power begins to corrupt her absolutely. She in turn, becomes autocratic, overbearing and, worst of all, boring. Seizing the opportunity of the visit of the Italian-speaking Countess Amelia Ferraglione, Mapp plans to regain control by exposing Lucia as a fraud and a cheat. Lucia retreats into illness, and Georgie removes himself to Folkestone, as the balance

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 515.

¹⁸⁰ In his autobiography Benson's friend, G.P. Jacomb-Hood, describes how he was invited to join a "hanging committee" to select paintings for an exhibition. His account of this committee's wranglings shows he obviously shared Benson's sense of humour.

of power in Tilling shifts and allegiances are reversed. The Fates, though, are kind, as they usually are to a comic heroine who is an improviser and an opportunist. In Folkestone, Georgie meets a Mrs. Brocklehurst, who is fluent in Italian, and she translates into Italian Lucia's letter of apology for her absence from the welcoming lunch for the Countess. Mapp's elaborate subterfuge of spying on Lucia from the top of the church-tower in order to announce at the lunch that Lucia is malingering is discredited. Mapp, as usual, is outclassed by Lucia's flair and ingenuity. For the comic heroine always converts obstacles to opportunities. And in the comic realm truth often yields to a more inventive duplicity.

Having gained ascendancy politically, during the next season Lucia duels with Mapp for marital status. A sub-plot to the battles over property and social status has been the women's manoeuvres to appear sexually attractive. Georgie's growing fear that Lucia intends to marry him, is a prospect that makes the "palms of his hands" "cold and wet."¹⁸¹ He moves to Tilling because life in Riseholme without Lucia's energetic leadership will be dull, but he is averse to any physical intimacy. Fortunately for him, Lucia regards sexual intimacy as abhorrent, preferring the show of intimacy rather than the reality. Lucia, grateful for his companionship and help in the Italian affair, nevertheless exploits him as ruthlessly as the others in Tilling. Similarly, Mapp's sexual designs on the Major, and even on Georgie Pillson, are vengeful rather than affectionate. Happy to play the role of the unrequited lover, Georgie is horrified by Mapp's seductive glances. When he thinks Lucia has been drowned, he genuinely

¹⁸¹Benson, *Mapp and Lucia*, 467.

misses her directing energy and her capricious will, but soon consoles himself with the comfortable thoughts of her bequests. The elaborate arrangements he and Flint make for the cenotaph and the memorial service are more to expedite the distribution of the legacies, than to express sincere grief.

The climax of the conflict between Lucia and Mapp comes when Mapp determines to gain access to the most important social information in the society — Lucia's lobster recipe. This quest for the secret to social supremacy in Tilling almost results in the death of the two protagonists. Having broken into Lucia's house, Mapp is discovered by Lucia just as the Spring flood waters break through the dyke and both women are swept out to sea on an improvised raft, the kitchen table. For the moment Elizabeth is saved from public humiliation by the even greater threat of drowning. Georgie and the Major watch helplessly as their loved ones are swept out to sea, but they soon regain their composure at the more joyful prospect of being the women's heirs rather than their spouses. As usual, in the comic realm, death is the means of obtaining social and financial status not a time of distress. The ultimate ironic reversal occurs when, on April Fool's Day, the women return to find that their kingdoms have been laid waste by their putative suitors. Elizabeth and Lucia have been rescued from their frail vessel by a dragger on its way to the Gallagher banks fishing grounds, probably off the coast of Newfoundland. The novel ends with the two women, their rivalry undiminished by their shared perils, offering two versions of their adventures. Lucia wins an audience, but Elizabeth wins a mate. During the final feast, as the characters celebrate Elizabeth and Lucia's survival, there is no doubt that

their greed, hypocrisy and vindictiveness will continue beneath the veneer of social propriety. The tension builds as Lucia prepares to taste the meal Elizabeth has prepared. The indirect narrator describes the scene in slow motion.

Lucia read the menu and slightly moistened her lips. She directed on Elizabeth a long, penetrating gaze that mutely questioned her. Then the character of that look altered. There was no reproach in it, only comprehension and unfathomable contempt.

The ghastly silence continued as the lobster was handed round. It came to Lucia first. She tasted it and found that it was exactly right. She laid down her fork, and grubbed up the imperfectly buried hatchet.

Then in unequivocally direct discourse, Lucia exposes Elizabeth's theft and the competition for power goes on, despite the Tillingites attempts to pretend otherwise.

Are you sure you copied the recipe out quite correctly, *Elizabeth mia?*" she asked. "You must pop into my kitchen some afternoon when you are going for your walk — never mind if I am in or not — and look at it again. And if my cook is out, too, you will find the recipe in a book on the kitchen shelf. But you know that, don't you?"

"Thank you, dear," said Elizabeth. "Sweet of you."
Then everybody began to talk in a great hurry.¹⁸²

In comedy, the dichotomy between the self-interested desires of the individual and society's need to curb as well as incorporate those desires is the mainspring of the dual occasions of the action. In this novel there are serious threats to social order; the characters lie, cheat, steal, blackmail and burgle to gain control of information and property. But because of their interdependence, fiscally and socially, the characters preserve the appearance of social order by reciprocal deals, deceptions and silence. Benson's comic world in the "Lucia" novels may be amusing, but it is not an attractive one: expedience replaces morality, the humanizing emotions of love and

¹⁸²*ibid.*, 620.

grief are subverted for selfish gain, deception and greed are never eradicated and injustice and inhumanity prevail. The Tillingites profess to be altruistic, but in reality they are happy to be immoral as long as they are not found out. Lucia likes the appearance of moral superiority by discovering Mapp's "hanky-panky" about the pictures Georgie and Lucia submitted to the hanging committee. It is incidental that she also lies to take advantage of that appearance of moral superiority to blackmail Elizabeth into submission. She renegotiates the lease on Mallard's, quite indifferent to the consequences for the others. A desire for revenge, not justice, governs all the relationships between Mapp and Lucia from the initial jumble sale and garden fête to their final public lecture that offers the dual versions of their flight rescue and reconciliation.

Other dualities, in characterization, and language, reinforce the structural duality of events. Rivals for property, attention, and men, both Mapp and Lucia disguise their acquisitive and aggressive natures in affected speech, which in itself offers a double version of reality. Miss Mapp's malice masquerades under her stream of girlish chatter.

"Dear Mrs. Lucas," she said. "No need for introductions, which makes it all so happy, for how well I remember you at Riseholme, your lovely Riseholme. And Mr. Pillson! Your wonderful garden party! All so vivid still. Red-letter days! Fancy your having driven all this way to see my little cottage! Tea at once, Withers, please! In the garden room. Such a long drive, but what a heavenly day for it. I got your telegram at breakfast time this morning. I could have clapped my hands for joy at the thought of possibly having such a tenant as Mrs. Lucas of Riseholme."¹⁸³

¹⁸³*Ibid.*, 463.

Hypocrisy pervades the way she represents her friends. Her double-edged remarks about their appearance, dress, are defamation disguised as frankness. In an aside that undercuts her compliment, she implies the vicar neglects his duties: the "Dear Padre, Mr. Bartlett" is "a very good bridge player when he can spare the time, as he usually can." She ridicules "Dear Diva Plaistow, whom we're all devoted to" by saying her name is "such a handicap." Irene Coles' unconventionality is "sometimes refreshing, but can be rather embarrassing" and Mrs. Poppit, M.B.E. is "very worthy, and such a crashing snob."¹⁸⁴ Over tea, the inhabitants of Tilling are "plucked and roasted."¹⁸⁵ Similarly, Lucia is at her most duplicitous when she embroiders her speech with Italian phrases, mixed metaphors and half-remembered literary allusions. Justifying her move from Riseholme to Mallards she declares,

There comes a tide in the affairs of men, which if you don't nip in the bud leads to boredom.¹⁸⁶

Her baby talk to Georgie affects a sexual intimacy that neither wants, as well as appealing to his need to be mothered.

"Oo poor thing!".... "But me's back again now, and we will scold oo vewy, vewy much if oo does not do your lessons."¹⁸⁷

Only occasionally is the persiflage dispelled, but even then Lucia never loses control. When Mapp forces her way into Mallards to rebuke her for organizing a fête in the

¹⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 465-6.

¹⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 466.

¹⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 461.

¹⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 462.

grounds, Lucia still behaves like a lady, pretending to take seriously Elizabeth's splenetic proposal.

"Perhaps you would like to hire a menagerie," said Elizabeth, completely losing her self-control, "and have an exhibition of tigers and sharks in the garden room."

"No, I should particularly dislike it," said Lucia earnestly. "Half of the garden room would have to be turned into a sea-water tank for the sharks, and my piano would be flooded. And the rest would have to be full of horseflesh for the tigers. A most ridiculous proposal, and I cannot entertain it."¹⁸⁸

The allusion to animals reminds us of the "savagery that lurks beneath the social simper" in Sypher's definition of comedy. In the world of Tilling, the maintenance of appearances is all-important, not the adherence to ethical values. All the characters adopt a mode of speech that is supposed to be disarming. Irene's brisk vulgarities are as assumed as her dress. Both are contrived to shock middle-class proprieties. Even poor Mr. Bartlett, whom no-one calls Reverend, tries to disguise his déclassé Midland industrial origins by affecting a more socially acceptable Scottish accent. The incongruity between social manner and inner feelings underlies one of the funniest scenes in the novel where Mapp tries to act the hostess at the garden fête at Mallards, which she has earlier tried desperately to prevent. The success of Lucia's fête is a sequel to the one in Riseholme, pointing to the similarity between the two occasions that are supposed to be for the common good of the community, but which, in reality, are occasions for self-aggrandizement. The implied narrator reminds us that she is, indeed, the snake in the garden. Then we are taken directly into a

¹⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 512.

section of free indirect discourse which lets us know Lucia's true feelings about the objects of her charity.

She sidled off into the crowd. There were those dreadful old wretches from the workhouse, snuffy old things, some of them smoking pipes on her lawn and scattering matches, and being served with tea by Irene and the Padre's curate.

This passage is immediately followed by a section of Lucia's direct discourse as she masks her irritation with a "social simper," though she still manages to assert her authority over her guests by using the royal pronoun and by claiming Elizabeth's delphiniums.

"So pleased to see you all here," she said, "sitting in my garden and enjoying your tea. I must pick a nice nosegay for you to take back home. How de do, Mr. Sturgis. Delighted you could come and help to entertain the old folks for us. Good afternoon Mr. Wyse; yess, my little garden is looking nice, isn't it? Susan, dear! Have you noticed my bed of delphiniums? I must give you some seed. Oh, there is the town crier ringing his bell! I suppose that means we must take our places for the tableaux. What a good stage! I hope the posts will not have made very big holes in my lawn. Oh, one of those naughty choirboys is hovering about my fig tree. I cannot allow that."¹⁸⁹

She naturally disclaims all appearance of authority, pretending the town crier, not she, is in control. Life, though, is a perpetual struggle for Lucia as she tries to govern the world, both natural and human. Even the fig tree is not inviolate in her paradise.

The pairing of Lucia and Mapp provides endless opportunities for comic contrast in dress, manner, speech and action. Similarly, Major Flint and Georgie Pillson, representing the comic extremes of masculinity, are the ludicrous pair of lovers of

¹⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 520.

these two women. Georgie,¹⁹⁰ dressed in his motley, harlequin costumes, always assumes the dress he thinks appropriate to the occasion. In Folkestone, a seaside resort, he wears

A very nautical-looking cap, with a black shining brim, a dark-blue double-breasted coat, white trousers, and smart canvas shoes.¹⁹¹

His judgements are based only on appearances — he approves of Mr. Wyse because he dresses in a style Georgie admires.

He wore a brown velveteen coat, a Byronic collar, and a tie structured with a cameo ring; he wore brown knickerbockers, and stockings to match; he wore neat golfing shoes.¹⁹²

The precise rhythms of this description denote the meticulous attention to external appearance that is Georgie's forte. Major Flint thinks Georgie affected and, therefore, contemptible. The Major is resolutely male in his preference for whisky, golf, in his pride in the moth-eaten souvenirs of his Indian military service and in his determined gallantry towards women. The sudden windfall of Elizabeth Mapp's inheritance, however, causes him to drop all his pretences. Beneath his bluff courtesies, he is insensitive, greedy and vain. Even Georgie is shocked by the Major's blatant selfishness.

¹⁹⁰While Howard Sturgis is the most obvious model for Georgie, Benson and his friends knew other equally idiosyncratic people. Before taking a side-trip to Capri, G.P. Jacomb-Hood visited Redmond Clayton Browne who lived near Genoa in a villa with his friend Higgs, two men-servants, several macaws and a cat. There he "achieved beautiful things in embroidery with silks and corals." This anecdote is taken from G.P. Jacomb-Hood's autobiography With Brush and Pencil, 141.

¹⁹¹Benson, Mapp and Lucia, 548.

¹⁹²Ibid., 478.

There he was straddling in the doorway with the air of a vulgar nouveau-riche owner of an ancestral property,.... "It would serve him jolly well right," thought Georgie, "If she came back."¹⁹³

There is a cyclic rhythm to the events in Tilling as the characters adapt to the summer and winter patterns of life, but they pay little attention to the natural world, divorcing themselves from its aesthetic and healing properties. In fact, the natural world is as much under Lucia's command as the people in it. Lucia and Georgie's pride in their decision to move from Riseholme to Tilling is mocked in a comic parody of the pathetic fallacy. As they stroll through the town their thoughts about the sunset are coloured by their self-congratulation.

The great celestial signs behaved admirably; it was as if the spirit of Tilling had arranged that sun, moon and stars alike should put forth their utmost arts of advertisement on its behalf, for scarcely had the fires of sunset ceased to blaze on its red walls and roofs and to incarnadine the thin skeins of mist that hung over the marsh than a large punctual moon arose in the east and executed the most wonderful nocturnes in black and silver.¹⁹⁴

Even the sunsets over Rye are used by Lucia for her own ends. She persuades Georgie to move to Tilling, urging that the sunsets will inspire his painting. She, though, is vitalized by competition, not aesthetics.

The red roofs of Tilling glowed as if molten not only with the soft brilliance of the evening light, but (to the discerning eye) with the intensity of interests that burned beneath them.... Lucia hardly knew what gave her the most satisfaction, the magic of the marsh, her resolve to live here, or the recollection of the complete discomfiture of Elizabeth.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³*Ibid.*, 603.

¹⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 472.

¹⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 543-544.

The gathering social storms between Elizabeth and Lucia during the winter rivalries over bridge parties, art exhibitions and callisthenic classes are paralleled by the mounting winds and flood waters of the river Rother. In a fitting climax, Nemesis, in the guise of the January flood, sweeps away the central antagonists just as Mapp has acquired the "mystic spell," the lobster recipe from "the sacred volume" in Lucia's kitchen. Nemesis, though, is thwarted and the women are miraculously resurrected, to begin their games anew.

Sypher referred to the double values in comic literature that are reinforced by the dual occasions and premises. In Tilling, there is a constant discrepancy between what the characters preach and what they practice. Flint takes great pains to act like a gentleman, but his so-called courtesies are excuses for pompous assertions of authority. The women use the pretence of lady-like behaviour to get "their majors and their padres completely under their thumbs."¹⁰⁰ The communal spirit of good-will associated with festive and religious occasions, the giving of parties, the distribution of Christmas cards, attendance at church services is subverted. Greed and self-interest are the motivating forces, not generosity and love for others. In fact any display of genuine emotion is regarded as an embarrassment. As the group gathers to consider the tragic fate of Mapp and Lucia, they munch caviar, and are relieved when Irene, who genuinely grieves over Lucia's death, goes. Now they can enjoy Mrs. Wyse's excellent supper of cold turkey, plum pudding, toasted cheese and figs, stuffed with almonds, and speculate about why Mapp was in Lucia's kitchen. Self-

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 484.

preservation is uppermost in their minds, then, as always in this society. Benson, has no illusions about the irredeemable nature of humanity, though like other comic artists he hopes that ridicule might have a salutary effect. His view of humanity is similar to George Meredith's who said,

To love comedy you must know the real world, and know men and women well enough not to expect too much of them, though you may still hope for good.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy the Uses of the Comic Spirit in The Egoist by George Meredith, edited by Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton, and Co., 1979), 440.

The Worshipful Lucia: "Lucia Victrix"

"I have progressed, I know, and I'm glad you like my touch, but I hardly think I could manage the whole complicated business alone yet. Festina Lente."¹⁹⁸

Ostensibly, Lucia is referring, here, to her musical progress in learning to play the organ she had donated to the church. Implicitly, she is giving notice to Georgie of her need for a matrimonial partner as she progresses beyond her fiftieth birthday. Needless to say, her desire arises from a longing for power, not passion. When this novel was published in Great Britain, it was titled Lucia's Progress. Thematically this is a more appropriate title than the American one, The Worshipful Lucia, because of the implicit allusions and ironies in the word "progress." The Tudor resonances of the word "progress," referring to Elizabeth I's journeys round the English countryside during which she courted publicity, practised economy and kept an eye on her over-mighty subjects, may be compared to Lucia's progress, in this novel, into the realm of municipal politics, treasure-seeking and marriage.

Although this was the fifth novel about the indefatigably petty rivalries of Lucia and her cohorts, the reviewers continued to register pleasure at E.F. Benson's talent to amuse. Harriet Colby in the September issue of Books wrote:

It is a tribute of the highest order to Mr. Benson's skill and laughing good humor that, although a single one of the characters in 'The Worshipful Lucia' encountered in actual life would be enough to sour a saint....somehow, between the covers of a book and in Mr. Benson's hands, they are irresistibly funny, and even, in their own diabolical way, engaging. Their entanglements are so fresh, surprising and ingenious as

¹⁹⁸E.F. Benson, The Worshipful Lucia in Make Way for Lucia (New York: Thomas Crowell Co., 1977), 726-727.

to keep any reader guessing as to what inspired devilry lies over the page.¹⁹⁹

In the Boston Transcript, the reviewer found

sheer delight in satirical, yet amusing observations on the foibles of human nature, one turns instinctively to any story of this incomparable Lucia and her associates.... Mr. Benson (is) at his brilliant best.²⁰⁰

And in the Spectator, the reviewer noted that

The social gaieties of Tilling are such as we should hate to experience but delight to read about.²⁰¹

After the epic struggle with mean-spiritedness and mortality, chronicled in Mapp and Lucia, Lucia now finds the zest has gone out of life, now that she is in her fiftieth year. The return of Spring and the "faded and antique appearance"²⁰² of the tortoiseshell butterflies, "engaged in a decrepit dalliance"²⁰³ with the Spring flowers is a disturbing reminder of mortality. Born sometime in the 1880s, with little formal education and no profession, Lucia cannot compete against the enterprising new breed of women who fly the Atlantic, swim the channel and have business careers. In another kind of novel Lucia would be a pathetic, if not a tragic figure, but, in comedy, her infinite capacity for renewal and her confident, uncritical faith in herself continues undiminished. Nevertheless, the distractions of volunteer work, community classes in Modern literature and calisthenics, and even Aristophanes' plays are no

¹⁹⁹Harriet Colby, review of The Worshipful Lucia, Books, September 15, 1935, 15.

²⁰⁰Review of The Worshipful Lucia, Boston Transcript, October 26, 1935, 3.

²⁰¹Review of Lucia's Progress, Spectator, March 22, 1935, 506.

²⁰²Benson, The Worshipful Lucia, 623.

²⁰³Ibid.

longer meaningful in a world where women are exercising real power. Lucia's coterie, in Tilling, is being drawn slowly towards age, illness and death, but they also refuse to lose heart, or even admit frailty. Georgie retreats from society rather than admit he has shingles, that his hair is greying or his teeth disintegrating.²⁰⁴ Instead, he grows a Van Dyke beard to hide the blemishes caused by the disease.²⁰⁵ Elizabeth Mapp and Major Flint defy logic and nature by leaving in the references to procreation in their marriage service, though Mapp, naturally, refuses to "obey" Flint.²⁰⁶ Diva, unlike her name-sake, Godiva, cuts her hair short and opens a tea-shop, and Irene sublimates her love that has no name by organizing Lucia's political campaign. Otherwise the Tillingites are reassuringly the same: they try to solve the mystery of Georgie's disappearance; they speculate about the Mapp-Flint's sleeping arrangements; they compete over the bridge table, at the hustings and in the Stock market. The "progress" of all the characters in this comic novel is cyclic, not vertical. They do not develop, they continue to live the same as they always have.

For the first part of the novel the mystery of Georgie's retirement from social life is sufficient to occupy the minds of the Tillingites together with their prurient speculations about the sexual intimacies between the Mapp-Flints, or the "young couple" as the community condescendingly calls them. As Lucia walks along the High Street, to play bridge at Mallards she speculates on how Elizabeth Mapp and The

²⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 628.

²⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 658.

²⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 627.

Major Flint will have adapted to the changes married life brings. Their name may be hyphenated, but the power in the relationship will not have been so easily divided.

Despite the change in the furnishings of the main room at Mallards which "in days of Elizabeth's virginity" "had dripped with feminine knick-knacks"²⁰⁷ and is now reeking "of masculinity and stale cigar smoke,"²⁰⁸ Elizabeth has not changed. She has curtailed Flint's pleasures, drinking and golf, and even denies him the right to shout "Qui-Hi" at the servants. She plans that he should run for political office, and when he is reluctant to put himself forward she decides to run for election herself. Not to be out-done, Lucia virtually kidnaps Georgie, taking him and his shingles to her home, Grebe, away from Elizabeth's prying eyes. All this to prove that she is as knowledgeable about men as Tilling's newest bride.

In E.F. Benson's comedies, the characters are never motivated by altruism or a sense of the public good, though they may speak piously of duty and self-sacrifice. The obituary notice of a Dame Catherine Winterglass, who made a fortune by speculating on the Stock Exchange, gives Lucia a renewed sense of purpose. How much more profitable to speculate on the management of the Siriami gold fields than the Mapp-Flint's marriage, or Georgie's shingles. With her accustomed flair, and sound judgement, Lucia makes £8,000 and at the end of the novel uses this fortune to ingratiate herself with the municipal, ecclesiastical and sporting fraternity in Tilling. Earlier in the novel she and Elizabeth have followed the more democratic procedure

²⁰⁷*ibid.*, 629.

²⁰⁸*ibid.*

of standing for election. The contest for the council seat is accompanied by the usual hypocritical posturing that marks self-interest. Mapp is eager to introduce traffic regulations not for the benefit of the town, but to prevent Susan Wyse's Rolls-Royce from blocking her way. She wants to preserve the "pretty little slums"²⁰⁹ and decrease municipal expenditures in order to stop any increase in the rates she has to pay for Mallards. Lucia, on the other hand, claims it is her Christian duty²¹⁰ to work for the less fortunate and intends to raise the rates to pay for new houses, roads and repairs for the town. She bases her campaign on principle, so she says, though she knows that if Mapp has to sell the coveted Mallards she will be ideally positioned to buy it. In addition to the prospect of personal gain, both women are excited by the prospect of conflict.

After their ignominious defeat at the polls, the bitterness engendered by politics is soon dispelled, not by "Christian Charity"²¹¹ but by their need to bolster their illusions and self-delusions. In fact, both Elizabeth Mapp and Lucia think the Reverend Bartlett's attempt to improve the moral and spiritual health of the community by preaching a sermon on amity and unity is in the worst possible taste. Uninterested in spiritual values, they console themselves with physical pleasure. Lucia continues to speculate successfully and makes a capital profit and Elizabeth promulgates the rumour that she is pregnant. Lucia has generously shared her financial knowledge

²⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 665.

²¹⁰*Ibid.*, 668.

²¹¹*Ibid.*, 678.

with Diva and the Mapp-Flints, but they have not had the acumen to maximize on their investments. The Mapp-Flints find their income is diminished by their unwise speculation, so they have to let Mallards. Lucia seizes this opportunity to buy the house she has always wanted and begins a round of negotiations, deals, offers and counter offers. Capitalizing on Elizabeth Mapp's greed, she persuades her to exchange Mallards for Grebe, and gives her a large sum of money, 2,000 guineas as a bonus. The progress of Elizabeth's pregnancy is not as successful. Initially the community is charmed by the prospect, especially as Elizabeth embodies "the combination of financial disaster and great expectations,"²¹² those favourite themes of Victorian novelists. They offer "little acts of homage,"²¹³ helping her to sit down, to avoid drafts and by giving her nourishing food. They, coyly, notice that she has let out her skirt, and is knitting a little white garment, that the doctor calls at Mallards, and that Benjy is more than usually solicitous. Elizabeth, of course, enjoys the extra attention, though she knows her friends' speculations are unfounded. In this genteel community no-one directly broaches the delicate subject of pregnancy, except for Irene who ridicules the idea by commenting on Flint's impotence.²¹⁴ For a while the Tillingites are caught up in Elizabeth's delusions and duplicity, regarding Lucia as a great spider "sucking gold out of the spoils"²¹⁵ entangled in her web. In reality,

²¹²*Ibid.*, 684.

²¹³*Ibid.*

²¹⁴*Ibid.*, 682.

²¹⁵*Ibid.*, 684.

Elizabeth is trapped by own folly and greed into giving up Mallards and into admitting the onset of menopause, not maternity. Each contest, in the novel, ends with a celebratory meal as the community comes together to heal the wounds, rather than create a better life. A supposedly festive house-warming gathering at Mallards marks Lucia's acquisition of Elizabeth's property, the erosion of the Mapp-Flint's marital harmony, and exposes Elizabeth's delusions of pregnancy.²¹⁶

After the success of her party, Lucia's mind is filled with grandiose plans for leading Tilling's literary and social life. For a while though her progress is impeded as she is subject to the misunderstandings and misinterpretations that are frequent in comedies.²¹⁷ The discovery of some broken bits of glass and pottery, while the drains are being repaired at Mallards, leads her to think that Mallards is built on the side of a Roman villa. Not heeding Alexander Pope's dictum that "a little learning is a dangerous thing," Lucia thinks that the initials SP on a piece of broken tile stand for the Roman abbreviation S.P.Q.R., though, in fact, they are the first part of the name of a local plumber, Spencer, whose plumbing business was established in Tilling in 1820. Having narrowly averted public ridicule over this mistake, she nearly makes a similar false assumption about a glass fragment that is stamped with the letters APOL. She supposes the piece of glass is from a vessel used in a temple of Apollo, so convinced is she that Mallards has been built on the site of a Roman villa. Her premature announcement about the Roman remains is picked up from the Hastings

²¹⁶*Ibid.*, 695-700.

²¹⁷*Ibid.*, 700-718.

Chronicle by a national news agency and only a great number of lies and evasions prevents the exposure of her ignorance, pretention and folly. It turns out that what she thought was a sacred glass vessel, is in fact a broken, ordinary bottle of distilled water, marketed under the popular trade name, Apollinaris. Lucia, with characteristic verve and dexterity, keeps this information from the public, cancelling further excavations on the pretext that she can not live with all the publicity and the envy that it generates. The community, smarting under the twin deceptions of Elizabeth's putative pregnancy and Lucia's imaginary Roman temple, the one offering new life, and the other celebrity, are ready for retribution when they congregate at Susan Wyse's party. Amidst the Lucullan feast of champagne, chestnut ices, turbot, oyster savouries, chicken and compôte of figs in honey, civility disintegrates. Elizabeth's vindictive remarks about Lucia's excavations are deflected by Irene's pointed comments about babies.

"We must make a plot, Mr. Georgie," she said, "to compel our precious Lucia to take more care of herself. All that standing about in the wet and cold over her wonderful excavations."

By this time Irene had sensed that these apparent dewdrops were globules of corrosive acid, though she did not know their precise nature, and joined the group.

"Such a lovely morning I spent, Mapp," she said with an intonation that Elizabeth felt was very like her own. "I've been painting a cow with its dear little calf. Wasn't it lovely for the cow to have a sweet baby like that?"²¹⁸

²¹⁸Ibid., 719-20. The image of the dewdrop recalls a similar image Mary Benson used to describe the separate natures of her husband and her friend Ethel Smyth: "We all realize that you and the Head of the Church are not two dewdrops destined to roll into one." This is in Ethel Smyth's book, Impressions that Remained (1933). Mary Benson also refers to herself and her family as being "more or less aggressive and cocksure."

Having lost that round, Elizabeth then loses control of Major Benjy. He imbibes freely, flirts with Lucia, brags about his amorous adventures with "The Pride of Poona" and is last seen conducting traffic in the High Street on his way home to Grebe.

Lucia has escaped unscathed from the "carnage" of the Wyse's dinner party, and progresses higher, her sights set on spreading the largesse financed by her successful speculations. Unable to win the support of the community democratically, Lucia begins to buy her way into local prominence: she donates a new organ to the church; pays for the levelling of the cricket ground; becomes a member of the hospital board, the church council and the Football club. This "plague of munificences,"²¹⁹ accompanied by the right amount of self-promotion in the local press, results in her co-optation to the council, an indication, in Tilling, that money and publicity can easily by-pass the normal democratic processes. Along the way, Lucia agrees to host a party at Mallards, to heal the divisions among the Tillingites, so that she now has an appreciative audience for her progress "up the pinnacle of social eminence till she was almost among the stars herself."²²⁰ She even manages to sooth and mollify the group, who turn out for the grand celebration marking her "anonymous" donation of the church organ, when they are not mentioned by name in the local paper. Her munificence seems to know no bounds when she offers accommodation to the Mapp-Flints when they are flooded out of their cheap holiday cottage. She has capitalized on the irrational, unjust forces governing the world of high finance and enjoys the

²¹⁹*ibid.*, 745.

²²⁰*ibid.*, 732.

worldly profits, and the power over her friends that it brings. Like many astute people in business, and politics, she knows the virtues of largesse and liberality in self-promotion and in appeasing those she has out-smarted.

Lucia's final triumph over Elizabeth Mapp is to transform herself from being a widow, to becoming a bride. Fortunately both she and Georgie are more interested in public ostentation than private intimacies and amicably agree to the disposition of possessions, servants and the protection of personal privacy.²²¹ The marriage contract echoes that of Millamant and Mirabell in Congreve's Way of the World, but in the world of Tilling there is no sense that Lucia and Georgie will respect each other's individuality or needs as they face the venality and mendacity of the world. Naturally, there is no discussion of the spiritual or physical values of marriage: the more important decisions are about the colour and cut of Lucia's dress and Georgie's suit. The wedding is nearly as grandiose as the one when the church organ was dedicated, and the "young couple" honeymoon in Riseholme.

In this novel, the wheel comes full circle. The novel begins and ends in Spring-time and, throughout the diurnal round, Lucia has progressed from purposeless solitude to matrimonial and municipal power. She has survived her Jubilee, gained possession of Mallards, and Georgie, bought her way into all the significant positions in the community, donating an organ to the church, a new operating theatre to the hospital, levelling the cricket pitch, planting almond trees, and mending the steps near the Norman tower. The jewel in the crown of her progress comes when she is in

²²¹*ibid.*, 756.

Lucia in London offered the Mayoralty. Having learned the dangers of hubris, she salves Georgie's wounded masculine pride and manoeuvres him towards insisting she accept.

"Sì, caro: pensa seriamente," said she. "But I must make up my mind now; it wouldn't be fair to my colleagues not to. There are plenty of others, Georgie, if I refuse. I should think Mr. Twistevant would make an admirable mayor. Very businesslike. Naturally I do not approve of his views about slums, and of course, I should have to resign my place on the Town Council and some other bodies. But what does that matter?"

"Darling, if you put it like that," said Georgie, "I must say that I think it your duty to accept. You would be condoning slums, almost, if you didn't."

The subdued radiance in Lucia's face burst forth like the sun coming out from behind a cloud.

"If you think it's my duty, I must accept," she said. "You would despise me otherwise. I'll write at once."²²²

Then both Lucia and Georgie, gleefully, spend time choosing absurd emblems of authority, and exaggerating the responsibilities of office.

Georgie tried on one or two himself.

"I like the beret," he said. "You could trim it with your beautiful seed pearls."

"That's a good idea," said Lucia cordially. "Or what about the thing like a wig? Rather Majestic; the Mayor of Tilling, you know, used to have the power of life and death. Let me try it on again."²²³

This is, indeed, a marriage of true minds, and nothing more.

Once again, E.F. Benson has used classical and literary allusion to highlight the disparity between the self-aggrandising dreams of his characters and the selfish, petty nature of their motivations. As Lucia casts about for a worthy ambition, she implicitly compares herself to Hamlet, though she is more like his treacherous schoolfellows in

²²²ibid., 765.

²²³ibid., 766.

her preoccupation with "high ambition."²²⁴ Her self-delusions of grandeur continue as she listens to the musical chimes that summon her to dinner. Their "jangled"²²⁵ sound alerts her to Foljambe's irritability. Lucia's domestic fears that her servant will leave is in marked contrast to Ophelia's grief over Hamlet's strangely disordered mind that is "like sweet bells jangled out of time, and harsh." Untroubled by any need to act justly and honorably Lucia soon finds her ambition more than gratified. Under the tutelage of Mammon-cash, her stock-broker, she makes a great deal of money. Her twin speculations, the one about the stock-market, and the other about life at Mallards, provide her with a renewed sense of purpose and delight. Her envy, greed and prurience are gilded over by her references to what "Homer or was it Aeschylus"²²⁶ meant by the "numberless laughter of the ocean."²²⁷ The comedy of her vain, self-deluded pursuit of political power is heightened by the mock-heroic references to the campaigning of her supporters. Irene's disorganized procession is compared to the second act of Wagner's grand opera "The Meistersinger" though the candidates are better suited to comic rather than grand opera.²²⁸ The chance meeting of the political opponents is compared to the feuds between the Montagues and Capulets,²²⁹ though the social, not the political, well-being of the state is what

²²⁴*Ibid.*, 625.

²²⁶*Ibid.*

²²⁸*Ibid.*, 655.

²²⁷*Ibid.*

²²⁸*Ibid.*, 675.

²²⁹*Ibid.*, 676.

is lost as the Tillingites divide into factions. The narrow self-absorption of this handful of middle-aged people is shown by the embarrassing results of the election.

The Mayor bowed. There were two vacancies to be filled, he said, on the Town Council, and there were seven candidates. He read the list with the number of votes each candidate had polled. The first two had polled nearly three hundred votes each. The next three, all close together, had polled between a hundred and fifty and two hundred votes.

"Number six," said the Mayor, "Mrs. Emmeline Lucas, thirty-nine votes. Equal with her, Mrs. Elizabeth Mapp-Flint, also thirty-nine votes. God save the King."²³⁰

E.F. Benson cites Greek philosophy, this time the work of Aristotle's pupil, Theophrastus,²³¹ when Lucia tries to assess the change in Major Benjy's character after his marriage. As usual, she perverts the original intention of classical authors for her own selfish ends, seeking ways to exploit, not understand her friends. Benson's persistent references to Lucia's reading of Aristophanes' play, The Smerchophoriazusa (The Poet and the Woman) subtly underscores the ferocity of the conflict between the women as they struggle to dominate the men in Tilling. There is also a parallel between the incident where a Greek woman pretends she has a baby, when in reality the bundle she carries is a bag of wine. When the childless women of Tilling discover Elizabeth's deception about her pregnancy like a vindictive Greek chorus they ridicule her "wind-egg."

"Not a bit," said Diva. "I don't believe she ever believed it. Wanted us to believe it; that's all. Most deceitful."

"And Kenneth had been going through the Churching of Women."

²³⁰*Ibid.*, 678.

²³¹*Ibid.*, 754.

"And she had no end of drives in your motor, Susan. False pretences, I call it. You'd never have lent her it at all unless—"

"And all that nutritious honey from the Contessa."

"And I think she's taken in the old green skirt again, but the strips of tiger skin make it hard to be certain."

"And I'm sure she was crocheting a baby cap in white wool, and she must have pulled a lot of it out and begun again. She was wearing it."²³²

Lucia does not join in this malicious litany. Not that she is any more charitable, she has simply progressed to higher things. Once she is securely installed in Mallards, Lucia takes particular pleasure in offering hospitality to the unfortunate Mapp-Flints whose home is flooded. When they are not sufficiently subservient, she recalls what happened to ungrateful guests in Dante's *Inferno*.

"The guests who eat the salt of their host and *sputare* it on the floor. Some very unpleasant fate awaited them; I think they were pickled in brine."²³³

Of course, Lucia omits any reference to the fact that the Mapp-Flints's home has been vulnerable to the briny seas because she appropriated their original home in an ingenious deal that took advantage of Elizabeth's cupidity. Sublimely indifferent to the feelings and needs of others, Lucia is loyal only to her own predatory nature. After her defeat in the election, she returns to the politics of the bridge table, claiming a need for recreation, but really to find out how to regain prestige in the community. She insists that she wants to follow Horace's wonderful maxim: "*Non semper arcum tendit Apollo*."²³⁴ But Lucia has no intention of keeping her bow unstrung in the

²³²*Ibid.*, 699.

²³³*Ibid.*, 753.

²³⁴*Ibid.*, 679.

battle for advantage. Consistently she masquerades as a high-principled exponent of Christian service to others, but her attempt to be elected to the Town Council arises out of her desire to thwart Elizabeth and to raise the rates so high that she would be forced to give up Mallards. On the one hand she compares herself to Charles Kingsley, while on the other she is aware of the advantages of municipal power.

"Quite," said Georgie, "for if taxes were much higher, and they couldn't get a thumping good let for Mallards every year, I don't suppose they would be able to live there. Have to sell."

An involuntary gleam lit up Lucia's birdlike eyes, just as if a thrush had seen a fat worm.²³⁵

There is also a preponderance of bird and animal imagery in this novel. While he lived in Rye, E.F. Benson was a bird-watcher,²³⁶ so the frequent parallels between the behavior of humans and birds were drawn from his intimate observation of both species. At the very beginning of this novel Lucia's "keen bird-like eye"²³⁷ glances meaningfully towards two "imprudent" tortoiseshell butterflies as they flit innocently among some early Spring flowers. In her mind's eye, she makes a comparison between the butterflies' "decrepit dalliance quite unsuited to their faded and antique appearance" and the marriage of Elizabeth and Major Flint which also seems untimely and out-of-season. By the end of the novel Lucia has quite mercilessly taken away the Mapp-Flints's home and undermined their reputation for domestic bliss. Although she envies Elizabeth's married state she realizes that money,

²³⁵*Ibid.*, 669.

²³⁶Benson, *Our Family Affairs*, 161.

²³⁷Benson, *The Worshipful Lucia*, 623.

not sex, wields more extra-ordinary power over the affairs of Tilling. There are times, though, when even the faithful acolyte, Georgie, is wearied by Lucia's unremitting strategies. As he listens to yet another stream of comments about the Mapp-Flints he wishes "he had a piece of green baize to throw over her as over a canary."²³⁸ E.F. Benson uses other members of the animal kingdom to characterize the furtive, predatory nature of the Tillingites. During a tedious bridge-game, Major Benjy casts a glance "quick as a lizard"²³⁹ at his wife before he sneaks out for a surreptitious drink. Elizabeth gives Lucia a "hyena smile"²⁴⁰ as she prepares to campaign against her and she is "lynx-eyed"²⁴¹ as she watches Lucia's preparations for the grandiose ceremonies to mark her gift of the organ to the church. Even the purchase of animals for food is more like a plundering expedition than a civilized pursuit. Ordinary, everyday shopping expeditions become opportunities to humiliate and out-smart each other. A simple exchange about the availability of wild duck has ominous resonances about the potential loss of Elizabeth's home and status. Mr. Worthington, the butcher replies that "No, ma'am, Mallards, if you'll excuse me is over."²⁴² Elizabeth's home is also called Mallards, and she is about to lose it to Lucia. During this same encounter Elizabeth imagines that the social-climbing Mrs. Susan Wyse is gaining ascendancy over her, when the butcher offers her household a range of wild birds —

²³⁸*Ibid.*, 668.

²³⁹*Ibid.*, 631.

²⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 672.

²⁴¹*Ibid.*, 733.

²⁴²*Ibid.*, 645.

pheasant, woodcock and snipe – while Elizabeth is left to make do with rabbit. She manages to snatch the snipe for herself, only to discover that Diva's dog, Paddy, has in turn seized the rabbit she had in her basket.

Part of the reason for the consistent freshness and ingenuity of Benson's work is his skillful parody of literary styles. In this novel he makes fun of the fashionable literary term "stream of consciousness" as well as the characters who are engaged in these solipsistic musings. In the chapter, "Grub Street" in As We Are,²⁴³ E.F. Benson had pointed out that the term "stream of consciousness" was a new term for an old method which had been practiced by Samuel Richardson, early Victorian novelists, Theophile Gautier and Henry James long before the publication of the writing of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. He succinctly describes the narrative method of the post-war writers

What constituted the unique quality of these works was that they were no second-hand narrative, told from the outside, of what befell, but the pictures are of those befallings on the mind of the watchers (Bloom or Dalloway), and thus they gave not only the befallings, but the stream of consciousness which carried them along.²⁴⁴

Early in the novel, as Lucia is searching for some distraction in a life that no longer contains any high purpose or adventure, she directs

her stream of consciousness to her hostess, who, as Elizabeth Mapp, had been her timorous partner in the great adventure on the kitchen table a year ago. She, at any rate, had not vegetated since their return for she had married Major Benjamin Flint.²⁴⁵

²⁴³Benson, As We Are, 258.

²⁴⁴Ibid., 256.

²⁴⁵Benson, The Worshipful Lucia, 627.

As she listens to the French phrases that punctuate Elizabeth's greeting on her return from her Parisian honeymoon, she strives to exploit the new situation.

Lucia could not quite make up her mind whether these pretty Gallicisms were the automatic result of Elizabeth's having spent a month in France, or whether they were ironically allusive to her own habit of using easy Italian phrases in her talk. But she scarcely gave a thought to that, for the psychological balance between the two was so much more absorbing. Certainly Elizabeth and her Benjy-boy seemed an enamoured couple. He called her Liz and Girlie, and perched himself on the rim of her chair as they waited for the rest of the gamblers to gather, and she patted his hand and pulled his cuff straight. Had she surrendered to him? Lucia wondered. Had matrimony wrought a miraculous change in this domineering woman?²⁴⁶

This "directed" stream of consciousness is not confined to Lucia. Benson also uses the phrase to characterize Elizabeth's self-serving, though ultimately foolish, analysis of Lucia's offer to exchange Grebe for Mallard's together with a cash settlement of £2,000. Benson takes us into Elizabeth's brackish "stream of consciousness," showing she would rather lose her home, than lose face.

Her stream of consciousness, eddying round in this depressing backwater, suddenly found an outlet into the main current, and she again read Lucia's toasted letter. It was a very attractive offer; her mouth watered at the thought of two thousand pounds, and though she had expressed to Benjy in unmistakable terms her resolve to reject any proposal so impertinent and unscrupulous, or perhaps in a fervor of disdain not to answer it at all, there was nothing to prevent her accepting it at once, if she chose. A woman in her condition was always apt to change her mind suddenly and violently. (No; that would not do, since she was not a woman in her condition.) And surely here was a very good opportunity of diverting Tilling's attention. Lucia's settling into Mallards and her own move to Grebe would be of the intensest interest to Tilling's corporate mind, and that would be the time to abandon the role of coming motherhood.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 629.

²⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 688.

One of the engaging aspects of this novel is that E.F. Benson has used many incidents from his immediate experience as sources for his comedy. By doing this, he clearly identified himself with the human capacity for vanity and folly. He notes in his autobiography²⁴⁸ that he had already written The Worshipful Lucia and it was due to be published when his friend Captain Dawes, the Town Clerk, asked if he would accept the position of Mayor of Rye, if he were elected by Council. Benson claimed he was taken aback by the offer, pleading his ignorance of municipal affairs, his distaste for public speaking and the demands of his literary work. In addition he doubted whether it would be fitting to accept the offer.

Surely it would be very unseemly that the man whom the Town Council were proposing to honour should presently publish a piece of farcical fiction in which the Mayor of Rye was the most prominent and ludicrous figure.²⁴⁹

In his account of the offer, his show of reluctance, and qualms about propriety, he is quite aware of the temptations of vainglory and hypocrisy, freely admitting his pleasure in being the six hundredth and forty-fifth Mayor of Rye.

I liked the pomp and ceremony and the due observance of ancient tradition, and being prayed for in church on Sunday morning without the disadvantage of being seriously ill.²⁵⁰

E.F. Benson was three times Mayor of Rye and though he was never as self-serving as Lucia he did exploit his own experience for his comic novels. In the next one set in Rye, Trouble for Lucia, Lucia has to cast around for a Lady Mayoress. She claims

²⁴⁸Benson, Final Edition, 279.

²⁴⁹Ibid., 272-3.

²⁵⁰Ibid., 273.

Georgie is the wrong gender for the position, but in reality she wants to use her position to dispense patronage, and to subdue potential rivals. She does not intend to waste an appointment on Georgie, her husband. As he was unmarried, E.F. Benson also needed a Lady Mayoress to attend to the social duties of the position. He chose the wife of a close friend, Mrs. Jacomb-Hood, begging her to live with him "in municipal sin,"²⁵¹ his humorous frankness disarming any criticism of his appointment. In The Worshipful Lucia, Lucia marks her contribution to the restoration of Tilling's Norman Tower with a "modest stone tablet," though her other munificences are not so modest. In a more public-spirited action, E.F. Benson, in 1935, provided a look-out for the people of Rye. This was commemorated by a modest, blue-enamelled metal tablet. Lucia donates an organ to the church at Tilling, amid an elaborate ceremony in which she plays a front and centre role. In 1928, E.F. Benson together with Eugenia Langdon de Nottbeck, his brother's benefactress, had donated the Benedicite window in the South Transept of the Parish Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Rye in memory of Arthur Christopher, Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. In 1937, E.F. Benson provided a stained-glass window above the altar of the same church to commemorate his parents Archbishop and Mrs. Benson. The central scene is the Nativity and angels and archangels crowd the heavens above Joseph, Mary and the Christ-child. At the feet of the Virgin is E.F. Benson's beloved dog, Taffy, and in the far-off, right-hand corner is the figure of E.F. Benson, in his Mayoralty robes. Benson, then, was not indifferent to the human need to be

²⁵¹*Ibid.*, 272.

remembered for his contribution to civic life. In this novel he may even have been wryly mocking his own literary success with his biography of Charlotte Brontë,²⁵² published in 1932, by alluding to Charlotte's wedding when Lucia plans her nuptials to Georgie.²⁵³ Benson had acquired considerable distinction as a biographer from his association with this writer and Lucia's desire to model her wedding after Brontë's, and thereby gain celebrity by association, was not an unfamiliar emotion, though more warranted in Benson's case.

Other incidents in his life at this time provided inspiration for comic occasions as well as emotions. During the holiday season in Tilling,²⁵⁴ Irene rents the house next door to Diva's, having sublet her own. Because Diva has refused to repair a faulty flue, no one can use the kitchen range in the adjoining house. Irene's prompt solution to Diva's neglect and parsimony is to light a huge fire in the kitchen range and smoke Diva into submission. Rather than repair the chimney, or redecorate the bathroom Diva takes a cheap cottage near the railway. In 1933, E.F. Benson had been engaged in a similar dispute with his London neighbour at 26 Brompton Square. His response was far more placatory and courteous than Irene's. In a correspondence²⁵⁵ that dates from October 16th, to October 30th, 1933, between the neighbour, Benson and the building contractor, it is clear that Benson is not to

²⁵²E.F. Benson, Charlotte Brontë (London: Longman's Green and Co. Ltd., 1932).

²⁵³Benson, The Worshipful Lucia, 758.

²⁵⁴Ibid., 741-2.

²⁵⁵This correspondence is in the Benson Deposit in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, 3/65-70.

blame for the smoking chimney, and the problems with the over-flow pipe from the bathroom. In addition, Lucia's activity in the stock market, purchasing stocks and shares, consulting her broker, informing herself about business opportunities in Imperial markets was not unfamiliar territory. The Bodleian Library²⁵⁸ also has records of extensive holdings by A.C. Benson and Mary Benson in companies in British North Borneo, New South Wales, South Africa, Argentina, India, The United States and Canada, as well as railway stock and exchequer bonds in England. So Lucia's interest in Siriami gold mines and her decision to exchange that more precarious stock for more secure investments at home is not entirely drawn from Benson's imagination.

In this then, his fifth novel about Lucia and her coterie, published in his sixty-eight year, E.F. Benson's comic inventiveness in structure, allusions, narrative parody and self-parody were as diverting as his first in the series.

²⁵⁸Benson Deposit, 3/71-8.

Trouble for Lucia

Published in 1939, the year the world was moving inexorably towards the cataclysm of the Second World War, Trouble for Lucia provided reviewers and the public with welcome comic diversion. M.L. Becker in Books was glad of

those carefree, war-defying entertainments. Wodehouse and Benson are doing their respective bits to keep us smiling for the duration.²⁵⁷

In the Manchester Guardian, J.D. Beresford thought there was no failure of invention in this E.F. Benson's sixth novel about the plots and counterplots in the town of Tilling, writing that "it is as good as its predecessors."²⁵⁸ The Spectator found "the humour unforced and the satire shrewd."²⁵⁹ The reviewer identified the familiar characters of comedy who represent human weakness, "snobs, gossips, liars, humbugs" and whose sole preoccupation is "to gain their own ends or to score off their neighbours." Trouble for Lucia was probably a diversion for E.F. Benson as well. The year before he had published a compassionate study of the political and domestic lives of Queen Victoria's daughters²⁶⁰ and during 1939 was working on his autobiography, Final Edition, which was completed just before his death in 1940.

Forrest Reid, in The Spectator²⁶¹ had found what the characters said and did in Trouble for Lucia extremely life-like. In those intensely political times, this

²⁵⁷M.L. Becker, review of Trouble for Lucia, Books, September 24, 1939, 4.

²⁵⁸J.D. Beresford, review of Trouble for Lucia, Manchester Guardian, July 7, 1939, 7.

²⁵⁹Review of Trouble for Lucia, The Spectator, July 14, 1939, 68.

²⁶⁰E.F. Benson, Queen Victoria's Daughters (London: D. Appleton Century, 1938).

²⁶¹Spectator, 68.

observation is not surprising because Trouble for Lucia is a comedy about the political process and its perversion: the image-conscious politicians, Lucia and Elizabeth Mapp-Flint, place self-interest ahead of public interest; private and personal relationships with husbands and friends are sacrificed to gratify over-blown egos; the fickleness and folly of public opinion is exposed. Ultimately Lucia is the winner in the political arena because her gimlet eyes penetrate the hypocrisies of her sycophants; she sees all too clearly how the chance for political influence and public recognition brings out the worst in human nature. Undismayed by this knowledge, she manipulates cupidity for her own ends, turning reversals into triumphs. Once again she appears immortal, invincible, and all-wise, because she is untrammelled by self-doubt or guilt. The "troubles" she encounters are the threats to her reputation and credibility, inevitable in the social and political arena, but which can be overcome, if a politician is unscrupulous and experienced enough. Having learned her lessons in the communities of Riseholme and Tilling, Lucia is always careful to "scout, skirmish, lay ambush, defend"²⁸² before she attacks. And her assaults are rarely petty. Only once does Lucia lose control and descend to self-pity.²⁸³ Ironically, it is the one time that she tells the truth in the novel that she is universally disbelieved. She is saved from social ruin by recognizing the "value of vindictive forgiveness"²⁸⁴ and by inviting the chastened Tillingites to the final dinner-party with the lascivious Poppy, Duchess of

²⁸²E.F. Benson, Trouble for Lucia in Make Way for Lucia (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977), 889

²⁸³Ibid., 900.

²⁸⁴Ibid., 911.

Sheffield. The vicar may preach that all riches and position of the world are dross,²⁶⁵ but Lucia knows that to maintain power in the world of Tilling, appearances matter, not moral substance.

In many ways this novel is a continuation of The Worshipful Lucia. That novel ended with Lucia deciding, literally, which hat she should wear. This one begins with a similar preoccupation with appearance and precedence. Concerned only with the trappings of power rather than the work, Lucia is indifferent to the real economic and social issues in Tilling, spending her initial weeks as Mayor wondering if she should grace the High Street with her presence during the shopping hour. Her speech is larded with political abstractions — "conscience," "duty," "principle."²⁶⁶ She grandiosely compares herself to Catherine of Russia²⁶⁷ and Queen Victoria.²⁶⁸ Her strategy and style as a politician are based on grand gestures, not on practical policies and careful planning. In an arbitrary way, she plans to govern the thoughts and pleasures of the people of Tilling by censoring the films, putting benches in sunny corners, installing flower boxes and reviving ancient customs and inexpensive concerts of classical music.²⁶⁹ Georgie, part-courtier, part-clown, tries to moderate her egomania and vanity by reminding her of the reprisals the community can exact, if she increases the rates to finance these vainglorious proposals. Her schemes for

²⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 866.

²⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 770.

²⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 771.

²⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 773.

²⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 770.

Tilling are inventive, but ultimately impractical because they are based on publicity-seeking rather than economics: her scheme to supply Royalty with fish from Tilling is turned down by the Railway Board²⁷⁰ and Noel Coward,²⁷¹ John Gielgud and Sir Henry Wood²⁷² refuse the opportunity to lecture at the Tilling Literary Institute.

In the nexus of fluctuating and shifting patterns of conspiracy, deceptions and betrayals so frequent in the personal and public lives of political figures, Lucia and Elizabeth struggle for pre-eminence in their marital relationships as well as in the public arenas of Diva's tea-shop, an unofficial parliament, the council chamber, and the public lectures, and art exhibitions of the Tilling Literary Institute. The first major issue, the appointment of Lucia's Lady Mayoress, is a detailed comic commentary on the process of decision-making in the political arena. First, there are the cautious approaches by the husbands of the prospective candidates, Major Flint, the Reverend Bartlett and Mr. Wyse. Diva, who is husbandless, is forced to make the initial advances herself. Then the letters of application arrive, after which the informal interviews are conducted over lunch. Lucia heartily enjoys the opportunity of exercising power over her former rivals, particularly as she has decided from the

²⁷⁰*ibid.*, 836.

²⁷¹Noel Coward in his autobiography includes E.F. Benson in a list of the celebrities he knew or nodded to between 1917 and 1918. "I knew G.B. Stern, Sheila Kaye-Smith, Charles Scot-Moncrieff, Fay Compton, Charles Hawtrey, Ivor Novello, Gertrude Lawrence and Beatrice Lillie. I was on pleasant, but not intimate terms with Rebecca West, Hugh Walpole, W. Somerset Maugham, Yvonne Arnaud, H.G. Wells, Rose Macaulay, Olive Wadsley, Billie Carleton, Viola Tree, Ronald Colman, Madge Titheradge, Lady Carisbrooke, Lady Londesborough and Nellie Wallace. I could also nod and be nodded to by Compton Mackenzie, Irene Vanbrugh, Violet Vanbrugh, Gladys Cooper, John Galsworthy, Gerald Du Maurier, Nigel Playfair, E.F. Benson, John Lane, Elsie Janis, Maurice Chevalier and Lynn Fontanne." Noel Coward, *Autobiography* (London: Methuen, 1986), 69.

²⁷²Benson, *Trouble for Lucia*, 841.

outset that Elizabeth Mapp-Flint should have the position, not because she is more qualified, but because "she would be infinitely more tiresome if she wasn't."²⁷³ Also Lucia, by making this appointment, would have the added pleasure of being able to call Elizabeth to heel and tell her what she may, and may not, do.

Once Elizabeth becomes Lady Mayoress she is, naturally, not content to fetch and carry for Lucia. When the opportunity of a vacant seat on Council arises, she exploits her position as an appointed member of Council to gain public support for her candidacy. She handsomely defeats her rival, Georgie Pillson, and sets about undermining Lucia's authority as Mayor. She succeeds in preventing the Council from accepting Lucia's portrait, though Lucia is able to exact revenge by denying access to the Council chambers to Elizabeth and the guest, Susan Leg, she is trying to impress. The political contest is only ended when Lucia gains supreme social success by entertaining both a duchess, and the popular novelist, Susan Leg. Running parallel to the political manoeuvring are the marital charades, as Lucia and Elizabeth pursue political power at the expense of their private relationships.

In a comic round of apparently trivial incidents, Georgie and Lucia move closer and closer to separation. Georgie feels increasingly neglected and abused by Lucia's vainglorious pursuit of power. After an unnecessary debate about the ethical issues of marital status and conflict of interest, Lucia, at first, refuses to allow Georgie to come to her inaugural banquet, and then relegates him to embarrassing and

²⁷³*ibid.*, 784.

uncomfortable isolation.²⁷⁴ He complies, reluctantly, when Lucia insists he oppose Elizabeth's candidacy for the council. When he loses the contest, he feels publicly humiliated. His private life also offers fewer satisfactions as Lucia is excessively absorbed by her public office. When, to impress the electorate, Lucia establishes an era of plain living in private life, Georgie seeks solace in Diva's tea-shop. The intimacies of baby-talk and piano-playing are diminished as Lucia and Georgie no longer share their secrets. At this stage, the secrets and betrayals are minor: Lucia does not tell him she's learning to ride a bicycle; she gives him no information about the mystery of the disappearance of Mrs Wyse's budgerigar, Blue Birdie; she hides from him the fact that she has false teeth and only reluctantly admits to her cycling accidents. He, finally, loses confidence in her when she deceives him about her replication of Major Flint's riding-whip.

The gradual deterioration of Lucia and Georgie's relationship is paralleled by the growing tension between Elizabeth and the Major. Instead of flogging the editor of the Hampshire Argus for printing Irene's irreverent photograph of his wife, Major Mapp-Flint accepts several glasses of whisky from him and then takes the editor home for lunch, leaving the avenging instrument, his riding-whip, in the editor's office. Elizabeth surreptitiously retrieves the whip, hoping to avert any loss of face over the incident, but the back-benchers in the tea-shop know the full-story and wait to see how Elizabeth deals with it. "A cataleptic rigidity"²⁷⁵ seizes the entire company as

²⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 773.

²⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 797.

they listen to Elizabeth's account of the lunch. Brilliantly, she recreates reality and, instead of admitting her husband is craven and her marriage less than perfect, she averts social catastrophe by asserting that the editor is a welcome and favoured guest. The Tillingites, with relief, endorse the charade that the moral absolutes of loyalty, honour and trust are possible in human relationships. The riding whip is eaten by Diva's dog, and only the silver top remains. This Diva buries in the garden where this emblem of betrayal "the silver cap of a vanished relic"²⁷⁶ soon tarnishes and lies "like an unspent shell with all its explosive potentialities intact."²⁷⁷ By coincidence, Georgie finds it and it becomes an emblem of the growing secretiveness between Lucia and Georgie that threatens their marital harmony.

The evasions and betrayals between Georgie and Lucia become major when the friendship between Georgie and Olga Braceley is renewed. Olga is now a widow and Georgie's decision to stay with her at Poppy Sheffield's, then to bring her to stay overnight at Mallard's when he knows Lucia is away, seriously threatens their relationship. A series of mistaken identities and comic misunderstandings result in Lucia imposing herself on Poppy Sheffield's hospitality, while Georgie is entertaining Olga at Mallard's. Poppy, who had thought that the Mayor of Tilling was the attractively-bearded Georgie, sends Lucia away, and Lucia arrives home late to find Georgie and Olga as near to being "in flagrante delicto" as anyone ever comes in the "Lucia" series. Georgie carefully explains the confusion and as a result of his

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 801.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

brief but convincing narrative, the thwarted Muse of Tragedy picked up her skirts and fled. Lucia gave a little trill of happy laughter.²⁷⁸

Lucia manages to crush the rumours of sexual scandal that sprout "like mushrooms"²⁷⁹ after Olga's over-night stay, and maintain the pretence that she is an intimate friend of the Duchess of Sheffield. But her success is short-lived. Georgie decides to holiday in Le Touquet with Olga and Poppy and Poppy fails to recognize her friend Lucia when they meet outside Diva's tea-shop. Earlier in the novel, Lucia has successfully avoided public scandal when she is found guilty of speeding, in fact her popularity is increased by her truthfulness, but as the novel progresses and she finally tells the truth about Poppy Sheffield's visit no one believes her. This loss of prestige, coupled with the tussle for power over who should control the social life of the popular novelist Susan Leg, contributes to the battalion of troubles Lucia endures during Georgie's absence in Le Touquet. The final blow comes when the Council rejects Irene's portrait of Lucia surrounded by her emblems of Mayoral authority. This public rejection and humiliation is almost more than the invincible Lucia can bear, especially as Irene's satirical portrait of Elizabeth and Benjy as post-Victorian grotesques has been immortalized by the Royal Society. For the first time, Lucia's illusions are dispersed, and there is the danger she must face the reality of life's injustice and ingratitude.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸*ibid.*, 871.

²⁷⁹*ibid.*, 872.

²⁸⁰*ibid.*, 897.

Sad reversal of fortune that leads to harrowing self-knowledge is acceptable in tragic drama, but not in a comic novel. Chance, coincidence, and Lucia's unfailing instinct for survival, once more intervenes, and she succeeds in confounding her enemies by entertaining the Duchess of Sheffield not once, but twice. Georgie returns from Le Touquet, chastened by Poppy's assaults on his chastity, and the Tilling coterie eagerly gather to pay homage to the fat, lazy, vulgar woman, simply because she has a title and a castle. Against all the odds, Lucia deals with life's troubles: the loss of prestige, authority and reputation. Her wit and courage, her refusal to accept others' versions of reality and her willingness to exploit anyone, even her husband, means she never gives in to despair. The novel ends on what appears to be an affirmative note, after the ducal dinner party:

"Perfect!" she whispered. "Such a treat for them all! They will remember this evening. Perfect."²⁸¹

But what is perfection in this society? Outsmarting other people, using any deception to attain selfish ends, denying the possibility of love, loyalty and honour in human relationships. By exaggerating both their vain attempts to find satisfaction in rendering "the trivialities of life intense"²⁸² and to survive in a world characterized by set-backs, reversals and occasional triumphs, E.F. Benson implicitly reminds us of the folly of our drives and appetites.

Not only does he expose the folly and vanity of human behaviour in the petty squabbles in Tilling, but he also parodies the literary and artistic techniques used to

²⁸¹*Ibid.*, 913.

²⁸²*Ibid.*, 837.

represent the human situation. In Trouble for Lucia, he continues to allude to classical literature to underscore the human propensity for self-aggrandisement. After Lucia has received the informal letters of application for the position of Lady Mayoress, entertained the Wyse, Bartletts and Mapp-Flints to lunch, she then keeps them on tenter-hooks. The candidates, like senators from Shakespeare's Roman plays, consult the omens. Because the church clock strikes thirteen times instead of twelve, the mousy Mrs. Bartlett is ruled out. When Elizabeth Mapp-Flint's asparagus bed is washed away, and Susan Wyse is in a car crash, it seems as though the forces of Nature and Fortune are conspiring against them.²⁸³ The manoeuvring and interpretation of the omens are futile as Lucia has no intention of announcing her decision until she has made Elizabeth beg for the position. The implied narrator characterizes the delay in mock-heroic terms; it is said to be "like the Pythian oracle,"²⁸⁴ or the "Conclave of the Cardinals,"²⁸⁵ when, in reality, it is a predetermined, petty appointment to a town council in a small provincial community. As in previous novels he again uses animal imagery to emphasize his character's lack of dignity and insecurity. Elizabeth Mapp-Flint is like a "squirrel in a cage"²⁸⁶ as she paces outside Mallards waiting for Lucia's decision. Later, she feels vaguely "like a

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 791.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

rabbit with a stoat in pursuit"²⁸⁷ whenever she is confronted by the blunt, instinctual responses of the artist, Irene Coles.

To vary what might otherwise become a repetitive account of political manoeuvring for the position of Lady Mayoress, E.F. Benson parodies the epistolary technique popularized by Samuel Richardson and refined by Jane Austen. Diva's letter corresponds to her hasty, ungrammatical, deferential, self-effacing chatter in the streets of Tilling and her tea-shop.

I felt quite shy of speaking to you about it today, for writing is always the best, don't you think, when it's difficult to find the right words or to get them out when you have, so this is to tell you that I am quite at your disposal, and shall be ever so happy to help you in any way I can. I've been so much longer in Tilling than you, dear, that perhaps I can be of some use in all your entertainments and other functions. Not that I would ask you to choose me as your Mayoress, for I shouldn't think of such a thing. So pushing! So I just wanted to say that I am quite at your service, as you may feel rather diffident about asking me, for it would be awkward for me to refuse, being such an old friend, if I didn't feel like it. But I should positively enjoy helping you, quite apart from my duty as a friend.²⁸⁸

Lucia's response is scathing.

"Poor dear, ridiculous little Dival!" said Lucia, handing Georgie this artless epistle. "So ambitious and so pathetic! And now I shall hurry off to begin my sketch of the dahlias. I will not be interrupted by any further public business this morning. I must have a little time to myself — What's that?"²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 814.

²⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 781-2.

²⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 782.

Algernon Wyse's lengthy letter is couched in the pompous, pedantic phrases consistent with his self important view of himself. He elaborates on the virtues and distinctions of his wife.

Of the distinction which renders her so suitable for the post of Mayoress, I need not speak, for you know her character so well. I might remind you, however, that our late beloved sovereign himself bestowed on her the insignia of the Order of Merit of the British empire, and that she would therefore bring to her new office a *cachet* unshared by any of the otherwise estimable ladies of Tilling. And in this distressing estrangement which now exists between the kingdoms of England and Italy, the fact that my dear Susan is sister-in-law to my dear sister Amelia, Contessa di Faraglione, might help to heal the differences between the countries. In conclusion, dear lady, I do not think you could do better than to offer my Susan the post for which her distinction and abilities so eminently fit her, and you may be sure that I shall use my influence with her to get her to accept it.

*A rivederci, illustrissima Signora, ed anche presto!*²⁹⁰

Predictably Georgie and Lucia think his style is "elegant" and "beautifully expressed."²⁹¹ Major Benjy's letter mixes flattery, bluntness and vindictiveness in equal parts as he addresses his request to Georgie in "man-to-man" terms.

Now, my dear old man (if you'll permit me to call you so), I've a word to say to you. Best always, isn't it, to be frank and open? At least that's my experience in my twenty-five years of service in the King's (God bless him) Army. So listen. *Re Mayoress*. It will be a tremendous asset to your wife's success in her most distinguished post, if she can get a wise and level-headed woman to assist her. A woman of commanding character, big-minded enough to disregard the little flurries and disturbances of her office, and above all one who has tact, and would never make mischief. Some of our mutual friends — I mention no names — are only too apt to scheme and intrigue and indulge in gossip

²⁹⁰*ibid.*

²⁹¹*ibid.*, 783.

and tittle-tattle. I can only put my finger on one who is entirely free from such failings, and that is my dear Elizabeth.²⁹²

The self-serving epistolary discourses of Diva, the Wysees and the Mapp-Flints are leavened by the direct discourses of Lucia and Georgie as they assess the candidates and plan their strategy for the coming dinner-party. Lucia knowing Georgie's naivety and weaknesses advises him

Be like Mr. Baldwin and say your lips are sealed, or like some other Prime Minister, wasn't it, who said, 'Wait and see.' Counting Diva, there are four applicants now — remind me to tell Mrs. Simpson to enter them all — and I think the list may be considered closed. Leave it to me; be discreet.... And the more I think of it, the more clearly I perceive that Elizabeth Mapp-Flint must be my Mayoress. It is far better to have her on a lead bound to me by times of gratitude, than skulking about like a pariah dog, snapping at me. True, she may not be capable of gratitude, but I always prefer to look for the best in people, like Mr. Somerset Maugham in his delightful stories.²⁹³

In this novel, E.F. Benson relies less on classical allusions, animal imagery and more on borrowing discourses from self-revelatory letters and parodying the symbolist writers. By selecting ordinary objects, the silver top of a riding-whip and a little blue budgerigar and investing them with magical, even metaphysical significance, E.F. Benson makes fun of the Symbolist writers, so popular in his youth. Mrs. Susan Wyse's Blue Birdie and Mayor Flint's silver-topped riding whip function both to symbolize the self-deluded fantasies of the characters and advance the action from one absurd moment to another. The symbolist poet and playwright Maurice

²⁹²*Ibid.*

²⁹³*Ibid.*, 784. E.F. Benson's ironic intentions are also delightful. Maugham's stories rarely find the best in people. Having shared a villa with him in Capri, Benson knew his acerbic views on human nature.

Maeterlinck, in 1908, wrote a popular story, "L'Oiseau Bleu," an allegorical fantasy about the human quest for happiness. The children in the story search world-wide for the blue-bird of happiness only to find it is at home all the time. Thus this story celebrates the values of loving relationships. In other works, Maeterlinck examined questions about the human responsibility for misfortune and the immortality of the soul. There is no direct evidence that Benson read Maeterlinck's works, but the naming of Mrs. Wyse's budgie and the parodic parallelism in the symbolism are too close to be coincidental. Also Maeterlinck's works were widely celebrated before the First World War.²⁸⁴ By the 1930s, the sentimental optimism of Maeterlinck's philosophy, as well as the techniques of the symbolists, were ripe for mockery. Up to this point in the chronicles of Tilling, Mrs. Susan Wyse, the dentist's wife, has clung to her external symbols of status, her sable furs and her Rolls-Royce, feeling secure in a material world. In this novel, she struggles with the unfamiliar emotions of grief and guilt by seeking solace in the spiritual world. The object of her distress, though, is not a family member, but her pet budgerigar who died when she inadvertently sat on it. First, she wears the bird on her hat as a symbol of her lost happiness, and her remorse. She abandons this style of contrition when the bird keeps falling off her hat onto the pavement or into her dessert. Seeking to appease the spirit of her beloved bird, and assuage her grief, she holds seances, oblivious that she is becoming an object of derision and concern. Lucia, who has no truck with the

²⁸⁴Robert Hichens, the author of *The Green Carnation*, describes his meeting with E.F. Benson in the Louxor Hotel as a turning point in his life (*Yesterday*, London: Cassell & Co. Ltd., 1947, 63). He also mentions how influential Maeterlinck was on his generation (*Ibid.*, 177). Hichens and Benson had many friends in common, including Ethel Smyth, Sybil Colefax, Lady Beresford and the Speyers.

world of the spirits though she is able to mimic the discourse, snatches the stiffened bird out of its necromantic shrine, hiding it in a municipal box that, appropriately, contains Museum business. She explains the bird's disappearance by announcing that

"He is free; he is earth-bound no longer, and, by his miracle of dematerialization, has given you proof of that."²⁹⁵

This cynical exorcism of guilt and fear is sufficient for this community that is incapable of love and faith.

Another symbol that is used in the novel to focus attention on the characters' need for self-deluding fantasies is Major Benjy's riding-whip. It also serves as a device to expose the inadequacies in the Mapp-Flints's marital relationship, and the duplicity and treachery of Diva, Georgie and Lucia. The silver-topped riding-whip is an emblem of the Major's pretensions to military status and masculinity. It is one of his prized possessions because he is said to have used it to defend himself against a tiger. He also intends to use it against Mr. McConnell, the editor who defames the honour of Elizabeth.²⁹⁶ In an excess of bonhomie, however, he forgets his original intention and leaves the whip in the editor's office, where an enraged Elizabeth finds it. She, in turn, becomes so absorbed in revising the story of her husband's actions that Diva's dog eats the whip, unnoticed. Diva, in her turn, buries all that remains of the whip, the silver top, to avoid any confrontations.²⁹⁷ But in Tilling nothing remains

²⁹⁵Benson, *Trouble for Lucia*, 823. E.F. Benson knew many people who believed in spiritualism as well as the discourses of that belief. His uncle, Henry Sidgwick was the first President of the Society for Psychical Research and his mother and sisters attended meetings of the society.

²⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 795.

²⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 801.

secret. Through a network of coincidences Georgie finds the cap when he is helping Diva plant some bulbs and carries it home to Mallards, where Elizabeth finds it one afternoon when she is visiting. She replaces the whip and all the mysteries seem resolved, until Lucia, out for revenge against Elizabeth for her treacherous rejection of Lucia's portrait, rematerializes the whip, by having a replica made and having Georgie rediscover it in Diva's tea-shop. The Major's valuable, but spurious, emblem of authority in turn becomes a symbol for the betrayals, subterfuges and manipulations indulged in by all the Tillingites. E.F. Benson uses it to mock the extreme measures taken by his characters to avoid truth, honour and regard as they pursue political and social power.

Not only does E.F. Benson increase the comic effect in this novel by parodying literary styles, he also mocks the once fashionable visual representations of reality.²⁹⁸ To do this he uses four distinct voices to show how criticism is in the voice as well as the eye of the beholder: firstly the slightly sardonic, implied author comments on the initial sketch made by Irene Coles of Mrs. Mapp-Filnt's jubilation at being made Lady Mayoress.

The sketch was very striking. A nude, well-nourished, putty-colored female, mottled with green shadows, was balanced on an oyster shell, while a prizefighter, representing the wind and sprawling across the sky, propelled her with puffed cheeks up a river towards a red-roofed town on the shore which presented Tilling with pre-Raphaelite fidelity.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸A founding member of the pre-Raphaelite group, Sir John Millais, used the buildings and countryside of Winchelsea, near Rye, for several of his most famous paintings.

²⁹⁹Benson, *Trouble for Lucia*, 777.

Irene replaces this sketch with a picture more suited to the prudish tastes of Tilling, announcing

I shall turn my wondrous Hellenic goddess into a Victorian mother. I shall dress her in a tartan shawl and skirt and a bonnet with a bow underneath her chin and button boots and a parasol. I shall give my lusty south Wind a frock coat and trousers and a top hat, and send the design back to that foul-minded Department asking if I have now removed all objectionable features. Georgie, when next you come to see me, you won't need to blush."³⁰⁰

She makes her painting respectable by aping Holman Hunt instead of Botticelli. What began as a slightly vindictive exposure of Elizabeth's greed is erected into a grand indictment of the Victorian age. Or as the art editor of the *Daily Mirror* puts it, Irene Coles is the artist of the year for her

daring realism, for withering satire of the so-called Victorian age, for savage caricature of the simpering, guileless prettiness of such early Italian artists as Botticelli.³⁰¹

Irene, herself, is far more satisfied with her less derivative portrait of Lucia, which receives no attention from anyone, other than Elizabeth who manages to ban it from the Council Chamber and eagerly disparages it at the local art exhibition.

"Can't make head or tail of it," murmured Benjy. "I never saw such a jumble."

"A little puzzling at first," said Elizabeth, "But I'm beginning to grasp it. Seated at her piano, you see, to show how divinely she plays. Scarlet robe and chain, to show she's mayor. Cards littered about for her bridge. Rather unkind. Bicycle leaning against the piano. Her paintbox because she's such a great artist. A pity the whole thing looks like a

³⁰⁰*ibid.*

³⁰¹*ibid.*, 846.

jumble sale, with Worship as auctioneer. And such a sad falling off as a work of art. I'm afraid success has gone to Irene's head."³⁰²

This conscious mimicking of other narrative discourses and mimetic displays reaches its apogee in Lucia's pseudo-scholarly lecture on Shakespeare's comic masterpiece. The implied narrator summarises the lecture, using the narrow lit. crit. discourses that limit rather than enlighten understanding.

Lucia first gave them a brief and lucid definition of drama as the audible and visible presentation of situations of human woe or weal, based on and developing from those dynamic individual forces which evoke the psychological clashes of temperament that give rise to action. The action (drama) being strictly dependent on the underlying motives which prompt it and on emotional stresses might be roughly summed up as Plot. It was important that her audience should grasp that quite clearly. She went on to say that anything that distracts attention from Plot or from the psychology of which it is the logical outcome, hinders rather than helps drama, and therefore the modern craze for elaborate decorations and embellishments must be ruthlessly condemned.³⁰³

E.F. Benson must have taken some pleasure in the closing, if puzzled, remarks by his reviewer Forrest Reid who admitted to finding Benson's novel amusing but noted there was "not really any story to speak of."³⁰⁴ Reid obviously missed the mockery implicit in this account of Lucia's lecture.

In all the "Lucia" books, E.F. Benson's mockery of the snobs, gossips and hypocrites has been implicit. Many reviewers remarked on his deft, amusing writing but none analysed Benson's command of the medley of voices in narrative discourse, his wide-ranging, mock-heroic allusions, or his ironic use of bird and animal imagery to create his comic world which is endlessly entertaining and instructive.

³⁰²*Ibid.*, 881.

³⁰³*Ibid.*, 843.

³⁰⁴*The Spectator*, 68.

CHAPTER FIVE

Comic Epiphanies

Whatever may be the truth about the things seen and unseen, happiness is quite certainly better than misery, and laughter than the most edifying of tears.

E.F. Benson, A Reaping (1909)

Any introduction to the comic world of E.F. Benson cannot overlook two comic novels written coterminously with the "Lucia" sequences but which offer a different comic vision as well as an even more dynamic interplay of narrative discourses. Paying Guests, published in 1929, and Secret Lives, published three years later in 1932, are examples of the range of E.F. Benson's comic insights into human nature as well as the versatility of his handling of narrative discourse. The age, class and preoccupations of the characters in Secret Lives and Paying Guests are the same as in the "Lucia" series. In fact one character, the romance novelist Susan Leg, appears in both Secret Lives and later in Trouble for Lucia; nevertheless, the main characters in Secret Lives and Paying Guests achieve a measure of self-knowledge and consequent emotional fulfilment. By loving, and partly loving, Colonel Chase, in Paying Guests, ends his lonely peregrinations and marries the owner of the boarding-house Mrs. Oxney, and Florence Kemp and Alice Howard decide to share their lives, free from the tyranny of fathers and suitors. In Secret Lives, Margaret Mantrip and Susan Leg are reconciled, once all secrets are revealed. The main characters in both novels only achieve genuine emotional affinity with others after they have glimpsed, if only for a moment, the reality of their lonely, pitiable condition. These sudden illuminations, often arising from trivial or arbitrary circumstances, propel the characters out of their

isolation into unions with others. These epiphanies are comic because the self-knowledge is partial and the new relationships are ultimately as transient and imperfect as the humans who make them. E.F. Benson would not go as far as the views expressed in Amiens' song in As You Like It that "most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly," but echoing through the epiphanies in Paying Guests and Secret Lives is Touchstone's reminder that "all is mortal in nature, so is all nature in love mortal in folly," particularly when that love is between those uncertain about their emotional and sexual preferences.

Most of the reviewers of Paying Guests and Secret Lives remarked on the distinctive tone and perspective in those novels. L.P. Hartley in The Saturday Review said that E.F. Benson was at his best in Paying Guests, displaying a wit and invention "so fertile and resourceful"¹ that the humiliations of the characters were always more amusing than painful. Hartley thought Benson's wit was "spiced with cruelty,"² but the reviewer in the American magazine, The Saturday Review of Literature, Amy Loveman, wrote

Mr. Benson is amused by the boarders at Wentworth (a select establishment at Bolton Spa), but he is not cruel or aloof. Rather we perceive absurdities of character without once losing our human sympathy. We chuckle and even guffaw, but we do so from no sense of finicky superiority.³

¹L.P. Hartley, review of Paying Guests, The Saturday Review, 6 April, 1929, 484.

²Ibid.

³Review of Paying Guests, The Saturday Review of Literature, 12 October, 1929, 262.

This reviewer freely admitted that she would not want to live with the pretentious and idiosyncratic "odd sticks of humanity" living at Wentworth, but that their trivial eccentricities became "memorable as Mr. Benson tells of them."⁴ The humour is, indeed, in the manner of telling, more than in subject. This reviewer also finds it difficult to locate this novel critically. She comments on the absence of plot, the lack of obviously high-minded themes, but persists in commending it. "High-brows need not sniff at Paying Guests,"⁵ she says. Other transatlantic reviewers also commended this novel. The reviewer in The New York Times seemed familiar, though not in sympathy with, the conventional charges that Benson was too prolific and should not allow himself to be distracted from serious works by the diversions of comedy.

By ordinary standards, at least, E.F. Benson may be accounted a prolific novelist. "Paying Guests" is listed as his twenty-seventh work. There is some excuse for literary fecundity, however, when the entertainment provided as thoroughly satisfactory as that which Mr. Benson offers here. Indeed, one could wish that others who have not written half so much as Mr. Benson would write half as well.⁶

He commented on the rare nature of Benson's comic invention and the distinctiveness of his tone.

"Paying Guests" is comedy of the sort one sees too seldom. It is the product of a fertile but unrestrained invention and a sense of quiet drollery.⁷

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶"Paying Guests and other Recent Works of Fiction," The New York Times Book Review, 7 July, 1929, 6.

⁷Ibid.

E.F. Edgett, writing in the Boston Transcript, called Benson's wit "light" and "sparkling," comparing him to the American humorist, Booth Tarkington, rather than Jane Austen.

To say that Mr. Benson in it does for English life and human nature what Booth Tarkington does for like phases of the American brand of masculine and feminine eccentricities would be to do it only partial justice. As expositors of its humorous aspects both these story-tellers are unsurpassed. And in "Paying Guests" Mr. Benson seems to have surpassed himself.⁹

Secret Lives, published four years later, was as well-reviewed. In England, the reviewer in The New Statesman and Nation thought the new generation of authors could learn much from this sixty-seven year old writer.⁹ He admired Benson's disengagement, his skilful manipulation of the mainsprings of comedy, exaggeration and parody.

If the young wish to be devastatingly satirical they should borrow Mr. E.F. Benson's recipe. He never gets hot himself, nor are his hands damp as he describes his frols and fribbles. Secret Lives is rather broad in its effects, and occasionally Mr. Benson rushes away from his road to dig up and exhibit some rich but irrelevant bone; but the farcical satire of these people in a London Square, Mrs. Mantrip, Mrs. Conklin, Lady Eva Lowndes, Jimmy Mason and Susan Leg is really laughable, and not quite so acid as in some of Mr. Benson's recent tales. He is extravagant, but no extravagance can be excessive in portraying the character of Rudolph

⁹E.F. Edgett, "Paying Guests," Boston Transcript, 20 July, 1929, 2.

⁹He might be referring here to Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh. Huxley's satiric novels Chrome Yellow (1921), Antic Hay (1923), Barren Leaves (1925) and Point Counter Point (1928) had commanded a great deal of public attention. It is interesting to note that as a young man Huxley knew E.F. Benson's work. He wrote to his father on 9 July 1913 from Villa Belledonne in La Touche that he "was just translating large chunks of E.F. Benson into French." This reference is in Grover Smith, ed. Letters of Aldous Huxley (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), 49. Evelyn Waugh's books Decline and Fall (1928) and Vile Bodies (1930) had also received wide attention. He might have known Benson's work. His father reviewed many books, including Benson's Queen Lucia for the Daily Telegraph and discussed his weekly reviews with his family. David Lodge mentions these discussions in his book Working with Structuralism (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 128.

Da Vinci, alias Miss Leg — and even now Mr. Benson's Susan, in her splendid, satisfied fatuity, hardly equals her great original; for it is evident that Da Vinci, author of Apples of Sodom, has a close relation in the author of The Sorrows of Satan.¹⁰

In the United States, the reviewer in The New York Times also saw the correspondence between Susan Leg and Marie Corelli, the author of The Sorrows of Satan. He thought Benson ridiculed "a number of human foibles"¹¹ in a good-natured way and was struck by the parts of the book where Benson mocked his characters' engagement with fiction.

For all her absurdities, Susan is lovable which is more than can be said for the noted critic Arthur Armstrong who made her so exceedingly angry. The account of the novel she writes with herself as heroine and Mr. Armstrong as villain, is one of the most amusing things in the book, almost as amusing as the quotations from Mrs. Mantrip's biography of her remarkable father a deceased clergyman who, though afflicted with asthma had contrived to combine the service of God and Mammon in a highly satisfactory and profitable manner.¹²

The implicit presence of an author who takes pleasure in managing the fictions within fiction was noted by L.A. Strong in The Spectator. He ended his review by commending Benson's urbane wit.

Mr. Benson is in excellent form. To call Secret Lives entertaining would be to use the word in a more exact sense than usual. Throughout its pages one has the sense of being literally entertained by an urbane and witty host, whose eye, humorous and kindly, can harden to a glint of steel when it catches sight of something uncouth in life or manners, and whose graciousness has behind it every now and then a hint that its

¹⁰Review of Secret Lives, The New Statesman and Nation, 30 July, 1932, 134.

¹¹"Teapot Tempests," The New York Times Book Review, 23 September, 1932, 7.

¹²Ibid.

owner's first loyalties have been given to another order and another period. The entertainment is rich and varied.¹³

At this stage in his life, E.F. Benson was all too aware of the ending of "that other order, and other period." By 1932, Benson was the last survivor of his remarkable family. Arthur had died in 1925 and many of Benson's energies between then and the publication of Paying Guests had been spent in clearing out Arthur's home, the Old Lodge at Magdalene College, Cambridge. When he recounts this experience in Final Edition,¹⁴ he conveys the overwhelming sense of the futility of acquiring material possessions. Seven years earlier he had dismantled his mother's home at Tremans, sending some of the family possessions to Arthur and now he had to deal with them again.

I had then sent him quantities of family pieces, and now they confronted me again, mutely glittering in plate-chests and china cupboards. But who wanted with or without a sense of associative tenderness, a crown Derby dinner service for thirty people, or a silver William IV urn, appalling in design and decoration, and large enough to supply boiling water for all their breakfasts next morning.¹⁵

He patiently sorted through the controversies surrounding the considerable bequests to Magdalene College, and fended off those who wanted to profit from Arthur's death by rushing into print with a commemorative volume of essays.¹⁶ In those endeavours

¹³L.A. Strong, Review of Secret Lives, The Spectator, 6 August, 1932, 190.

¹⁴Benson, Final Edition, 196.

¹⁵Ibid., 197.

¹⁶In the Benson collection of correspondence in the Bodleian Library (Ben/Dep., 3/65-70) there are a series of letters to the Magdalene College Bursar discussing the allocation of A.C. Benson's Bequests. There are also letters between E.F. Benson and Edmund Gosse about E.H. Ryle's determined intention to publish a book on A.C. Benson. In all these letters, Benson shows the tact, patience and integrity that marks his handling of contentious matters.

he found Edmund Gosse a loyal friend, despite the acrimony that had grown up between Gosse and his brother in the later years of Arthur's life. Dutifully, Benson had supported Arthur through his periodic bouts of mental depression, even though their interests and ways of life had become so divergent. Clear-sightedly, Benson reviewed his brother's strengths and limitations as a writer and as a human being and delineated the source of his profound and disabling divisions, his lack of self-knowledge about his emotional needs.

A consciousness that with all his friendships and eager interests he missed a more direct expression of himself. Reserve combined with fastidiousness, both of which were characteristic of him, were perhaps responsible for this suppression. He shunned emotional experience.¹⁷

During this time, Benson was suffering from the onset of osteo-arthritis. For a man who had been a vigorous athlete all his life this was a particularly cruel stroke of fate, so by the time he came to write Paying Guests, which chronicles the lives of an odd assortment of lonely, aging, arthritic individuals in search of miracle cures both physical and spiritual, he was in familiar territory. Even though some of his most productive years were ahead of him during which he was to write some of his most enduring works, he was closer to despair than he had ever been before. In the summer after Arthur's death, E.F. Benson went for rest and relaxation to the spas at Droitwich. At that time Edmund Gosse sent him a delightful letter warning him against the folly of despair in a mock epitaph.

¹⁷Benson, Final Edition, 200.

We hope earnestly that Droitwich may set you up. It does wonders. But beware, when you take your walks abroad, that you do not crash through the saline crust. It is said to be extremely treacherous:

Pickled Body
of
Celebrated Novelist
exhibited
in
Butcher's Shop
in
Droitwich
Still fresh after many years
in the salt.¹⁸

Gosse obviously knew that Benson's sense of humour would help him prevail. That humour and absence of self-pity is apparent in Benson's account of his arthritis and his vain pursuit of medical cures. He tried them all: special diets of oranges and iodine; wearing necklaces of crystal and radio-active knee-pads; following the mind-over-matter teachings of Christian Scientist, Mrs. Eddy. But they all "ran the same course, cradled in high optimism and gently expiring in complete failure."¹⁹ Nevertheless, he explored all possibilities however absurd because

I wanted to get well, and was prepared to do anything, however preposterous, in search of this consummation. Indeed I think it would have been foolish, not to have been so foolish, for who can tell?²⁰

What saved Benson from the despair and self-pity that so oppressed his brother was his courageous and humorous identification with the all too human striving for that

¹⁸Letter from Edmund Gosse, dated July, 1925 in the Benson family correspondence (Benson Dep. 3/65-70).

¹⁹Benson, *Final Edition*, 205-207.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 208.

consummation devoutly to be wished despite man's animal, physical mortal nature. As he put it "the perception of the ludicrous [is] among the higher attributes of fallen man."²¹

In Paying Guests he transmutes his own folly in trying to deny the advent of physical change into an appealing comedy. Paying Guests is set in a boarding house, Wentworth,²² situated in Bolton Spa. The physically and emotionally disabled "guests" pay to stay here for a while seeking cures and comforts. Unaware of the folly of seeking cures for the body, without remedying the defects of their spiritual and emotional lives, the guests while away their time eating and bathing, competing and complaining. All are middle-aged and in addition to their bodily afflictions are "afflicted with the middle-aged disease of fabrication"²³ about their identity, status and worth. The proprietor of Wentworth, Mrs. Oxney, is only too ready to suffer these fools gladly as "rheumatism and its kindred afflictions had a silver if not a golden lining."²⁴ Her impulses though are not wholly mercenary. There is a sense that she shares one of her more generous-spirited guest's, Mrs. Holden's, advocacy of civility and tolerance in life, as well as at Wentworth.

²¹Ibid., 222.

²²It might be a coincidence, but the odious clergyman who is the main character of Mary Cholmondeley's novel Red Portage is also called Wentworth. Mary Cholmondeley was a friend of the Benson family and had visited the family home, Tremans. Mary Benson and others thought that she had modelled Wentworth on A.C. Benson.

²³E.F. Benson, Paying Guests (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), 22.

²⁴Ibid., 9.

Here we all are.....and we've got to be pleasant to each other and not fly into passions.²⁶

The paying guests at the Wentworth are a fatuous and gullible group of people. All are unencumbered by financial worries or emotional commitments, free to indulge their petty and puny contests for recognition and attention. The two star boarders, Colonel Chase and Alice Howard, spend their time perambulating round the country, looking for a new set of boarders to bully or charm, respectively. Both cling to their delusions that they are handsomer, more vigorous, more talented and more wealthy than they are. After a "credible, but uneventful"²⁸ career in the army the retired Colonel wears himself out physically by bicycling round the English country lanes and by-ways and wears everyone else out emotionally by his bullying, dominating personality. Fixed in his belief that he is ageless, he uses spectacles surreptitiously and makes secret visits to a dentist in London to halt his tooth decay. The forty-year old Miss Howard is similarly misguided about her youth and prowess. In her case she sees herself as an incarnation of the Muses, as talented in painting, singing, dancing and playing the piano as she is genteel in her manners. The other boarders are as egotistical, repressed and self-deluded and fraudulent as these stellar boarders. The most sinister is Mr. Kemp, a sadistic martinet who has already destroyed his wife's will to live and is well on his way to "immolating his daughter on the altar of his aches,"²⁷ by perverting the normal relationship between a father and his daughter.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 31.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 35.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 58.

His daughter, Florence, thanks to her mother's bequest is independently wealthy, but is repressed emotionally by her father's intimidation. Into the midst of this "happy band of pilgrims" comes Mrs. Bliss with her bright fatuous smile and her Manual of Mental Science offering the spurious spiritual comforts of Christian Science. For a while the group are taken in by her facile epigrams and meaningless incantations:

All is harmony and you're perfectly well. All belief in pain and sickness comes from error.²⁸

Disillusionment sets in, however, when she is exposed as a liar and a fraud. Two other occupants of Wentworth in their deflationary and ironic commentary on the follies of the other guests resemble a less agile Feste and older Maria. They, themselves, are not free from their "vile bodies,"²⁹ but they have escaped from self-delusion. Outside the boarding house, the other characters make a living pandering to the conceit and folly of the residents: Mr. Amble, the chemist supplies their medicines; Mr. Graves, the masseur, ministers to their aches; Town Councillor Bowen and his wife frame Miss Howard's pictures and rent her their Exhibition room.

In comic literature characters' names are often deliberately chosen to underscore an aspect of their nature. The names in this novel both parallel and parody the characters' pretensions. Colonel Chase vainly chases after youth and significance, assiduously measuring his progress on his trusty pedometer which means more to him than any personal relationships. Miss Howard pretends she is related to the land-owning Yorkshire family of the same name. Mrs. Oxney's devotion to gratifying the

²⁸*Ibid.*, 102.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 94.

physical needs of her guests with endless supplies of scones and jugs of cream has a certain bovine quality about it. For a long while, the paying guests are blissfully unaware that the exponent of Mental Science, Mrs. Bliss, is a fraud. The Reverend H. Banks's promise of spiritual replenishment is equally suspect, despite the fact that his name echoes the consolations of the "banks of still water" in the twenty-third psalm. The masseur's name, Mr. Graves, is a serious reminder of man's transitory nature. The local chemist, Mr. Amble, makes his living off the less ambulatory, and poor Miss Jobson needs the patience of her namesake to cope with the querulous Dowager Duchess of Appledore. Even the names of the rival boarding houses, Balmoral, Blenheim and Belvoir, mock the pretentious longings of their owners.³⁰ And Miss Howard's titles for her paintings, "Leafy Warwickshire," "Harvest Moon," "Dewy Eve," "Lengthening Shadows,"³¹ etc. point to the sentimentality of their form and subject. Indeed, the title of the novel underscores the feeble attempts at gentility by this transient group of lodgers. It also takes into account the brief span of all mortal life. In a sense, we are all "paying guests" in life.

The time-frame of Paying Guests is narrower than the yearly cycles in the "Lucia" books. The novel opens in mid-October and ends in mid-November, with the addition of an epilogue recounting an event in early January. Most of the action occurs in the autumn season which is an apt one in which to set people who are in the autumn of their lives. Nevertheless, although the characters are aging, there is still

³⁰*Ibid.*, 9.

³¹*Ibid.*, 147.

the possibility for new growth, a second growing.³² In this novel the characters take the opportunity to break out of their egocentricity and delusion and choose to lead less solipsistic lives. The unions of Colonel Chase and Mrs. Oxney and of Florence Kemp and Alice Howard are hardly the festive nuptials one finds in Shakespearean comedies, but they are better than the emotionally sterile lives they were leading at the beginning of the novel.

These consummations are attained only after the usual round of mistakes, misunderstandings, coincidences and surprises. For a long while the Colonel and Alice are content with their own delusions and then those offered by Mrs. Bliss. It takes two climactic events, and the good-natured intervention of Mrs. Holders, and the lame, but grown-up Tim Bullingden, to bring them to the moments of illumination that free them from those delusions. Initially it seems that Mrs. Bliss's doctrine of the mind can cure colds, and find lost talismans. After her fraudulence is exposed, the Colonel suffers a further loss of self-esteem when his story-telling skills are ridiculed. Miss Howard seems to be heading towards a similar fate of public ridicule when it looks as though no-one is going to buy one of the forty paintings she has exhibited in the "Green Room."³³ Both are saved from complete humiliation by the friendly intercession of their fellow-boarders, but these resolutions are only temporary. Alice

³²In 1917, E.F. Benson had written another novel about middle-age regrets, *Autumn Sowing*. This title refers to the desire of the middle-aged protagonist to change his life and begin anew. It also corresponds to the season of second growth in ancient Greece when the festivals were held at which Aristophanes' comedies were performed.

³³There is an ironic echo here of Northrop Frye's notion of the "green world." Miss Howard hopes to achieve freedom and recognition when she exhibits her paintings in the Green Room.

and the Colonel are still solitary figures, prey to the caprices of fortune and the vanity of their self-conceit. Ironically their moments of insight into their solitary states come not as a result of the "high thoughts and selfless deeds" advocated by the Reverend Banks, but during the trivial squabbles at a bridge game and in a stray paragraph about a fire in Tunbridge Wells in the Morning Standard.³⁴ When her father's authority and judgment is challenged at bridge, Florence Kemp begins to consider that freedom is possible. Her sentimental adulation is transformed to genuine love when she learns that Alice is not as wealthy as she pretends. That same paragraph also reveals to the Colonel Alice's duplicity and helps him settle for Mrs. Oxney. After these comic epiphanies they attain a measure of self-knowledge, a recognition that living is better than dying, sharing better than solitude. The novel reaches an equipoise, rather than an ending, because it is clear that characters are still capable of complacent foolishness.

"God bless my soul," he cried, springing actively up from his low chair. "I had no idea it was so late. My packing still only half-finished, and you — ha, your beauty-sleep. Time for little boys and girls to be in bed, Mrs. Oxney. But this little boy has still to finish his packing. He will be glad when the day comes for him to pack again, and return to charming Wentworth."³⁵

And return he does to marry Mrs. Oxney. An event that Alice and Florence celebrate by taking a special bag of nuts to two monkeys in London Zoo who bear a close resemblance to the happy couple.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 266.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 283.

They bought a bag of wedding nuts. The Colonel was swinging madly on his rope.

"Probably doing a record," said Alice. "Come, Colonel! Such delicious nuts."

The Colonel paid not the least attention to them, but when he had broken his record, sat and cuddled up to a stout and rather comely lady-ape, who received a few trivial connubialities with marked favour.

"And Mrs. Oxney!" said Alice.³⁶

Although there is the potential for tragedy in the subject of this novel, the emotional and physical disintegration of human life, Benson mocks the absurdity of retreating into solipsism and self-delusion by his use of the interplay of many voices. In addition he borrows extensively from Biblical discourses to contrast the shallow pretensions of his characters with the lofty principles they avow. In the "Lucia" series Benson used a medley of different voices and blended them with analogies and allusions drawn from classical and literary works to parody the assumptions and actions of his characters. In Paying Guests, Benson contrasts the material and physical preoccupations of the residents of Wentworth with the vision, or illusion, of eternal life offered by the Bible, which itself is also, of course, a polyphony of different texts and voices.

In the opening paragraph of Paying Guests, the voice of the cliché-ridden commercial community is interlaced with biblical phrases, suggesting the values of the implied narrator. The reader is consequently reminded of the pathos of being halt and lame in a world where the values are preeminently material not spiritual. The desire for wholeness and immortality, though, seems endemic in the pilgrims to Bolton Spa,

³⁶*Ibid.*, 286.

Bolton Spa, justly famous for the infamous savour of the waters which so magically got rid of painful deposits in the joints and muscles of the lame and the halt, and for the remedial rasp of its saline baths in which the same patients are pickled daily to their great relief, had been crammed all the summer, and the proprietors of its hotels and boarding houses had been proving that for them at least rheumatism and its kindred afflictions had a silver if not a golden lining.³⁷

As Mrs. Oxney and her sister sit under the cedar tree their song is not in praise of God, like the daughters of Lebanon, but weary calculations about the price of coal, the cost of a new bathroom and envious comparisons between Wentworth and rival boarding-houses. Mrs. Oxney will only be completely satisfied, her cup will run over when Wentworth is "permanently full."³⁸ Similar resonances, this time from the Songs of Solomon instead of the Psalms, sound in the Colonel's joyous reunion, not with his lover, but with his beloved pedometer. Later, the pedometer is described in terms taken from the Anglican hymnal. It is all bright and beautiful:

There it lay, bright and clean, for Mr. Amble had polished it up beautifully.³⁹

The emotional sterility of the Colonel's life is ridiculed through these ironic textures of discourse. That he should so revere and cherish a mechanical measuring device indicates his desperate need for achievement and attention. It has accompanied him all his life, a faithful talisman, proudly recording his physical prowess. He is downcast when it is lost and when it is returned by Mrs. Bliss's sleight-of-hand, he is easily

³⁷*Ibid.*, 9.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 11.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 110.

convinced of her miraculous powers. The effect on the Colonel of the restoration of the pedometer is described in the sardonic tones of the implied narrator.

All day harmony, so miraculously restored after that wild outburst, shone on Colonel Chase. He and his pedometer had a wonderful walk that afternoon.⁴⁰

The first serious challenge to the Colonel's authority over the inmates of Wentworth had occurred at the bridge table. The outrageousness of his conceit when his hand of cards is challenged is underscored by the biblical allusion:

It was as if Moses, coming down from Sinai with the tables of commandment had been subjected to cross-examination as to their authenticity and the number of them.⁴¹

The matter is eventually resolved, not in the Colonel's favour, by consulting the oracle, Slam in The Sunday Gazette.⁴²

The next crisis, after the loss and restoration of the Colonel's pedometer, is the potential disaster of Miss Howard's humiliation at her Art Exhibition. Once again, the discrepancy between the material and moral impulses of these fallible people is apparent in the incongruous juxtaposition of biblical analogies and human action. The high-toned smooth and predictable observations of the Reverend H. Banks are reinforced by his wife's naive reassurances, laced with trite Christian phrases:

"People," said this subtle observer, "are like sheep. If one leads, in things great and small, the rest will follow. Let each of us therefore lead in all high thought and selfless deeds, and we will speedily find that we are not alone as we tread the upward path of Christian endeavour. And now—

⁴⁰*ibid.*, 117.

⁴¹*ibid.*, 48.

⁴²*ibid.*, 114.

Mrs. Banks had been struck by this analogy between people and sheep: it seemed to her 'very teaching,' and at lunch afterwards she thanked her husband for the enlightenment it had brought her.⁴³

This enlightenment is short-lived as Hildebrand and his wife are stampeded into buying no less than two quite expensive pictures at Miss Howard's exhibition merely because other people seem intent on purchasing them. People are indeed "like sheep. If one leads in things great and small, the rest will follow." In the context of his sermon the Reverend Banks is referring to principled, unselfish action of moral individuals. In their actions, he and his wife are as easily motivated by greed and envy as anyone else. A further layer of irony emerges when it becomes apparent that, although the buyers have been led astray by their desire to have something everyone else seems to want, their foolishness has prevented Miss Howard's humiliation. Her success in selling her paintings draws the Colonel's unwelcome attentions, which in turn is the catalyst for Florence's declaration of love. This absurd series of events celebrates the value of folly. Before her success, though, the Colonel is determined not to waste even a small amount of money by purchasing entrance to Miss Howard's exhibition. However, he is soon affected by the actions of the other sheep. His self-importance and greed are underlined in the comparison between this unremarkable, retired Colonel and the prophet Balaam. Balaam was inspired by God to praise, not curse the chosen people of God. The Colonel is inspired by greed to praise Alice's paintings.

He had come in Balaam's first mood, inclined to curse the expenditure of six pence as the payment of blackmail, but this public eagerness to secure an example of Miss Howard's skill, made him wonder whether he

⁴³*Ibid.*, 174.

should not be blessing a blackmail which seemed to offer an opportunity of securing something worth having at a reasonable outlay.⁴⁴

As their quest for something of material worth increases, the purchasers regard the price catalogue as the source of all truth and power

Mr. Banks who was holding the price catalogue in front of Lady Appledore like the Book of Gospels gave a sycophantic laugh.⁴⁵

By borrowing discourses from the Bible, Benson draws the reader's attention to the amusing lack of congruence between the overblown conceit of the Wentworth inhabitants and their puny struggles to outsmart each other. This is not his only narrative strategy. It is in the constant interplay of narrative levels and voices that he shows his humour and compassion for God's fallen creatures. The voice of the implied narrator is not as disguised in this novel, as in the "Lucia" series. In case the reader is misled by Miss Howard's girlish chatter, her unenlightened state is given early in the novel

Miss Alice Howard was a pathetic person, though she would have been very much surprised if anyone had told her so. She had been an extremely pretty girl, lively and intelligent and facile, but by some backhanded stroke of fate she had never married, and now at the age of forty, though she had parted with her youth, she had relinquished no atom of her girlishness. She hardly ever walked, but tripped, she warbled little snatches of song when she thought that anyone might be within hearing in order to refresh them with her maidenly brightness, and sat on the hearth-rug in front of the fire, even though there was a far more comfortable seat ready.⁴⁶

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 179.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 182.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 21.

Colonel Chase is analysed with the same relentlessness. In the following passage the implied narrator tells how the Colonel's exaggerated estimate of his abilities has prevented him from having any worthwhile experiences. After dinner he settles down to re-read and meditate on Macaulay's Essays, apt reading for this pompous, emotionally immature man.

This meditation was always agreeable, for its origin, the cave out of which it so generously gushed was his strong and profound satisfaction with himself, and this gave a pleasant flavour to whatever he thought about. He had had a thoroughly creditable though uneventful career in the army, and on his retirement two years ago, found himself able to contemplate the past and await the future with British equanimity. Being unmarried and possessed of a comfortable competence, he could live for a couple of months in the year in furnished rooms close to his club in London, and for the other ten at this admirably conducted boarding-establishment, thus escaping all the responsibilities of house-keeping and of friendship.⁴⁷

At other times in the novel the voice of the implied narrator is almost drowned out by the medley of the characters' voices as they compete for attention. For example, when the paying guests gather for a quiet rest after lunch they are interrupted by the Colonel's news.

"I'm afraid I've caught a fearful cold," he said. "I got wet through in my walk and chilled to the bone."

Mrs. Bliss looked at Mr. Kemp, then at Florence, and finally at Colonel Chase.

"No, Colonel," she said with great sweetness of manner, "you haven't got a cold at all. Error."

"I wish it was," he said, "but there's no error about it. Shiverings, sneezings, sore throat. That spells cold."

"Error!" said Mrs. Bliss again tenderly.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Ibid., 35.

⁴⁸Ibid., 83-84.

At this point Miss Howard arrives, with her own demand for attention.

"La donn 'e mobile," said Miss Howard. "Oh, Colonel Chasel I never saw you! Not coming out again on this beautiful afternoon."

"Not I. I've got a cold coming on and I shall stop in and nurse it. Are you going into the town?"

"Yes. I've got to see about my little pickies being framed. Just fancy! I'm going to hold a little teeny picture-exhibition of some of my rubbishy sketches. So rash! But nobody would give me any peace until I promised to."⁴⁹

The reader is then reminded that Miss Howard's self-deprecation is only a guise for her vanity.

This was approximately though not precisely true: Miss Howard had told the group in the lounge that Mrs. Bowen had said that everyone was longing for her to do so, and the group in the lounge had all said "Oh, you must!" again and again and again. She had to yield.⁵⁰

The most dramatic and amusing multi-vocal discourse occurs in the stories-within-the-stories, the recounting of the Colonel's comic anecdotes and his Kiplingesque tales of heroism and adventure.⁵¹ There are several versions of these tales about the curate's egg, the man-eating tiger, the inebriated little boy, the ghost story, the man who mistakenly sat on his hat,⁵² and the love-sick grocer. First when

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 84.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹E.F. Benson was very proud of his election as an Honorary Fellow of Magdalene College. This distinction had been previously conferred on Thomas Hardy and Rudyard Kipling.

⁵²The story of the man sitting on his hat is an example of self-parody here. Benson, however, solemnly recounts the same story as an example of the incongruous element in humour in *Final Edition* (220).

the Colonel rehearses them in his mind, anticipating the gratifying response from the audience,⁵³ the account is given in the free direct discourse of an internal monologue.

After that he must make the flesh of his entire audience creep, and the ghost story of the dak-bungalow would be the very thing. It was rather a long story, but he had no reason to suspect that anyone had ever found it so, and if the lights could be turned down during it, and Miss Howard would play a little weird music on the piano during the most thrilling section, the effect would be quite terrific. Then up would go the lights again, and he would make them hold their sides over the member of Parliament who thought he had sat down on his neighbour's hat, and in the middle of his profuse apologies found that it was his own. How his junior officers used to roar when he told them that story at mess. But he must be careful to omit the swear-words tomorrow: that was a pity.⁵⁴

The audience's reception of his narratives is very different from that he had anticipated: Lady Appledore is not amused by jokes about the Church; the chilling tale of his encounter with the man-eating tiger provokes titters not terror; the audience takes as parody the idiom of Empire.

But the audience, with the curious unanimity of crowds, had made up their minds, after the Curate's egg, that he was a comic, pure and simple, and the crack-jaw Indian names and allusions to tiffin and Chota-hazri and shikari produced little titters of delighted laughter. They became more and more certain of it as he bade them follow him (he was kidding them) into the pathless solitary jungle with the kites whistling overhead (here some dramatic boy at the back whistled piercingly between his fingers) and up the dry nullah-wallah.⁵⁵

Even Lady Appledore considers the vocabulary associated with tales of British exploits in India absurd.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 122-123.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 130-131.

"By the order of his Excellency the Viceroy," said Colonel Chase, rather severely, "I was sent into the district of Astmetagaga to make a report on the discontent among the Bizributmas. Bellalanga, the capital of the Bizributma tribe was a three-days journey from Futipur-Sekri, and I had to sleep at two dak-bungalows on the way. Just before sunset on the day of which I am speaking I came in sight of the dak-bungalow of Poona-padra, and sent my khitmagar on with a couple of coolies to cook my dinner, and deal with superfluous cobras."

"Really very good," said Lady Appledore to Miss Jobson, "a perfect parody of Mr. Kipling. I am sure something very comical is coming."⁶⁶

Other once popular discourses, this time connected with ghost-stories, are also parodied. A climactic, comic discord is established in the telling of the ghost story by the three contiguous voices: the Colonel's cliché-ridden direct discourse; the free, indirect discourse of the anonymous interlocutor; and the succinct intrusions of the implied narrator.

"—a grey shape forming itself into the semblance of a man. As the lamp burned brighter—"

"You 'aven't lit it yet mister," said some precisian from the back.

"—burned brighter," repeated Colonel Chase, "I saw the dread form with greater distinctness, and my heart stood still. It was clothed in ragged garments, sparse elfin-locks hung over its forehead — forehead," said he, looking wildly round for the man whose duty it was at this particular moment to switch off all the lights in the hall except one close above the platform, by which the audience could see his face of horror surrounded by darkness, "and blood dripped from a jagged wound in its throat. Slowly it detached itself from the wall and advanced on me—"

Every single light went out, including that above the platform, and the man at the switches seeing his mistake, put them all on again. The laughter became general, but as it were, expectant, holding itself in for the climax.

"—towering ever higher as it approached. Cold sweat broke out on my forehead, my throat was dry as dust—"

"Ave a drink," said a delighted voice.⁶⁷

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 132.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 133.

The residents of Wentworth, of course, know they will have to bear the brunt of the Colonel's anger at his humiliation and they wait for the inevitable outcome. Their feelings are summarized in free indirect discourse

Should they congratulate him on his success, or execrate the odious light-mindedness of the audience, or ignore the whole affair and talk lightly about the weather?⁵⁸

But it is the immediacy of Lady Appledore's direct discourse that saves them from the Colonel's retribution.

"I so much enjoyed your very amusing stories, Colonel Chase," she said. "Did I not Miss Jobson? The ghost! Quite killing! How I laughed! And the man-eater! What a clever little dog to come in just when you told it. Beautifully trained! And the comic music for the ghost! Most humorous."⁵⁹

Because the Colonel is a "snob to the bottom of his appendix"⁶⁰ he reverses his original expectations

"Delighted to have afforded you a little amusement, Lady Appledore," he said in a voice that Wentworth could hear. "We had many a laugh in the mess when I told my ghost story."⁶¹

This is but one example of the comic contentiousness of the residents at Wentworth as they struggle to save their wounded pride, keep the peace and accommodate each others' concepts and comforts of mind and body. The comedy is in the way these comic actions are told. Benson's creates a cacophony of comic voices, manipulating

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 136.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 136-7.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 137.

⁶¹*Ibid.*

voices other than his own to represent the egocentric self-delusions, and comic reversals of his characters. In this blend of serious and ludicrous voices he manages to evoke a sympathetic response from the reader, not a condemnatory one. For who can fail to empathize with the desire for moral and spiritual absolutes to compensate for the frail condition of humanity.

In this novel, E.F. Benson demonstrates his exceptional narrative skill in borrowing from Biblical discourses and parodying both the literary idiom of travellers' tales of the British Empire and the tricks of the trade of the ghost-story writer. In his next novel, Secret Lives, he parodies other literary discourses to mock the false claims of men and women who make their living in the world of "letters" as well as drawing on the close relationships he had experienced in his long and eventful life. The obsessions and passions of his relatives and contemporaries provide a rich resource for a man who was as keenly aware of the duality of his own nature as that of others.

In the Benson family correspondence there exists an anonymous note to E.F. Benson dated 8th November, 1917.⁶² It is sandwiched between a letter from the politician C.F.G. Masterman,⁶³ complimenting him on his novel David Blaise, and one

⁶²Benson Deposit, 3/69.

⁶³Educated at Cambridge University, Masterman chose to become a social reformer and politician rather than an Anglican priest. Elected on 1908 as M.P. for West Ham North, he served as a Junior Minister in H.H. Asquith's Liberal Government (1908-1915). Masterman's book The Condition of England (1909) presents a bleak view of the profound social divisions in Britain. In his letter to E.F. Benson he refers to the "immortal David," a phrase which indicates his admiration of books concerned with the moral, aesthetic and physical education of the young.

from Marie Corelli,⁸⁴ chastising him for not sending her a birthday letter. The anonymous note consists of the cryptic line:

I know your secret.

It is intriguing that E.F. Benson kept this note, when he had destroyed so many family papers, especially any "dangerous stuff",⁸⁵ the telling phrase he used to describe some of his brother A.C. Benson's letters. He probably kept this for his own amusement and, possibly, to tantalize anyone reading the documents years later. He kept other bizarre letters and notes: there is a stack of letters from an adoring fan, one Mrs. M. Harvey,⁸⁶ a forty-year old wife of a dentist; a besotted young man in Australia, who dreamed of meeting E.F. Benson one day, sent a photograph and a long letter. Throughout his life Benson had been an acute and amused observer of human follies and foibles. He had been particularly intrigued by the secret springs that fed obsessive and eccentric behaviour and the absurd disguises people assumed to preserve their private passions from public scrutiny. The struggle to secure and to expose disguised identities is standard fare in most comedies, including Benson's. His characters strive vainly to preserve their illusions that they are richer, more talented, more youthful, and attractive than they are. He observed this struggle in the lives of his family, friends and himself, and recorded it in his fiction. In Secret Lives, published

⁸⁴Marie Corelli (1855-1924) published her first novel in 1886 and during the 1890s was an extremely popular writer of romantic, melodramatic novels. Her two most well-known novels are Barabbas (1893) and the Sorrows of Satan (1895). She continued to publish until her death, but her works were widely ridiculed in later years.

⁸⁵Benson, Final Edition, 135.

⁸⁶Benson Deposit, 3/67-68.

in 1932, he used that knowledge to advantage. The characters try to keep secret their own passions and fantasies, while simultaneously trying to find out the innermost feelings and desires of others. For most of the novel, they are intent on gaining power over others by acquiring that secret information, instead of coming to terms with their innermost desires. Although he presents these unresolved divisions as comic, he had witnessed in his family their destructive power. In the lives of both his brother Arthur and his sister Margaret the devastating effect of thwarted emotional and intellectual needs contributed to Arthur's several serious mental breakdowns and to Margaret's committal to an asylum. After long periods of rest, much of which was spent under the care of his brother, Arthur recovered from his nervous breakdowns and was able to resume his tutorial and administrative duties at Cambridge. Margaret, on the other hand, was kept in hospital, had only occasional times of lucidity and died there in 1916. E.F. Benson visited her regularly during her hospitalization. He, therefore, had plenty of opportunity to observe the tragic effect of divided and unbalanced personalities. In his comic fiction, he cheerfully presented obsessive, overbearing, unbalanced characters, though in real life they were not nearly so amusing. In Secret Lives, he allows his characters moments of illumination into their imperfect and limited natures and through the partial self-knowledge gained from these epiphanies he gives them a chance to begin new relationships. Arthur and Margaret had no such fulfillment.

In Secret Lives more than in any other comic novel Benson drew on several people he knew in his own life. The main character, Mrs. Margaret Mantrip the owner

of several houses in Durham Square, is modelled, in part, on his sister Margaret. Both women became obsessed with the desire to emulate their fathers, to follow their doctrines and judgments, even after their respective fathers had died. Mrs. Mantrip broke free from this obsession, after she had come to terms with her innermost desires. Margaret Benson, on the other hand, was not able to establish an identity separate from that of her parents. As she worked on his papers, she assumed more and more aspects of his personality and was jealous of the relationship between her mother and Lucy Tait.⁶⁷ Margaret Mantrip, in Secret Lives, preferred the company of women, especially those she thought she could dominate. For a while Margaret Benson's close friend was Nellie Gourlay, who often stayed at Tremans and who was subservient to her whims, but eventually they parted. Margaret, unlike Mrs. Mantrip, never married although she was admired when she was young, and her effect on men was not as devastating as Mrs. Mantrip's. Mrs. Mantrip's name is a comic version of her effect on men; she is even called Mrs. Mantrap,⁶⁸ on one occasion in the novel. Her husband's death, only eighteen months after their marriage, is presented as a welcome release for both of them rather than a tragic accident.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Benson, Final Edition, 11-18.

⁶⁸E.F. Benson, Secret Lives (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), 93.

⁶⁹Ibid., 5.

Susan Leg, the romance novelist in Secret Lives, is clearly based on the best-selling novelist Marie Corelli. E.F. Benson and his friend Philip Burne-Jones⁷⁰ visited her at Mason Croft in Stratford-Upon-Avon. She enjoyed Benson's cleverness and wit and wrote him coquettish letters,⁷¹ warning him about his friend's lack of ambition. Beneath his polite demeanour in his exchanges with Corelli, Benson was clearly amused by her pretensions to literature and scholarship. His character, Susan Leg, was not as outrageous in her behaviour as Corelli but she was as shy of publicity, as secretive about her origins and as sensitive to criticism.⁷² She, like Corelli, talked in baby-talk, was as sexually naive and as absurdly proud of the pens she used to write her best-sellers. The title of Susan Leg's most popular book, The Apples of Sodom, Benson took directly from the novel written by his childhood governess Miss Mary Bramston.⁷³ In his descriptions of Susan Leg he drew on the far more acclaimed, though no less complex novelist, Charlotte Brontë, whose biography he was working on at the same time he was writing Secret Lives.⁷⁴ The contrast between the slight appearance and powerful inner identity of Susan Leg and Charlotte Brontë are

⁷⁰Sir Philip Burne-Jones was the only son of Sir Edward Burne-Jones the celebrated painter and designer, whose work was influenced by his association with William Morris and D.G. Rossetti. Philip was an amateur painter and cartoonist. His letters to E.F. Benson are usually illustrated with amusing caricatures of either himself or Benson.

⁷¹Benson/Deposit 3/67-68.

⁷²Although her writings are disregarded Marie Corelli's life has been the subject of seven biographies, the most recent being Brian Master's book Now Barabbas was a Rotter (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978).

⁷³Benson, Final Edition, 27.

⁷⁴E.F. Benson's biography of Charlotte Brontë was also published in 1932, and was widely commended by the critics.

remarkably similar: Anthony Armstrong, the critic in Secret Lives, comments on Susan Leg:

So gloriously rich to his dramatic mind was the contrast between the physical plainness and insignificance of this small woman, no longer young, and her fiery, exotic mind.⁷⁶

In Secret Lives, Benson also mocked the interest his famous uncle Henry Sidgwick had in psychical phenomena.⁷⁶ Lady Eva Lowndes insists she can detect a person's secret, inner life by discerning the halo that hovers above that person's head. Benson's ambivalence about the credibility of psychic phenomena is perhaps reflected in the irony that she is more often right than wrong. She detects Miss Leg's imaginative power by observing her yellow halo and suspects Mrs. Mantrip's claims to scholarship because of the liverish colour of her halo. The writings of another notable Victorian, Charles Kingsley, who had been a close friend of his father during his time at Wellington, becomes the index of outmoded attitudes and tastes when Mrs. Mantrip expresses her admiration for his works. And the poems of Arthur Armstrong are suspiciously like those of Arthur Christopher, E.F. Benson's brother:

Those tonic and courageous pieces, which told you it was your duty to banish from your soul all the annoyances and trials of life, ill-health and penury and the rest, and march, head up, on the journey of life, enraptured by the beautiful and interesting things around you.⁷⁷

⁷⁶Benson, Secret Lives, 85.

⁷⁶Henry Sidgwick was his mother's brother. He was an influential philosopher at Cambridge University. His writings on ethics, hedonism, utilitarianism, egoism and dualism reflect many of the preoccupations of Victorian moral philosophers. He was the first President of the Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882.

⁷⁷Benson, Secret Lives, 61-2.

Even Arthur Christopher's stirring lyric "Land of Hope and Glory" does not escape irreverent ridicule in this novel. At one point in the gramophone wars that engulf Durham Square, Jimmie Mason is nearly driven mad by the twin afflictions of a painful tooth and the incessant playing of the lyric that some regard as Britain's second national anthem.⁷⁸

The habits of E.F. Benson's friends and contemporaries also appear in this novel. Arthur Armstrong's socialist novels have a similar flavour to those of H.G. Wells. In Armstrong's books,

A foundry hand...., or a lavatory attendant could be a gentleman of high culture and generally was.⁷⁹

Susan Leg, like Compton Mackenzie,⁸⁰ an author Benson knew in Capri, could only write when everything else was drowned out by music. Benson shies away from making fun of the eccentricities of his early mentor Henry James, but he does give the last name of James's discrete amanuensis, Theodora Bosanquet, to Susan Leg's butler, Bosanquet. Theodora Bosanquet was not above reading and commenting on the work of her employer, though not in such an influential manner as Susan's butler. A couple of other characters in Secret Lives, Elizabeth Conklin and Lady Mackleton, are drawn from women Benson knew. Elizabeth Conklin has the same first initials as Ethel

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 184.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 62.

⁸⁰Compton Mackenzie (1883-1952) was as prolific as Benson, writing more than ninety books—novels, biographies, histories, essays, criticisms and children's stories and verse. He enjoyed broadcasting and playing the gramophone. He was the founder and editor of the magazine, The Gramophone. His book, Sinister Street (1915) received high praise from Henry James.

Cadogan, a neighbour of Philip Burne-Jones, whose "pack of Pekinese"⁸¹ dogs regularly relieved themselves in his front garden. The life of Lady Mackleton, the one-time society hostess who now ekes out her existence by selling her services to the nouveaux riches, runs parallel to that of Lady Sibyl Colefax⁸² who had a salon in Chelsea until her wealth was diminished by extravagance and taxation. Benson is not above making fun of the firm that faithfully published his works. The first name of Susan Leg's lecherous publisher, Heinrich Cartwright, has a similar prefix to Heinemann Ltd.

Despite his reliance on the habits and personalities of people he knew for his comic characters, Benson did not provoke the controversy other authors did.⁸³ The experience of *Dodo* had perhaps made him more cautious and by 1932 many of his prototypes were dead. More significantly E.F. Benson did not remove himself from the absurdities and incongruities in human behaviour he witnessed in others. His own foolishness figures in this novel as much as the folly of others. When Susan Leg's publisher Heinrich "Nunky" Cartwright tries to defend her books from adverse criticism

⁸¹Benson, *Final Edition*, 66-67.

⁸²In November, 1991, the Bodleian Library received a large amount of correspondence between this society hostess and her many famous friends, in including H.G. Wells, Sir Winston Churchill, Noel Coward, D.H. Lawrence, Charlie Chaplin, Cole Porter, Lawrence Olivier and Virginia Woolf. A few of her letters to E.F. Benson are in the Benson Collection in the Bodleian.

⁸³Authors did not always get away with modelling their fictional characters too closely on their real-life originals. When Somerset Maugham published *Cakes and Ale* (1930) many thought that its major characters Edward Driffield and Alroy Kear resembled Thomas Hardy and Hugh Walpole. Walpole who was still alive when the book was published was deeply offended. To placate him, Maugham said Alroy Kear resembled Gilbert Frankau, E.F. Benson or Stephen McKenna as much as Walpole. Maugham had shared a villa with E.F. Benson and John Ellingham Brooks on Capri. A detailed discussion of this controversy is in Robert Calder's book *Willie* (London: Wm. Heinemann, 1989), 217-219.

he uses defences similar to those Benson used when his second book Rubicon came in for disproportionately severe criticism.⁸⁴

"Of course it's a conspiracy, Susanna", he said. "But did you ever hear of one that failed more utterly all the time? Jealousy, my dear. They were furious at the success of your first book, which none of them had the brains to appreciate, and they boycotted you".⁸⁵

The veiled remarks about Susan Leg's, alias Rudolph da Vinci's, prolificacy are couched in terms ironically reminiscent of those used by some about Benson's.

his books came out with very agreeable frequency: three during the course of a year.⁸⁶

The title of another of Rudolph da Vinci's best-sellers, Rosemary and Rue, is uncomfortably close to one of E.F. Benson's early successes, Scarlet and Hyssop. "Nunky" Cartwright's sedulous pursuit of any work that will be profitable, whatever its literary merit, takes him to Venice in pursuit of the infamous *fin de siècle* author Gabriele d'Annunzio.⁸⁷ His quest was unsuccessful as d'Annunzio was now in high repute with the fascist government of Mussolini. He had been unable to secure an audience with the lately ennobled Principe di Monte Nevoso⁸⁸ but when he discovered that d'Annunzio's book Le Novelle della Pescara was not protected by the copyright regulations laid down by the Berne Convention he published it anyway. Benson may

⁸⁴Benson, Our Family Affairs, 304-311.

⁸⁵Benson, Secret Lives, 91.

⁸⁶Ibid., 28.

⁸⁷Apparently Gabriele d'Annunzio thought "D'Annunzio" plebeian (Times Literary Supplement, 20 March, 1992, 11). E.F. Benson either consciously or unconsciously used the plebeian capital.

⁸⁸Ibid., 83.

have been drawing on personal experience in this account of the politics of publishing. In 1924 E.F. Benson had written to his old friend Horatio Brown, then living in Venice, asking him for information about the Italian names for particular flowers. Brown provided the information, but also questioned why he was bothering to translate D'Annunzio.⁸⁸ Margaret Mantrip's vigorous, if absurd, advocacy of the benefits of British Imperial rule sets up further ironic reverberations. After all, E.F. Benson's first paid position was as co-editor of the short-lived Imperial and Colonial Magazine.⁸⁹ Jimmie Mason's struggle to move and maintain his grand-piano corresponds to a similar chapter of accidents in Benson's life which he recounts comically in Up and Down. A more solemn and tactful version of such trivial but factious inconveniences appears in several letters exchanged between E.F. Benson and the owners of Wigmore Hall and Piano Galleries Ltd. in 1928.⁹¹

In this novel about the secret lives of those driven to achieve recognition in the precarious world of letters it is to be expected that Benson should rely on his experience in that world. Although some of his characters are the familiar survivors of upper-class English life he pilloried in his other comic novels, in Secret Lives he

⁸⁸Unpublished letter in the Benson Deposit, 65-70. The writings of Gabriele d'Annunzio had been admired by E.F. Benson's friend John Ellingham Brooks. In E.F. Benson's papers in the University of California in Los Angeles there is a typescript of Benson's translation of d'Annunzio's Watchers by the Dead.

⁸⁹The contract he signed in 1900 is in the Benson family miscellanea in the Bodleian Library (Ben/Dep. 3/71-8). E.F. Benson was responsible for editing the magazine, selecting short and serial stories, collecting and writing up current news from the Colonies, reviewing books and securing eminent and influential contributors. For this work he received £20 a month. This magazine is a fascinating study of Imperial and Colonial attitudes of the day. The drama reviews were probably written by Benson.

⁹¹Benson Deposit, 3/76.

broadens the spectrum of his comic types by including a new breed of pretentious charlatans who are emerging from an increasingly visible working-class. Miss Susan Leg, the £2 per week ex-proof reader at a typing academy, is now a resident in one of London's most exclusive Squares, able to furnish her home with an opulence beyond compare. All this comes from the profits made by nourishing the fantasies of millions of under-educated readers. Those same readers are similarly taken in by the political bombast of the Labour M.P. Anthony Armstrong, who also is a popular writer. Benson exploits humorously the collusion, as well as the collision, of the two groups of characters in Secret Lives, the indolent but socially self-assured upper middle-class and the indefatigable, socially inept working-class. Benson pillories the secret delusions of both groups, showing that self-delusion and pretensions are endemic to the species; they are not confined to one particular class. Nevertheless, for all their gullibility, Benson gives his main characters some insight into their fallible condition and in this Secret Lives is similar to Paying Guests. And although those evanescent moments of illumination that reveal the spiritual aspects of life are perhaps parodies of the epiphanies that James Joyce recorded, they are no less transforming.

In his own life and in the lives of those he knew Benson was all too conscious of the bizarre, sometimes wasteful, actions that resulted from repressed and secret longings. He had known the absurd lengths people would go to preserve genteel facades, while all the time bent on relentlessly finding out others' secrets in order to have power over them. The pleasure in disguising one's own duplicity, while seeking to discover others', is the mainspring for the events in Secret Lives. The continuous

interplay between an assumed public persona and private secret lives provides comic action in this most intricately plotted novel. The voice of the implied narrator alerts the reader to the duality of the lives of those residents in Durham Square.

Below the seeming tranquillity of the Square surprising passions and secret lives were seething in unsuspected cauldrons.⁹²

Mrs. Mantrip the doyenne of the Square publicly disdains business matters, devoting herself to preparing an edition of her father's, Reverend Bondfield's, life and works. Privately, she schemes how to raise the rents of her tenants and fills her emotionally-derelict life with romance novels by Rudolph da Vinci. The other civilized residents of Durham Square nourish their secret passions too. Captain Lowndes finds emotional satisfaction in London night-clubs. Spiritualism not marriage comforts his wife. Lady Eva admits to her secret need.

We all have our secret lives, I expect. Mine is the joy and illumination spiritualism gives one.⁹³

Jimmie Mason imagines he is forever young, forever the centre of attention, and Elizabeth Conklin fills her emotionally sterile life with the affections of her pack of Pekinese dogs. For a while they forget their rivalries, all united by a desire to find out all they can about the stranger in their midst, Miss Susan Leg. She, in turn, is as eager to keep her working-class identity a secret as her publisher is to keep hidden the fact that she writes romance novels under the nom-de-plume, Rudolph da Vinci. It doesn't take long for the Durhamites to penetrate one of Susan's counterfeit identities. Her

⁹²Benson, *Secret Lives*, 72.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 56.

furnishings are too opulent, her clothes too new, her expressions and gestures too déclassé. Her other secret identity is not so easily discovered. By a comic coincidence her former co-worker Miss Mimps is also Jimmie Mason's accountant. When she sees Susan Leg firmly established in the upper-class echelons of Durham Square, Miss Mimps enviously tries to unmask her though she is mistaken in thinking that the source of Susan's wealth is her sexual prowess. In an elaborate stratagem, Miss Mimps is forced to retract her remarks about Susan's humble origins in return for a signed photograph of the celebrated Rudolph da Vinci. The confusions and errors do not end there. By another improbable coincidence, Miss Mimps and Mrs. Mantrip are staying as guests at one of Jimmie Mason's weekend parties. Mrs. Mantrip covets Mimps' photograph of da Vinci which is in fact a picture of the gossip columnist Augustus Bosanquet alias Ulrica and manages to buy it. Consequently, when she sees Augustus in Susan's garden she assumes mistakenly that he is Rudolph da Vinci and that Susan is Ulrica, the gossip columnist. Eventually this tangle of errors and confusions about gender identities is unravelled. In an ending that is even more complicated than that of As You Like It, Mrs. Mantrip discovers that she has been infatuated by the picture of a man whose pseudonym is female, who in turn, is pretending to be a man who in reality is a woman. Having finally learned the truth that the writer who has gratified her inner life is a woman she had formerly ostracised, she confronts her own folly. She listens to the sound of Susan's laughter as she passes by her window.

The sound mocked her: gay though it was, it represented to her the dirge of hopes that would now never be fulfilled, and of shattered visions. For months she had had as her tenant the author who was the light and lantern of her own secret life, with every opportunity for making a friend

of her, and never once had such a possibility entered her head. Instead, when first her misbegotten ingenuity surmised that Susan had a secret life, too, she had made so appallingly wide a shot as to what that secret life was that it would not bear thinking of.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, in this comedy of the vanity of secret wishes all is not lost. Having shed the counterfeit guises of class and gender, Mrs. Mantrip and Susan Leg assuage their loneliness in an affecting scene:

Susan kissed her and they held each other's hands, and looked with damp smiles into each other's eyes, until these beautiful gestures of reconciliation and dawning friendship became quite embarrassing to both. They both longed to look elsewhere, and eventually Susan, with an effort, broke the spell and said she was still hungry, and Mrs. Mantrip found that she could eat a little now.⁸⁵

The other conflicts in Secret Lives are more public clashes that deride the feeble efforts by self-interested people to regulate their selfish desires. There are two issues, trivial in themselves, but capable of arousing monstrous passions: the democratic attempt to prevent dogs from using the garden in the Square and the insidious attempt to regulate Susan Leg's use of her gramophone. Both attempts, the one public, the other furtive, are foiled. The great dog debate is an hilarious exposé of how legitimate democratic procedures can be perverted by unscrupulous people. The debate begins calmly enough. The Garden Committee distributes a notice of the meeting to discuss rationally whether dogs should be allowed in the Garden. The residents, however, immediately form into pro-dog and anti-dog factions and proceed to court, canvas and cajole the undecided. Even these strategies are not enough, so they resort to stacking

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 300-301.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 309.

the meeting, interrupting due procedures, distributing misinformation and destroying ballots. E.F. Benson may not have published his translation of d'Annunzio's work, but he was certainly familiar with the tactics of its progenitor. The perversion of democratic procedures in Durham Square is the same as those in fascist Italy in the 1930s, though the outcome in the novel is trivial in comparison to the overthrow of democracy in Italy. The great dog issue is resolved in an amicable compromise and the Durhamites seek a new source of outrage. A convenient target is the noise from Miss Leg's gramophone. Jimmie Mason and Elizabeth Conklin devise a cunning series of reprisals against this unneighbourly act by the interloper, planning to play their gramophones as loudly as possible once Susan Leg's has ceased. Unknown to them Susan needs the constant stimulus of music in order to write. When her machine breaks down she is delighted when strains of music emanate from the walls of Jimmie's, and then Elizabeth's homes.

the words she had sought for were streaming on to the paper. On and on went the heavenly music, on and on poured the torrent of her thoughts now uncongealed again, but the authoress was unconscious of the passage of time. She could have wished that the music was louder, but it did very well.⁹⁸

By the end of six months, and by the end of the novel, all misunderstandings are resolved, all identities, public and secret, revealed. At the festive Christmas dinner, Mrs. Mantrip speaks openly of those resolutions:

We have all of us, I expect, a secret life unknown to the world, but when, by accident or design, these secret lives of ours come to light, how seldom, alas! does it happen, as in the case of our beloved hostess, that

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 126.

instead of there being discreditable exposures, we stand revealed, as she has done, in a blaze of added glory, of fame, not infamy."⁸⁷

These harmonious resolutions, though, are inevitably short-lived. After this stirring moment, the Durhamites retreat into childish solipsism as they open their presents and enjoy a well-fed sleep. In the final lines of the novel, Benson not only announces the end of this privileged party, but also reminds his readers of the fictionality of his work.

Bosanquet's entry to announce the Duchess's car was like that of the Fairy Prince into an assembly of Sleeping Beauties.... How they had all enjoyed that wonderful chapter! "Thank you, Miss Leg."

In this novel about the world of authors, critics, publishers and columnists, E.F. Benson has been most adept in his handling of narrative discourse. In Secret Lives there is a complex interweaving of multiple tones and textures of direct, indirect and doubly-orientated voices. As they play off each other these multiple voices create an abundance of irony and parody. Benson has used those varied discourses before in the "Lucia" series, but Secret Lives is a climactic, ludic carnival of narrative styles taken from romance novels at one extreme and Victorian "belles lettres" at the other.

Much of the first part of Secret Lives is taken up with Mrs. Mantrip's imaginary compositions for the standard work about her clergyman father, even though the market no longer exists for these fatuous biographies.⁸⁸ Mrs. Mantrip lists the proposed ten headings for the chapters, then smugly congratulates herself

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 315.

⁸⁸There is clearly an element of self-parody here, as well as some mockery of his brother's work when one considers the number of biographies written by E.F. and A.C. Benson. E.F. Benson used similar outlines for his biographies as is seen in his notebooks in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

It could hardly be bettered: it was chronological, it was orderly, it was comprehensive and covered the ground. These headings for chapters were spaced over five pages of foolscap (two chapter-headings to a page), and Mrs. Mantrip had lately been jotting down, in their appropriate places, notes about asthma (Chapter VII), the railway strike of 1911 (Chapter VIII) about which her father held very strong views and to which he alluded in an unfinished manuscript sermon, and the hot summer of 1921 (Chapter IX). Soon, very soon, now that the framework was ready she would be busy over the actual writing of the book, but though as yet she had not begun that, the sense that she had a definite object ahead, a piece of solid serious literary work to occupy her, caused her to contrast her own activities very favourably with the aimless hedonistic drifting of Jimmie and the narrow horizons of Elizabeth Conklin's life which embraced little more than Pekinese dogs.⁹⁹

Much of the rest of the novel is constructed around the narrative patterns of the romance novel. When Susan takes a holiday in Brighton after the completion of her latest work it is clear that she views the world in terms drawn from her romantic fiction. The Regency Palace Hotel is a wonderland.

There were velvet chairs and palm-trees and liveried men. It had seemed a fairyland, and fairy-like were the folk who sat negligently at their little tables, and at whose nod all the delicacies she had heard of but never seen were brought by obsequious attendants.¹⁰⁰

She regards the other hotel guests as glamorous figures in a play and accepts unquestionably the rags-to-riches fiction created by the socialist M.P. and critic Arthur Armstrong, in his weekly newspaper column.

He was of the Labour Party; he was also immensely wealthy, and how magnificently he justified his contention that the great landowners and capitalists of inherited fortunes ought to be taxed out of existence, their acres sequestered by the State, and their capital divided among the workers! He himself had worked hard all his life for his money, and would continue to do so in order to secure as much more as possible.

⁹⁹*ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰⁰*ibid.*, 58.

He might have been a recipient of the dole himself, so he asserted amid loud laughter, if he had not chosen to work, and while he would willingly give relief to the unemployed who could not get work, and even increase the dole at the expense of the holders of unearned increment, he would give periodical floggings to all who could get work and preferred to be lazy. Not a penny had he inherited: He had started life as an errand-boy in a book-shop, and labour had brought him capital. These admirable views, in which Susan whole-heartedly concurred, he often stated in those articles dealing chiefly with literary subjects, but by no means confined to them, which he wrote every week in the *Sunday Chronicle*.¹⁰¹

He becomes the inspiration for her new romance novel and she weaves an elaborate sado-sexual fantasy about his life as an errand boy in a bookstore who achieves instantaneous fame and fortune, after an acceptable amount of suffering. The reader is taken into her mind as she plans her narrative about Armstrong, the

dreamy boy who, when he was sent out to deliver books from circulating library, sat down with his burden (say on this esplanade at Brighton) and read, instead of doing errands. So absorbed was he in them that a subscriber, an old lady with a cold, who had selfishly looked forward to spending this afternoon sitting over the fire with the new book she had ordered, rang up the library and demanded to know why her book had not come. She would be told that the boy had started on his round two hours ago, and then he would be found on the sea front, oblivious to the rain that was falling heavily, soaking him and ruining the books. His master took him back to the shop, stripped off his coat and shirt, tied his hands above him, and covered his white shoulders with a criss-cross of cruel weals. Not a cry or a moan came from his lips, and he read more voraciously than ever. Then he fell in love with a young girl of patrician beauty, and they sat on the end of the pier together. The time the Earl, her father, whipped him. He was dismissed from the shop and wrote his first story on scraps of paper he picked up in the street, and spent his last penny in getting it typewritten. The editor of *Tasty Bites* accepted it, and now his foot was on the ladder. The rest was easy.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 65.

When Susan reads Armstrong's damning criticism of her book, Rosemary and Rue,¹⁰³ she begins to revise her fictions and now casts herself as the heroine of a new novel Amor Vincit withstanding blandishments of the reincarnated Armstrong. No longer is he the innocent, protected boy, instead he is the corrupt man-of-the world of letters.

Susan began walking up and down her bedroom; her excitement was prodigious.

"Serena rose," she said to herself in a low voice, vibrant with emotion. "'Do you mean that for this paltry bribe you promise to write a favourable review of a book you have not yet read?' she cried. 'You dare to suggest to me, Serena Lomond, that I should pay you to puff me in the press? Is a leading critic, such as you represent yourself to be, so venial [*sic*] a cur? Out of my presence: never again presume to tempt me with your monstrous propositions! Go! Do your worst! Dip your foul pen in poison! I laugh your threats and promises to scorn.'"

Susan liked that. The speech of the impassioned Serena had fallen into blank verse without any effort on her part. She regarded this as the most signal evidence of high inspiration. Her prowling steps quickened, her face flushed, her plump little hands gesticulated, her voice sank to a whisper.¹⁰⁴

In this passage her public and her private selves are in concert and in conversation. The direct discourse of Serena Lomond is consistent with the vehement speech of the romance heroine. The reader, though, is reminded that this is a fictional character created by another fictional character, Susan Leg, in the final sentence of the passage. The voice of the implied author reminds us of Susan's comic movements and appearance as she is in the throes of composition.

The two narrative styles, Mrs. Mantrip's ponderous fictions about her dead father and Susan's sado-sexual fantasies about live critics, are brought together in an

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 157-158.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 162.

amusing passage. The contiguity of these discourses is clearly demonstrated when Mrs. Mantrip turns to the romance novels of Rudolph da Vinci for inspiration when the "glib and rhythmical phrases" of her biographical narrative about her father's life and times dry up.

How was it done?....She took Rosemary and Rue from behind the baize curtain: there was a notable paragraph describing the Earl of Truro, the fine oval of his face, his high-bridged, aquiline nose, his mouth, sensitive as a woman's, his curly golden hair, his great stature, his fine long-fingered hands. To read that through was to realize the magic of the man at once, and if, *mutatis mutandis*, she followed the lines of that, she could hardly help producing an equally vivid portrait of her father. He, too, had a magic of his own; few came in contact with him without feeling spiritually and intellectually braced. With Rosemary and Rue propped up in front of her, she began to write.

"My father's face was square rather than oval, and conveyed an impression of power. His nose was somewhat short. Not much of his mouth could be seen as he grew a beard and moustache from the time he took Holy Orders, but an earlier photograph of him when a boy shows that this feature had a remarkable firmness for one of his tender years. In later years his hair, never very abundant, became streaked, though no more, with grey. He was about five foot eight in height, and his hands were of normal size and shape...."¹⁰⁵

And so she continues for several profitable pages, happily plagiarizing the style, rhythms and images of the romance. Implicit in the conjunction of these narratives is Benson's mockery of both as representative of anything other than a spurious reality.

These are not the only narrative styles that Benson uses to show how language conceals and disguises the genuine. He incorporates into his novel the discourses of other characters who earn their living in the literary market-place. He neatly pillories

¹⁰⁵*ibid.*, 201.

Arthur Armstrong's clichés as well as Susan Leg's sentimental sensibility when he describes the effect on Susan of Armstrong's damning review:

The words began to dance before Susan's eyes, and she found it impossible to read the lines consecutively. She dipped here, she pounced there, she skimmed about like a swallow hunting poisonous flies, and caught a quantity of them. "Nauseating sentimentality....mawkish trash....childish sadism....a valet's view....lispings of a lady's maid....titterings of a typist...." Such were a few of the alliterative tidbits so lavishly spread for her. Then steadying herself down again, she read Mr. Armstrong's peroration:¹⁰⁶

As she reads Armstrong's attack on her work she identifies herself with the graceful, bright swallow, easily dispatching irritating criticisms. Strengthened by this image, she is able to read the rest of the review with equanimity. Her publisher, of course, is delighted by the attack because this will stimulate sales. He prints Armstrong's phrases on the book-cover of Rosemary and Rue, as well as the fact that 109,624 copies have already been sold. The "honey-sweet flutings"¹⁰⁷ of another manipulator of language, the gossip columnist Ulrica, provides other ironic and comic counterpoints in the novel. His extravagantly flattering paragraphs reinforce Susan's self-delusions of social grandeur and undermine Mrs. Mantrip's.

"This charming form of entertainment, devised by Miss Leg, bids fair to revolutionize social habits in the smart world. Busy men and women have not at this time of the year leisure for a long, elaborate lunch-party, so Miss Leg provides for them an exquisite cold buffet where guests help themselves, and sit where they please at one of the colour-scheme little tables for four persons, where they chat with their friends, taking their next course, if they choose, at some other table. I shall give readers more detailed information about these dainty *al fresco* gatherings when I have been to Miss Leg's first party, which takes place on Friday next

¹⁰⁶*ibid.*, 158.

¹⁰⁷*ibid.*, 172.

week. With her well-known thoughtfulness she will provide *déjeuner maigre*, for her Roman Catholic friends....¹⁰⁸

Other comic counterpoints in the narrative occur when Susan walks through the streets of Brighton, composing her new novels in ardent, fervent phrases and suddenly finds herself outside the typing agency where she worked for six years. In plain, unromantic prose the mind-numbing limitations of that life are exposed.

Well she knew the inside of that room, for she had spent there the working hours of fifteen years. There were half a dozen small tables, on each of which was a typewriter, and there all day (for the agency was famed far and wide for the neatness and accuracy of the work it turned out) used to sit six industrious spinsters, incessantly tapping the keys of their instruments. Click, clack, clack, click, a buzz at the end of a line, a rustle of paper, hour after hour in endless repetition. Susan could hear that noise in her head now, if she listened for the memories of old days. She herself had sat at a larger table with no typewriter on it, and her duty was to revise the sheets as they were finished and brought to her by the typists, to see that the order and the numbering of the pages were correct, to look through them for missing words and consult the manuscript to see if she could solve the conundrums, to estimate and note down in her ledger the number of words, and finally to enclose the copy in covers of thick red paper, to punch three holes on the near margin of it with a stamping machine, and thread it with ribbon.¹⁰⁹

Within this skilful blend of stylised discourses in which E.F. Benson is reproducing the narrative patterns of other prose forms, his own voice does not entirely disappear. In the few descriptions of nature, his sardonic tones can be heard. In this urban, literary world, there is little room for the natural world. All there is is the private park in Durham Square, only accessible to the privileged. It is described in Elysian images:

Tall elms and planes and chestnuts grew there among crumbling, undecipherable tombstones, and through their foliage, when the sun was

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 66.

low, pale green-tinted light, as in forest aisles, glimmered on the dinner-tables of these fortunate householders. Scarcely a sound of traffic penetrated; the roar of London was dim and distant.¹¹⁰

But this serene paradise is soon turned into yet another arena for contention and strife, despite the chalice-shaped flower-containers and summer house.

On the lawns were some curious erections, chalice-shaped, made of crooked sections of gnarled boughs, varnished and sturdily nailed together. These contained bowls of earth, in which, under favourable circumstances and according to the season, there grew daffodils or geraniums. There was also a summer-house, built in the rustic style of the chalices, and a few sets shaped like Victorian hip-baths of unparalleled hardness. A pair or two of wood-pigeons annually nested here, and the cats of the Square annually succeeded in killing and eating the more succulent parts of the families they reared. Mrs. Mantrip always alluded to these wood-pigeons as "cushats," for Papa had told her that such was their old English style; and when she heard them cooing, she, with her strong literary sense, was terribly liable to quote Tennyson's pretty line "The moan of doves in immemorial elms," though they habitually nested in Papa's memorial sumacs.¹¹¹

The implied narrator's voice resonates through this passage. Mrs. Mantrip would never have called the pollarded sumacs "curious erections," or criticised the unparalleled hardness of the Victorian-shaped seats. Nor would she regard her facility with Tennyson's verse as a terrible liability. Nonetheless, her outmoded literary allusions colour her perceptions of this privileged garden.

In this novel, E.F. Benson once again exploits the humour that emerges from the gabble of different voices as different characters vie for attention. As the Durhamites meet for dinner they try to converse in a civilized communal manner, in much the same way as the Tillingites tried to be civilized over dinner, but in the

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, 8-9.

process they reveal their singular preoccupations and their greedy desire to find out everything they can about the new resident, Susan Leg.

"I went to the Psychical Research meeting a few afternoons ago," she said, "and read a paper—"

"You took Miss Leg with you, didn't you?" asked Elizabeth.

"Yes, we went together," said Lady Eva.

This seemed to come to much the same thing: Elizabeth had guessed right. Then fish.

"I was going out shopping this morning," said Elizabeth— "really the price of the ox-liver I always give my dogs is monstrous — when I met that French chef who has lately come to the Square. An Alsatian was carrying his market-basket for him."

"Miss Leg's chef and dog, I suppose," said Jimmie, making a careful cache of his fish. It was soft, grey, dead fish, which in life, he imagined, must have fed on duckweed.

"I came across the most interesting book the other day," said Mrs. Mantrip. "*Stories from the boyhood of Charles Kingsley*. A book that I should have thought anybody would have been interested in."

"That was the second book that you lent to Miss Leg, wasn't it?" said Elizabeth. "You took it yourself, just before lunch, two days ago."

Mrs. Mantrip said that that was the one.

"I had a horrid day of toothache yesterday," said Jimmie. "I disliked every hour of it till the evening. Altogether a day of worries—"

"When Miss Leg's gramophone went on without ever stopping," interrupted Elizabeth. "Oh, yes, and we heard your voice and hers bawling at each other. What was happening?"¹¹²

At well-positioned intervals the free, direct discourse of each of the characters reveals the contrast between the public and private thoughts. Elizabeth is pleased that she "had guessed right" about Lady Eva's true reason for going to the Psychical Research meeting. Jimmie is hoping to enjoy the food provided by Susan Leg's chef rather than the soft, grey, dead fish served by Mrs. Mantrip. Elizabeth Conklin exposes Mrs. Mantrip's show of learning as a ruse to visit Susan and Jimmie's reference to his

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 192.

toothache opens a flood of questions about Susan. Their rapid retreat from the pretence of civility into greedy gossip is mocked by the implied author.

Here, then were these four old friends full of various interests. One had started the subject of Psychical Research, another the price of ox-liver, a third the boyhood of Charles Kingsley, the fourth toothache. They covered a vast range of topics: it should have been easy to have a lively and pleasant discussion of any of them, but no sooner had each been introduced then, in the manner of a transformation scene, it faded away and the figure of Miss Leg superimposed itself.¹¹³

At other places in Secret Lives the characters' free, indirect discourse is uninterrupted by any other voices, though other characters may comment on the speech patterns of their friends. For example, Miss Mantrip says Jimmie Mason's tongue has "discovered the secret of perpetual motion." His voluble discourse reveals his precocity, especially when he is talking to the "lower-classes." He coyly rebukes a young workman who is carrying a huge hydrangea into Jimmie's living-room in preparation for an evening concert.

"Get one of your pals to help you. You'll strain your inside and your mother will scold me. Come on, another of you. There! Put it at the side of the steps leading to my music-room. My servant will show you. Don't be frightened of Atahualpa. She won't bite you unless you're frightened. She will only growl at your heels, which is her way of showing that she approves. And all the gilt chairs to go straight into the music room.

Throughout Secret Lives, Benson intricately blends various voices to represent the ironies and incongruities arising from the public and private representation of identity. He has examined in a complex series of narrative patterns, many of which are parodies of other discourses, the propensity of humans to create self-deluded

¹¹³ibid., 192-193.

fictions about themselves and the world around them. Throughout this novel the reader is reminded of these fictions, but the ultimate irony is that they are contained within a work which is itself a fiction. It is in this novel in which he consciously draws attention to the fictitiousness of his work that Benson comes closest to creating a post-modern narrative. Not only does he expose and break the narrative structures but he also makes clear that without these fictions that we create about our selves and the world around us, it is impossible to sustain life. Perhaps, after all, all the world is a comic novel and all the men and women merely characters.

Conclusion

**"The perception of the ludicrous [is] among the
higher attributes of fallen man"**

E.F. Benson, Final Edition (1940)

From the outset of his career E.F. Benson played with the idea that men and women could only be redeemed from folly, if they could perceive it in themselves. By discussing E.F. Benson's comic novels within the matrix of comedy and by exploring the increasing complexity of the narrative discourses he employed in these novels, I have shown that they are meant for serious, though not solemn, people. E.F. Benson chose the comic mode, rather than the sermon or the sentimental essay favoured by the father and brother, not only because it suited his temperament, but also because it gave him the opportunity to refine his perception of the ludicrous.

In the festive world of the "Dodo" novels the self-indulgent and fatuous yield to the energy and wit of Dodo and Edith who thrive and survive because they perceive their weaknesses and limitations. Examples of the ethical hedonism advocated by Henry Sidgwick, E.F. Benson's uncle, they withstand the corrosive forces of despair and defeatism within themselves and within society. Their values are shaped by a witty appreciation of their own failings as well as a belief in the regenerative power of art and nature. The main characters in the "Lucia" novels are far less attractive examples of human instinct, energy and intelligence at work. Unemotional, unethical, intent solely on the self-interested pursuit of power and prestige, Lucia dominates her coterie of dupes and fools, exploiting their limitations and insecurities for her own ends. Her masquerades are amusing only so long as they are kept within the confines of her ignorant court. E.F. Benson is suavely derisive in his portrayal of the Tillingites but

he has no delusions about the pertinacity of hypocrisy, folly and self-delusion in fallen human nature. In Paying Guests and Secret Lives, he may be kinder towards the foolish guests at Wentworth and the pretentious residents of Durham Square, even allowing them momentary epiphanies into their self-delusions; nonetheless, he consistently mocks the perpetuity of vanity and folly in all its guises and voices.

I began this study by wondering whether E.F. Benson had defined or defended his comic work. I found that apart from occasional comments and a few aphorisms he has said little about his own role as a comic writer, although he admired and wrote about the comic talents of others practising across the broad spectrum of comedy. He took pleasure in Dan Leno's music-hall routines, in Oscar Wilde's sophisticated wit and in Max Beerbohm's caricatures and parodies which he said purified the mind "not by pity and terror, but by laughter."¹ These words are taken from the final sentence in E.F. Benson's essay on Beerbohm in which, in a light-hearted way, he defines the moral and educative power of Max's humour. Benson's amusing anecdotes about the effect of his friend's talents reveal the serious consideration E.F. Benson gave to humour. His own work is informed by the qualities he admired in Beerbohm's: the ability "to be able to make people see their ridiculous points is surely the first step towards their regeneration." In all his comedies, E.F. Benson has a similar purpose in portraying human folly. Many other apologists wrote more extensively about the educative and redemptive power of comedy, but in this brief essay Benson makes a clear distinction between the salutary effect of ridicule that is not intended to hurt

¹E.F. Benson, "Max," The Spectator, 31 January 1931, 144-145.

others and the kind he called "tonic ridicule." He characterized Beerbohm's humour as having that "derisive suavity," that economy, detachment and elegance that he admired. These qualities can be fittingly applied to Benson's work and his intentions to purge hypocrisy, vanity and greed by derisive laughter are as reparative as Beerbohm's.

Many of E.F. Benson's friends and acquaintances recorded their pleasure in his company and conversation. None attempted to define his talents as a humorist, at least not in words.² One friend, though, in a small illustration gives a perceptive insight into how E.F. Benson regarded his role as a comic writer. In 1915, E.F. Benson's friend George Plank designed a book-plate for him.³ Individualized book-plates were popular at the time and often depicted aspects of the owner's character or preferences. G.P. Jacomb-Hood, a friend who had travelled with Benson in Greece, included in his autobiography book-plates he had designed for friends.⁴ Jacomb-Hood's book-plates are quite conventional, clearly influenced by the style of William

²E.F. Benson's brother Arthur Christopher wrote an essay on humour in *At Large* (New York: Putnam, 1908), 72-84. In this he characterizes the humorist as one who "contrives a certain child-like zest and freshness of mind side by side with a large and tender tolerance." Also he comments on the humorist's sense of proportion, tolerance and "power of infinite forgiveness." Although he never seemed to approve of his brother's comic novels, he was able to generalize about the merits of the comic artist.

³This bookplate is in the Benson Deposit, 3/65-70, together with several delightful letters from George Plank. The first, dated 24 February, 1915, mentions they have met "at Sundry times and diverse places" and asks that they become better acquainted, though Plank adds that he is "not trying to force an acquaintanceship upon you." A further letter written on 23 April, 1919 from the U.S.A, or "Hell, Gall and Brimstone" as Plank called it, makes fun of theosophy, astrology and Christian Science and is signed "Plankimo."

⁴G.P. Jacomb-Hood, *With Brush and Pencil* (London: John Murray, 1925). G.P. Jacomb-Hood illustrated the works of Oscar Wilde and Andrew Lang. He contributed regularly to *The Graphic* and *The London Illustrated News* and provided the illustrations for E.F. Benson's book *The Vintage*.

Morris and D.G. Rossetti. George Plank's book-plates, on the other hand, are unorthodox⁵ and, perhaps that is why Benson chose Plank as his designer rather than Jacob-Hood. A year later, in 1916, Plank provided eight illustrations for E.F. Benson's satirical sketches, The Freaks of Mayfair. He portrays the snobs, social climbers and gossips of upper-class English life in striking black and white designs that are similar to Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations. George Plank and E.F. Benson obviously shared the same values: a love of art and a distaste for vulgarity. In a letter to E.F. Benson in 1919, Plank describes how his drawing relieves the tedium of trying to show an interest in the ugly, commercial world of his host who insists on taking him around his stores and warehouses.

Well, the sane and only door of escape is open to me here, and I'm using it: I bought some sheets of virgin white paper, some pens and pencils and a bottle of black ink and I shall do some silly black and whites.⁶

The book-plate he designed for Benson was also black and white and offers some insights into his friend's personality and attributes. He portrays his friend as a white-suited pierrot, pen in hand astride the world that is radiating light. When one considers the characteristics of this traditional *commedia dell'arte* figure it is possible to see why George Plank depicted his friend in this way.

The pierrot figure has a long established history in literature, theatre and art from his beginnings in the travelling comedy shows in medieval Europe to twentieth century

⁵George Wolfe Plank, Twenty Book-plates (New York: The Society of Book-plate Bibliophiles, n.d.).

⁶Benson/Deposit, 3/65-70.

plays, ballets, and portraits.⁷ Frequently overshadowed by the more self-important members of the rest of the *commedia dell'arte*, the Doctor, the Pantaloon, the Captain and Pulcinella, he nonetheless resists the lures of material gain, refusing to compromise his principles. A complex, sensitive but fundamentally honest character, the pierrot is more intelligent and skilful than others take him to be. Despite his clear-sighted insight into other people's motives, he is unfailingly optimistic, capable of joy even in adversity. The pierrot is sustained by his need and skill at self-expression. He never loses sight of his quest for truth, or the learning and language that lead him towards it. Pierrot's charm and delight in paradox emerged in modern times, in Molière's play, Don Juan ou le Festin de Pierre in 1665, his poetic talent in Hamoche's lyric, "Au clair de la lune," in 1712. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, he poses, sad and gay, in the paintings by Watteau, Renoir, Klee, Picasso, Beardsley, Gris and Rouault. George Plank's depiction of the pierrot is different again from these. While it incorporates some of the traditional emblems associated with the pierrot, the scholar's black velvet cap, the androgynous white suit, encircling collar, white mask and mocking smile, Plank's pierrot is more agile and dominant than his forebears. He holds a pen that is more like a flail than a quill. The world, smaller than the pierrot, is clearly beneath his control, but it is also able to enlighten him. This pierrot does not seek inspiration by the light of the moon; worldly affairs are the source of insight.

⁷I am indebted to the following books for this brief overview of the pierrot figure: Kay Dick, Pierrot (London: Hutchinson and Co., Ltd., 1960); Cyril W. Beaumont, The History of Harlequin (New York: Arno Press, 1976); Robert F. Storey, Pierrot: A Critical History of a Mask (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978).

His comic novels show that E.F. Benson shares many of this pierrot's qualities: his detached delight in the follies of his fellows; his pleasure in his writing; his modesty and integrity and unflinching optimism about life and passion for self-expression in art.



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Paying Guests — Dramatized for BBC television in October 1986 by Thomas Ellice. Filmed at Upton-on-Severn, near Malvern. Producer, Rosemary Hill; Director, Michael Simpson. Cast: Colcnel Chase, Robert Hardy; Miss Howard, Angela Thorne; Mr. Kemp, Benjamin Whitrow; Florence Kemp, Joanna David; Mrs. Oxney, Barbara Leigh-Hunt; Mrs. Bertram, Avril Elgar; Mrs. Bliss, Judy Cornwell; Mrs. Holders, Annette Crosbie; Mr. Bullingdom, Richard O'Callaghan.

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This Chronology is compiled from information in:

- a) Encyclopedia Britannica (Vol. 3), Eleventh Edition, (1910-1911).
- b) E.F. Benson, Our Family Affairs (1920).
- c) A.C. Benson, The Trefoil (1923)
- d) E.F. Benson, Mother (1924).
- e) E.F. Benson, Final Edition (1940).
- f) Cynthia and Tony Reavell, E.F. Benson: Mr. Benson remembered in Rye, and the World of Tilling (1984).
- g) Geoffrey Palmer and Noel Lloyd, As He Was: E.F. Benson (1988).

E.F. BENSON — CHRONOLOGY

- 1859 Edward White Benson married Mary Benson at Rugby.
- 1864 Queen Victoria visited Wellington College.
- July 24th, 1867 Edward Frederic Benson (Fred) born at Wellington College, Berkshire, the fifth child of Edward White Benson, Headmaster of Wellington College and Mary Sidgwick Benson. Older brothers are Martin White (1860), Arthur Christopher (1862) and sisters, Mary Eleanor (1863) and Margaret (1865).
- 1871 Younger brother, Robert Hugh born.
- 1873 Benson family moved to the Chancery House, Lincoln. Edward White Benson appointed Chancellor and Canon of Lincoln Minster by Bishop Christopher Wordsworth.
- Mary Benson ill. Spent much of the year in Scotland and Wiesbaden in Germany.
- 1873-77 Edward Frederic taught by his mother and by a governess, Miss Bramston. Attended Miss Giles' day-school. Summer holidays in Torquay.
- 1874 Martin White won first open scholarship to Winchester College.
- April 25th, 1877 Edward White Benson consecrated at St. Paul's and enthroned as Bishop of Truro on May 1st. Benson family lived at Lis Escop (Bishop's Court).
- 1877 Martin White won the Sixth Form Prize.
- February 9th, 1878 Martin White died of meningitis at Winchester College.

- 1878-1881 Edward Frederic attended private school at Temple Grove, East Sheen, Surrey. Mr. Ottiwell Waterfield was Headmaster of the school. School holidays spent with Aunt Eleanor married to Thomas Hare, a friend of John Stuart Mill.
- May 20th, 1880 The foundation stone laid for the Truro cathedral by the Prince of Wales.
- September, 1881 — July, 1887 Edward Frederic attended Marlborough College, having failed to win a scholarship to Eton.
- 1882 Won the Stanton Prize for Natural History.
- December, 1882 Queen Victoria, acting through the Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone, offered Edward White Benson the position of Archbishop of Canterbury after the death of Archbishop Tait.
- March 29th, 1883 Edward White Benson consecrated as Archbishop of Canterbury. Benson family lived at Lambeth Palace, London and Addington, the country home attached to the See.
- 1885 Family spent the summer in Zermatt, Switzerland.
- 1885 Edward Frederic, Head of House at Marlborough College. Co-edited The Marlburian. In final year won the racquet housecup, the fives cup, the gymnasium cup, football cup and singing cup.
- October 4th, 1887 Edward Frederic went up to King's College, Cambridge with his friend Eustace Miles. Was a Craven and Prendergast scholar. Member of the Pitt Club, the T.A.F. (Twice a Fortnight) Society and the Decemviri Debating Society.
- 1887 Queen Victoria's Jubilee. Family attended Service of Thanksgiving at Westminster Abbey.
- 1887 Edward Frederic edited the Cambridge Fortnightly with Roger Fry.
- 1888 Sketches from Marlborough privately published.

- 1889 Graduated from King's College with a First-class honours degree. Holiday in Switzerland. Climbed the Jungfrau.
- 1890 Edward White working on the Lincoln Judgement.
- 1890 Benson family spent holiday at the Rieder Alp in Switzerland.
- 1890 Mary Eleanor Benson (Nellie) died of diphtheria. Buried at Addington churchyard.
- 1891 Tranby Croft scandal.
- 1891 Gained Tripos in Archaeology and an open Scholarship to King's. Won a grant to excavate Roman walls at Chester.
- December, 1891 Journey to Algiers with mother and father, sister, Margaret, and Lucy Tait, sister-in-law of the Dean of Winsor and daughter of the former Archbishop of Canterbury. Edward Frederic left the family at Tunis and went to Athens via Malta and Brindisi. Lucy Tait moved in with the Benson family.
- February 20th, 1892 Attended first night of Lady Windermere's Fan, with Max Beerbohm and Reggie Turner, all wearing green carnations.
- 1892 Sent Dodo manuscript to Henry James and Lucas Malet.
- 1892-1895 Worked in Athens for the British Archaeological School. In joint charge of the British excavations at Megalopolis. Spent the winters in Egypt working for the Egyptian Exploration Fund. Margaret accompanied him.
- 1893 Duchess of Bayswater performed for the British legation in Athens. Edward Frederic and Margaret acted in the play.

- 1893 Dodo published. E.F. Benson is 25 years old.
Six Common Things published.
- 1894 The Rubicon published.
Working on The Babe B.A., published in 1897.
Journeyed up the Nile to Luxor with Lord Alfred Douglas and Robert Hichens, Reggie Turner and Frank Lawson. Lord Alfred Douglas was the guest of Lord and Lady Cromer at the British Agency.
- 1895 Published two papers in the Journal of Hellenic Studies.
- 1895-1897 In Egypt for the Hellenic Society. Writing The Image in The Sand, published in 1905. Writing The Vintage, published in 1898 and The Judgement Books, published in 1895.
- 1895-96 Margaret Benson given the concession to excavate the Temple of Mut at Karnak. Edward Frederic accompanied her there. Nellie Gourley also helped.
- 1896 Edward Frederic applies, unsuccessfully, to be an Inspector in the Education Office.
- Summer, 1896 In Capri on his way back from Egypt. Visited John Ellingham Brooks whom he had already met in Athens at the British School of Archaeology.
- 1896 Limitations published.
- September, 1896 Edward White Benson's visit to the Anglican Church of Ireland.
- October 11th, 1896 Edward White Benson died in Hawarden Church, near Chester. Had been staying with the Prime Minister, Mr. Gladstone, after the successful Irish tour.

- 1896 Family moved out of Lambeth Palace. Edward Frederic read and corrected the proofs of his father's book on St. Cyprian.
- Spring, 1897 Joined his mother, Lucy Tait, Margaret and Hugh at Luxor, where Margaret was working on the excavations at Karnak.
- 1897 Babe, B.A., published.
Taken ill with typhoid fever. Spent the summer in Capri.
- 1898 Mrs. Benson, Margaret and Beth Cooper rented a house on St. Thomas Street, in Winchester. Lucy Tait joined them, permanently.
Edward Frederic in Athens, administering a fund initiated by the Duke of Westminster to provide relief for Greek refugees from Thessaly, now under the control of the Turks.
- 1898-1914 Edward Frederic lives part of each year in Capri, shares a house, the Villa Cercola, with John Ellingham Brooks and Somerset Maugham. John Ellingham Brooks lived in Capri 1895-1929.
- 1898 The Money Market published.
The Vintage published.
- 1899 Working on Princess Sophia. Recommended for an Order of the Redeemer by Lord Wantage, Head of the Red Cross, but never received it.
- April, 1899 Benson family settled at Tremans, Horstead Keynes. Lucy Tait's money helped to buy the lease.
- 1899 Mammon and Co. published and The Capsina.
- Summer, 1899 Edward Frederic at the Wagnerian festival in Bayreuth as the guest of Mary, Countess of Galloway.

- 1899 Edward Frederic rented a flat at 395 Oxford Street, London.
- Stayed with Henry James at Lamb House, Rye. James working on The Wings of a Dove at the time.
- 1900 Rented a house at 3 St. Cross Street.
- 1900 Princess Sophia published.
- January, 1901 Stayed in Paris with Reggie Lister, Second Secretary in the British Embassy.
- 1901 The Luck of the Vails published.
- 1901 Death of Queen Victoria.
- Summer, 1901 At Wagnerian festival with Lord and Lady Charles Beresford.
- 1902 Scarlet and Hyssop published.
- 1903 Arthur Christopher left Eton and became a Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge.
- 1903 An Act in a Backwater, The Book of Months, The Relentless City and The Valkyries, published.
- 1903 Ceremony of consecration for Truro Cathedral.
- 1904 The Challoners published.
- 1904 Bought a house, 102 Oakley Street, Chelsea.
- The Image in the Sand published.
- Summer 1905 All the family at Tremans.
- 1905 Edward Frederic visited the salon of the Dowager Countess of Radnor in Venice.
- 1905 Edward Frederic's friendship with Philip Burne-Jones.

- 1906 Paul, The Angel of Pain and The House of Defence published.
- 1906 Dodo adapted for the stage. Play performed at The Savoy.
- 1906 Robert Hugh's friendship with Frederick Rolfe, "Baron Corvo."
- 1907 Margaret Benson taken to an asylum run by nuns, St. George's Convent at Wivelsfield.
- 1907 Arthur Christopher in a nursing home in Mayfair.
- 1908 Sheaves, The Blotting Book, The Climber and English Figure Skating: A guide to the theory and practice of skating in the English style published.
- 1909 Met Francis Yeats-Brown in Italy. Friendship with Montagu-Yeats-Brown, late Consul of Genoa.
- 1909 A Reaping published.
- 1910 Daisy's Aunt and The Osbornes published.
- May, 1911 Elizabeth Cooper (Beth) died. Account Rendered and Juggernaut published.
- 1911 Edward Frederic and Francis Yeats-Brown in Portofino.
- 1912 Mrs. Ames, The Room in the Tower, and other stories, and Bensoniana published.
- 1912 Sailed from Trieste to India. Stayed with Francis Yeats-Brown.
- May, 1913 Operation for removal of tumour from a kidney. Convalesced at Tremans. Margaret moved to a nursing home in Wimbledon.
- 1913 Publication of The Weaker Vessel, Thorley Weir and Winter Sports in Switzerland. Wrote an introduction to an edition of Nicholas Nickleby.

- 1913 Another collection of his epigrams published, Thoughts from E.F. Benson, selected by Elsie E. Morton.
- 1914 Edward Frederic attached to the Information Branch of the Foreign Office. Studying Turkey and Poland.
- April 1914 Margaret walked out of the home in Wimbledon, took a train and arrived at Tremans.
- 1914 Arundel and Dodo the Second published.
- May/June, 1914 In Capri, writing a chronicle of boy's adolescence. Later published as David Blaize.
- October, 1914 Robert Hugh died at Salford. Buried in the garden at Hare Street House.
- Christmas, 1914 Edward Frederic spent his holiday at Tremans.
- March 23, 1915 Margaret well enough to see his play, "Dinner for Eight."
- September, 1915 Edward Frederic moved to 25 Brompton Square, London, S.W.3.
- 1915 The Oaklevites published.
- 1915 Arthur Christopher appointed Master of Magdalene College.
- 1915 Madame Eugenia Langdon de Nottbeck gave Arthur Christopher £40,000 for his personal use and benefit.
- May, 1916 Margaret died, aged 51 years.
- 1916 David Blaize, Mike and The Freaks of Mayfair published.
- Autumn, 1916 The Foreign Office sent Edward Frederic on a mission to Rome, to take despatches and to elicit information about the Pope's allegiance.

- Autumn, 1916 In Capri, working on a book about Turkey.
- 1917 An Autumn Sowing and Mr. Teddy published and another collection of sayings, Thoughts from E.F. Benson, compiled by H.B. Elliott.
- Summer, 1917 Arthur in a nursing home for mentally ill at Ascot.
- 1918 Crescent and Iron Cross and The White Eagle of Poland published and Up and Down and David Blaize and the Blue Door.
- June 18, 1918 Mary Benson died, aged 76 years.
- October, 1919 — Sub-let Lamb House in Rye, Sussex. Still maintained March, 1920 his house in Brompton Square.
- 1919 Gave up his share of the lease on the Villa Carcola, Capri.
Across the Stream and Robin Linnet published.
- 1920 Awarded the M.B.E. for work as Honorary Secretary for Lady Slater's Fund for Wounded Soldiers and Sailors. Arthur joined him in Rye, during the summer vacations.
Our Family Affairs, 1867-1896, Queen Lucia and The Countess of Lowndes Square published.
- 1921 Dodo Wonders and Lovers and Friends published.
- 1922 Miss Mapp and Peter published.
- 1923 Colin and Visible and Invisible published.
Visited John Ellingham Brooks in Capri.
- 1923 Arthur Christopher's protracted bouts of depression ended.
- 1924 Alan and David of King's and Expiration and Naboth's Vineyard, later published as Spook Stories (1928).

- 1925 Mother, Rex and Colin II published.
- June 17, 1925 Arthur Christopher died, from heart failure, following pleurisy.
- 1926 Mezzanine and Pharisees and Publicans published.
- 1927 Lucia in London and Sir Francis Drake published.
- 1928 Dedicated Memorial window to Arthur in the Parish Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Rye. Commissioned by Arthur's benefactress, Eugenia Langdon of Nottbeck. The Life of Alcibiades and Spook Stories published.
- 1929 Ferdinand Magellan published. John Ellingham Brooks died of liver cancer. Paying Guests and The Male Impersonator published.
- 1930 Edward Frederic invited to dine with Edward, Prince of Wales.
- 1930 As We Were: A Victorian Peep-Show and The Inheritor published. Edited and introduced Letters from Henry James to A.C. Benson and Auguste Monod.
- 1931 Mapp and Lucia published.
- 1932 As We are: A Modern Revue, Charlotte Brontë and Secret Lives published.
- 1933 Appointed Magistrate in Rye. King Edward VII, The Outbreak of War, 1914 and Travail of Gold published.
- 1934 Appointed the 645th Mayor of Rye, chose Mrs. Jacomb-Hood as his Mayoress. Published More Spook Stories and Raven's Brood.
- 1935 Re-elected Mayor of Rye. Published Lucia's Progress and Queen Victoria.
- 1935 Visit of Queen Mary to Rye.

- 1935 Edward Frederic acted as Speaker of the Cinque Ports on the occasion of the appointment of a new Lord Warden.
- 1936 Re-elected Mayor of Rye. Published The Kaiser and English Relations and a chapter on the Brontës in The English Novelists, edited by Derek Verschoyle.
- 1937 Dedicated the west window in the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, Rye as a memorial in honour of his parents.
- Published Old London.
- 1938 Appointed Honorary Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge. The College thought him the most fitting of the living authors to succeed Kipling and Hardy.
- Published Queen Victoria's Daughters.
- March, 1938 Given the Freedom of the Borough of Rye and presented with a silver model of the Mary Rose. The last Freeman of the Borough of Rye had been Archbishop Randall.
- 1939 Published Trouble for Lucia.
- 1940 Published Final Edition.
- February 29, 1940 Died, aged 72 years.

Appendix

Listings of E.F. Benson's unpublished manuscripts, notebooks, correspondence, publisher's letters, drafts, etc., in the Location Register of English Literary manuscripts and letters at the University of Reading, in Room 132, Department of Western manuscripts, New Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, in the University Research Library at the University of California, Los Angeles and in the Harry Ransom Research Center, the University of Texas at Austin, Texas.

- I. Papers of E. F. Benson listed in Location Register of English Literary manuscripts and letters, The Library, University of Reading, Whiteknights, P.O. Box 223, Reading, RG6 2AE

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Aberystwyth. National Library of Wales. Department of Manuscripts and Records.
In NLW MS.62678.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Henry Taylor. — [18--?]

Owned. — [November, 1985]

re00155802

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Birmingham. University of Birmingham. Library. March 9.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Miss Tree. — [19--].

Owned. [December 1986]

re00233544

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Bristol. University of Bristol. Library. DM1107 (Penguin Books Ltd.) 00.0169

Editorial correspondence file relating to the publication of 'As We Were' (1938)/by
E.F. Benson.

On deposit.

Restricted access: written permission required. — [June 1987] re00367176

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Bristol. University of Bristol. Library. In DM662.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Mr. Potter. — 1938.

Owned. — [February 1984]

re00061506

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Cambridge. King's College (Cambridge). Library.

4 letters from E.F. Benson to Mr. Colles. — 1895-1902

Autograph. — Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [September 1984]

re00100765

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Cambridge. King's College (Cambridge). Library.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Mr. Gillet. — 1932

Autograph. — Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [September 1984]

re00100773

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Cambridge. King's College (Cambridge). Library.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Sir James T. Knowles. — 1986

Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [March 1985]

re00168491

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Cambridge. Magdalene College. Library. N.T.E.

As we are: a modern revue/by E.F. Benson. — 479 pages, bound.

Autograph. — Owned. — Published in 1932.

Access: by appointment. — [May 1984]

re00077879

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Cambridge. Trinity College (Cambridge). Library. Cullum

K222.¹⁻²

2 letters from E.F. Benson to Baroness Orczy. — [1917 & undated].

Autograph. — Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [March 1984]

re00068985

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Cambridge. Trinity College (Cambridge). Library.

Add.Ms.b.35⁶⁰⁻⁶¹.

2 letters from E.F. Benson to Sir James George Frazer. — [1892-1901].

— TS copies.

Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [March 1984]

re00068802

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940

Cambridge. Trinity College (Cambridge). Library.

Add.Ms.a.71¹⁴⁵

Letter from E.F. Benson to A.S.F. Gow. — 1938

Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [March 1984]

re00068993

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940

Cambridge. University of Cambridge. Library. Add.7026/154;7032/8

2 letters from E.F. Benson to Ellen Gosse. — 1928

Autograph. — Owned. — [October 1984]

re00123048

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Cambridge. University of Cambridge. Library. Add.7658/B60.

Letter from E.F. Benson to F.C. Burkitt. — 1925

Autograph. — Owned. — [October 1984]

re00123870

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Cambridge. University of Cambridge. Library. Add.5944/21/12.

Letter from E.F. Benson to J.Peile. — 1893

Owned. — [October 1984]

re00124958

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Cambridge. University of Cambridge. Library. In Hardinge 43.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Lord Hardinge of Penshurst. — 1920.

Owned. — [October 1984]

re00114251

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Cambridge. University of Cambridge. Library. Add.7481/b159-170.

Letters from E.F. Benson to M.R. James. — [1896-1925?]

Autograph. — Owned. — [October 1984]

re00128449

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940

Eton. Eton School Library. In Millington-Drake Collection, Vol. I.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Eugen Millington-Drake. — 1926

Autograph. — Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [October 1985]

re00229563

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940

Eton. Eton School Library. In Millington-Drake Collection (files).

Letter from E.F. Benson to Eugen Millington-Drake. — 192f.

Autograph. — Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [October 1985]

re00229954

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940

Glasgow. Glasgow District Libraries. Mitchell Library.

MS.152/12.

3 letters from E.F. Benson to Henry MacLaren. — 1923-1924

Autograph. — Owned. — [July 1984]

re00108715

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Leeds. Brotherton Library. Brotherton Collection. In Gosse Correspondence.

6 letters from E.F. Benson to Edmund Gosse. 1893-1927.

Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [March 1984]

re0063355

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Leeds. Brotherton Library. Brotherton Collection. In Shorter Correspondence.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Clement Shorter. — 1896

Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [July 1984]

re00090646

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Leeds. Leeds City Art Gallery. Henry Moore Centre for the Study of Baronture.
Thornycroft Archive C.79 & C.80.

2 letters from E.F. Benson to Hamo Thornycroft. — [189-?]]

Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [June 1987]

re00365297

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

London. British Library. Department of Manuscripts. In Add.Mss.59544.

2 letters from E.F. Benson to Evelyn Wrench. — 1928-1929

Autograph. — Owned. — [November 1986]

re00315184

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

London. British Library. Department of Manuscripts.

Add.Mss.46244, ff.79-87.

Correspondence between E.F. Benson and Mary Gladstone. — 1916-1920

Owned. — [May 1984]

re00070645

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

London. British Library. Department of Manuscripts. In Add.Mss.56669

Correspondence of E.F. Benson in the Society of Authors Archive. — 1913-1938

Owned. — [February 1985]

re00150924

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

London. British Library. Department of Manuscripts.

Add.Mss.49668, f.46.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Lord Avebury. — 1901

Owned. — [January 1986]

re00250554

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

London. British Library. Department of Manuscripts.

Add.Mss.46057, f.77.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Lord Gladstone. — 1898

Owned. — [May 1984]

re00070653

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

London. British Library. Department of Manuscripts.

Add.Mss.42575, f.54.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Mr. Manby. — [19--?]

Owned. — [May 1984]

re00070637

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

London. Garrick Club. Library. Allhusen album, p. 38.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Dorothy Allhusen. — [19--?]

Autograph. — Owned.

Access: by appointment and on payment of a fee. — [December 1986]

re00326720

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

London. Incorporated Society for Psychical Research. Lodge Papers 190.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Oliver Lodge. — [19--?]

Owned.

Access: by written appointment. — [February 1986]

re00262056

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

London, University College, London. Library. Ramsay Papers, vol. 16(ii), p. 303.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Lady Ramsay. — [18-- or 19--]

Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [November 1983]

re00057223

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Manchester. John Rylands University Library of Manchester. In Tillotson Deposit 17 (no. 62 in album).

Letter from E.F. Benson to W.F. Tillotson & Son. — 1896

Autograph. — On deposit. — [November 1985]

re00234044

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940

Newcastle upon Tyne. University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Library. MSS Album, 48.

Letter of condolence from E.F. Benson to Lady Battersea. — [19--?]

Autograph. — Owned. — [May 1983]

re00008109

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Reading. University of Reading. Library. In MS2606.

30 letters from E.F. Benson in early correspondence files of the Bodley Head Ltd. — 1926-1928.

Autograph. — On deposit.

Access: by written permission of the Bodley Head Ltd. — [June 1987]

re00361623

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940.

Reading. University of Reading. Library. In MS1089.

Letter from E.F. Benson to Macmillan & Co. Ltd. — 1938.

On deposit.

Access: by appointment. — [May 1986]

re00282219

BENSON, E.F., 1867-1940, recipient.

Norwich. Norfolk Record Office. In E.F. Benson correspondence.

Letter from Arthur Christopher Benson to E.F. Benson. — [191-]

Owned.

Access: by appointment. — [September 1985]

re00206148

- II. Papers of E.F. Benson listed in Room 132, New Bodleian in The Library, Oxford University, Oxford, England

Works of E.F. Benson**Novels and Short Stories**

- 2/1 A Rogue's Redemption 3 vols.
- 2/2 A Pair of Chelsea Figures
- 2/3 Alan
- 2/4 Alcibiades (printed)
- 2/5 Illustration of Alcibiades
- 2/6 Arundel
- 2/7 Aunt Georgie
- 2/8 By the North Sea
- 2/9 Complete rest
- 2/10 David Blaize
- 2/11 David Blaize and the Blue Door
- 2/12 David Blaize at Cambridge
- 2/13 Dodo the Second
- 2/14 Margery (typescript)
- 2/15 Michael (typescript)
- 2/16 Mike
- 2/17 Mr. Teddy
- 2/18 Mrs. Ames (typescript)
- 2/19 Quack Quack
- 2/10 Robin Linnett
- 2/21 Sea Mist
- 2/22 Sing for your Dinner
- 2/23a The China Bowl
- 2/23b The Chippendale Mirror
- 2/24a The Circle
- 2/24b The Dog in the Cult of Asclepius (typescript)
- 2/25 The Economies of Mrs. Handcock (typescript)
- 2/26 The Eternal Unpromised
- 2/27 The Flint Knife
- 2/28 The Grisley Kittens
- 2/29 The Oakleyites
- 2/30 The Patriarch Jacob (typescript)
- 2/31 The Pea-Green Incorruptible
- 2/32 The Peerage Cure
- 2/33 The Poison of Asps
- 2/34 The Shuttered Room
- 2/35 The Spiritual Partner
- 2/36 The Two Sisters (printed)
- 2/37 The Witch Ball
- 2/38 Thursday Evening

Novels and Short Stories (Continued)

- 2/39 Up and Down
 2/40 Victoria
 2/41 a story, (no title)
 2/42 a story, (no title)

Plays

- 2/43 Clapp (typescript)
 2/44 His Mother's Game (typescript)
 2/45 His Mothers Game (typescript)
 2/46 Kit
 2/47 Lucia (typescript)
 2/48 A play (no title, about Lucia)
 2/49 Mammon and Co.
 2/50 The Brothers (typescript)
 2/51 The Gimlet (typescript)
 2/52 The Luck of the Vails (typescript)
 2/53 The Mesmerist
 2/54 The Mother (typescript)
 2/55 The Willis Process Act II (typescript)
 2/56 The Willis Process Acts I-III
 2/57 Within Limits (typescript)
 2/58 A play (no title)

Essays

- 2/59 A Criticism on Critics
 2/60 Archaeology in Literature
 2/61 Asclepios (typescript)
 2/62 Climbers
 2/64 The Myth of R.L. Stevenson
 2/65 The Praises of Past Time

Miscellaneous

- 2/66 Windsor 2 February 1901
 2/67 notes on A.C.B.'s Will
 2/68 Two articles on the War
 2/69 Misc. stories etc.

Miscellaneous (Continued)

- 2/70 Misc. poems
- 2/71 Helen, a poem 2 copies 1 typed
- 2/72 Misc. parts of stories
- 2/73 Extr. from E.W.B. diaries
- 2/74 Extr. from E.W.B. diaries
- 2/75 Autobiographical notes
- 2/76 Copy by E.F. Benson of Oscar Wilde's 'De Profundis'
- 2/77-79 3 Printed Works belonging to E.F. Benson
- 2/80 Photographs and Engravings
- 2/81 Press Cuttings
- 2/82 Scrapbook

III. Papers of E.F. Benson listed in the Research Library at the Research Library at the University of California, Los Angeles

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NOTEBOOKS, DATED.

- 177/1
box 1 [Notebook], 1906.
70 p. in blue notebook, remainder of pages blank or with corrections. 21 cm, holograph.
- Dated on first page. Text begins, "My desire is to write a great-beautiful book...". Short story begins on next page. Text begins, "The English colony at Altin comprised a number of [word illegible] folk...", 37 p.. Speech, 6p., begins, "Mr. Mayor, Aldermen, and councillors of Rye...". Following are reminiscences (?). Text begins, "To start on a definite date...".
- 177/2
box 1 [Notebook, untitled], [January 24, 1920].
47 p. in black notebook, balance of pages blank. 23 cm, holograph.
- Several pages torn out. Date at end of text. "It went through edition after edition and the raging and the clamour of court only helped to sell it...".
- 177/3-4
box 1 Novel (unnamed), 1924.
495 p. in two notebooks. 26 cm, holograph.
- Pagination in first notebook is by leaves, with pp. 1-190 from front to back, and pp. 191-364 from back to front, upside-down. In second notebook, pp. 365-471 from front to back and pp. 472-495 from back to front, rightside-up. List of characters at beginning: Elizabeth Langdom, Walter [Langdom], Tony, etc.
- 177/5-7
box 1 Lucia in London [November 27, 1925 - January 14, 1926].
369 p, in three notebooks. 25 cm, holograph.
- First two notebooks with yellow cover, third with blue cover.

NOTEBOOKS, DATED (CONTINUED).177/8
box 1

[Notebook, untitled], [September, 1932].

64 p., remainder of notebook blank. 20 cm, holograph, purple cover.

Continuation from another notebook. Starts with page 468, "...would never do, while her child was yet unweaned. Dennis, had said sweetly...". At end: September 15, 1932.

177/9
box 1

[Notebook, untitled], [December 1, 1936].

100 p. in blue notebook, balance of pages blank. 20 cm, holograph.

Date "1870" at beginning of text, author's name and address on page preceding. First lines of text: "The re-opening of Bolingbroke House was obviously an event of the greatest social possibilities...". Date of writing at end of text.

177/10
box 1The Unwanted [December 27, 1936].

117 p. in red "Exercise-book". Remainder of pages blank or with corrections. 20 cm, holograph.

"Miss Dorothy Vincent put her Pekinese dog on a lead...".

177/11
box 1Portrait of an English Nobleman, 1929. [February 16, 1937].

142 p. in red "Exercise-book", remainder of pages blank or with corrections. 20 cm, holograph.

"The bells of Sunday morning service...".

NOTEBOOKS, UNDATED.

- 177/12
box 2 Boodle in books [and] Demoniacal possession.
36 p. and 43 p. in blue "Exercise-book", remainder of pages blank or with corrections, some torn out. 20 cm, holograph.
- 177/13
box 2 Demoniacal possession.
49 p. in black notebook, remainder of pages blank, several pages torn out. 20 cm, holograph.
- See preceding item for first draft.
- 177/14
box 2 Janet (1840).
95 p. in light grey notebook, remainder of book blank or with corrections. 20 cm, holograph.
- "Agnes and Julia Taylor, spinster sisters of the deceased...".
- 177/15
box 2 Monkey.
41 numbered pages, balance of book unnumbered. 21 cm, holograph.
- Name and address of author on front page.
- 177/16
box 2 Short stories: The Music Haters.
9 p. in red copy book, balance of book blank. 17 cm, holograph.
- At back of notebook [upside-down] "August 30 [no year] Books." A list of books read by Benson (?).

NOTEBOOKS (CONTINUED).

177/17
box 2

The Oriolists.

44 p., remainder of notebook with corrections or blank. In spatter-colored notebook. 23 cm, holograph.

On inside front cover, "(i) The Oriolists/ (ii) The Satyr's sandals.

177/18
box 2

[Notebook, untitled].

23 p., remainder of notebook blank or with corrections. 20 cm. Black-green cover. Holograph.

Text begins, "On this hot morning of early June, Philip Mordaunt came down the uncarpeted stairs of his villa...".

177/19
box 2

[Notebook, untitled].

36 p. and 4 p., balance of book unnumbered, many pages torn out. 22 cm, holograph.

Apparently an essay. Text begins, "The history of art is a history of revoluts...".

FICTION. DATED.

177/20
box 2

Dr. Drage's dilemma [1899?]

16 p.
26 cm., typescript.

Label of A.P. Watt and Son (Literary agent?) and date stamp of this firm. Text begins, "The early winter evening was closing rapidly in...".

FICTION. DATED (CONTINUED).

- 177/21
box 2 The Garden Gate [March 6, 1911]
31 p.
23 cm., holograph.
- Date on last page. Text begins, "Miss Elizabeth Courtney was delightfully younger..."
- 177/22 The Pavillion, Part II. [April 21, 1914]
45 p., 23 cm., holograph, pencil.
- With dated envelope. Text begins, "All that was in the year of grace 1884..."
- 177/23 [Novel, untitled] Aug. 13, 1916 - Nov. 3, 1916.
Approx. 530 p. (some lacking?)
24 cm., holograph.
- Text begins: "Mr. Keeling had expected..."
- 177/24
box 3 Across the stream [May, 1917].
580 p. (irregular pagination).
26 cm., holograph.
- Published 1919. Text begins: "Certain scenes, certain pictures of his very early years..."
- 177/25
box 4 The Face [Dec. 10, 1923].
21 p., 26 cm., holograph.
- "Hutchinson's Magazine" and date stamped on back.

FICTION. UNDATED.

177/26
box 4

Aftermath.

17 p., holograph, 26 cm.

Author's signature at end. Text begins, "Whther the morning was fine or wet...".

177/27
box 4

'And no bird sings'.

23 p., 26 cm., holograph mss.

Text begins, "The red chimneys of the house for which I was bound...".

177/28
box 4

The Artfulness of Rex.

14 p., 26 cm., holograph.

Text begins, "Rex Ellwood was quite aware, when he relit his pipe...".

177/29
box 4

Atmospherics.

7 p., 26.5 cm., holograph.

Text begins, "There is nothing more delightful to the thoroughly unscientific mind than...".

177/30
box 4

The Bachelors.

18 p., 26 cm., typescript.

Text begins, "It has been a shattering blow to those two...".

177/31
box 4

The Barsham letters.

25 p., 23 cm., holograph.

177/32
box 4

The Bath-chair.

27 p., 23 cm., holograph.

Text begins, "Edmund Faraday, at the age of fifty, had every reason to be satisfied...".

FICTION, UNDATED (CONTINUED).

177/33
box 4

The Bed by the Window. Prologue.
20 p., 26 cm., holograph.

Pages of two sizes (23 and 26 cm.). Text begins,
"My friend Leniel Bailey understands the works
of Mr. Einstein...".

177/34
box 4

Billy comes through.
25 p., 26 cm, holograph.

177/34
(cont.)

Text begins, "Mrs. Dorothy Yates was seated in
front of her typewriter...".

177/35
box 4

Boxing night.
20 & 29 p., 26 cm., holograph & typescript copy of
same. 2 pieces.

Text begins, "Hugh Grainger was spending Christmas
with us...".

177/36
box 4

Buntingford Jugs.
22 p., 26 cm., holograph.

Text begins, "Mrs. Ayliwin was having tea very
comfortably all by herself...".

177/37
box 4

By Subtlety.
25 p., 26 cm., holograph.

Text begins, "One of the most important
commandments of the decalogue...".

177/38

The Call of the Curlew.
7 p., 26 cm., holograph.

Text begins, "The estuary of the river Orme, the
marshy lands bordering it...".

FICTION. UNDATED (CONTINUED).

177/39
box 4

The Caricature.

17 & 24 p., holograph mss & typescript. 26 cm. 2 pieces.

"Ronald Anstruther's career, a wonderfully lucrative one...".

177/40
box 4

Caterpillars.

21 p., 23 cm, holograph.

On upper right-hand corner of page 1: "3500 words".
Text begins, "I saw a month or two ago...".

177/41
box 4

Complementary souls.

21 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "It was not in the lease because Walter Steeples and his wife...".

177/42
box 4

Complete Rest.

7 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Unfinished story. Text begins, "Cruel...that was the only epithet for it...".

177/43
box 4

The Corner-House.

26 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Firham-by-Sea had long been known to Tim Purley and myself...".

FICTION, UNDATED (CONTINUED).

177/44
box 4

The Dance.

19 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Philip Hope had been watching with little neighing giggles...".

177/45
box 4

The Death Drawer.

39 p., fragment, 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "On the olive-clad hill-side just outside Sorrento...".

177/46
box 4

The Deep Water.

23 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "My friend Louis Canington with whom I was to spend a literary week-end...".

177/47
box 4

The Desecrated Hermes.

22 p., 26 cm, holograph.

"Edward Mackor [?] was sitting up for his wife to come home...".

177/48
box 4

The Disappearance of Jacob Conifer.

15 p., on foolscap, 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Memories nowadays are short, with rapid succession of journalistic excitement...".

177/49
box 4

Dives & Lazarus.

21 p., 21 cm, holograph mss.

Text begins, "Dives was an extremely wealthy English banker in Naples...".

FICTION. UNDATED (CONTINUED).

177/50
box 5

Doggies.

16 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "It had really been difficult to know what to do with this.

177/51
box 5

The Dorothy Crystal Syndicate.

20 p., 26 cm, holograph.

"It was a fine moment when the editor of that very largely circulated magazine..."

177/52
box 5

The Empty House.

20 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "It had been a disastrous afternoon; rain had streamed incessantly.

177/53
box 5

The Exposure of Pamela.

25 p., 26 cm, holograph.

On first page in upper left hand corner "2" in pencil.
Text begins "Pamela pardyn (?) was bowling along..."

177/54
box 5

The Fall of Augusta.

12 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Augusta Plaiice - such was her incredible name..."

177/55
box 5

Fine Feathers.

22 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Mr. & Mrs. Altham sat open-mouthed and staring at each other..."

FICTION, UNDATED (CONTINUED).

177/56
box 5

The Guardian Angel.

17 p., 26 cm, holograph.

"Mrs. Attwood was an exceedingly good-natured woman...".

177/57
box 5

The Godmother.

25 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "There can be no doubt that Mrs. Shuttlewak had beautiful bones...".

177/58
box 5

The Invincible.

21 and 30 p., 26 cm, holograph and typescript of same with holograph corrections. 2 pieces.

Text begins, "He and she alike were on the outer rim of the giddy wheel.

177/59
box 5

In the Dark.

22 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Reginald Case, newly promoted to the rank of captain...".

177/60
box 5

The Jamboree.

18 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Caroline Lady Camber took it almost as personal insult...".

177/61
box 5

Jill's Golf.

10 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Jill much preferred that the weather...".

FICTION, UNDATED (CONTINUED).

177/62
box 5

Julia's Cottage.

25 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "For many years before this fatal tendency in Julia Hind...".

177/63
box 5

Krishna and the Corona.

5 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "The oily consistence of eternity had begun...".

177/64
box 5

Lady Massington's Redemption.

57 p., 26 cm, typescript, holograph corrections.

Typescript title "Lady Massington's resurrection", the last word crossed out and "redemption" written by hand.

Text begins, "The tide of carriages in St. James' Street had just turned...".

177/65
box 5

The Letters of Anthony Noble. Short Story.

29 p., 24 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "It was no doubt a continuation of his supreme musical gifts...".

177/66
box 5

The Light in the Garden.

21 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "The house and the dozen acres of garden...".

FICTION. UNDATED (CONTINUED).

177/67

box 5

The Lovers.

20 and 28 p., 26 cm, holograph and typescript of same. 2 pieces.

Text begins, "Stephen Merriall, unable to get a taxi..."

177/68

box 5

A Maternal Comedy.

13 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Mrs. Vine rose from her comfortable seat in front of the fire..."

177/69

box 5

The Miser.

25 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Dock Latimer, at the age of twelve..."

177/70

box 5

Mr. Carew's Game of Croquet.

11 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "The air was laden with the scent of summer..."

177/71

box 5

Mrs. Grainger.

22 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "The village of Aldwyn, lying at the base of the Dorset Downs.

177/72

box 5

The Moth and the Magnet.

5 p., 26 cm, holograph, signed at end.

Text begins, "Even the most high-browed and lofty intellects..."

FICTION. UNDATED (CONTINUED).

177/73
box 5

Mount Street.

12 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Elizabeth Langton, as her custom was..."

177/74
box 5

No. 12.

13 p., 13 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "In the course of many shiftings and pitchings of my tent..."

177/75
box 5

The Obituary Notice. A short story.

12 and 13 p., 25 cm, holograph and typescript same, 2 pieces.

Text begins, "The morning after Robert Holden's funeral Arnold Bailey received a note..."

177/76
box 5

The Old Bligh.

33 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "It was about half-past four in the afternoon..."

177/77
box 5

The Parable Party.

25 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text "Marie Lavering (?) was intending to give (what she called)..."

177/78
box 6

The Passenger.

17 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "On a certain Tuesday night, during last October..."

FICTION, UNDATED (CONTINUED).

177/79
box 6

Pocksky.

7 p., 26 cm, typescript.

Stamped "Mrs. Gill, Typewriting Office..." on back of last page.

Text begins, "Miss Alma Martin (who owes her name to the fact..."

177/80
box 6

The Poet.

23 p., 27 cm, typescript.

With label of literary agent, A.P. Watt & Son, on top.

Text begins, "The English colony in the island of Alatri...". For draft of same story see item 11 of this register.

177/81
box 6

Professor Burnaby's Discovery.

27 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "The Hotel Pi-netein ab El Nefer on the Nile..."

177/82
box 6

The Queen of the Spa.

13 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Miss Jessica Winthrop was taking her tea..."

177/83
box 6

The Red House.

26 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Unfinished (?) Text begins, "Hugh Fairfax had been accustomed for the last six or ten years..."

FICTION. UNDATED (CONTINUED).

177/84
box 6

The Release. A short story.
22 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "About half past ten on this broiling Saturday morning..."

177/85
box 6

Sir Roger Coverly.
16 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Considering that it was Christmas eve the weather was almost pretentious..."

177/86
box 6

To Account Rendered.
21 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Even in those first intoxicating days of success..."

177/87
box 6

The Top Landing.
11 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "I had bought that afternoon from a twopenny bookstall..."

177/88
box 6

The Washing of Lady Graeme's Face.
12 p., 21 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Lady Graeme had been for many years..."

177/89
box 6

A Wife to the Rescue.
10 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Text begins, "Elizabeth had always known that this would happen..."

FICTION. UNDATED (CONTINUED).

- 177/90
box 6 The Woman in the Veil.
16 p., 26 cm, holograph.
- Text begins, "It was a joyful spectacle, as the great tram..."
- 177/91
box 6 [Novel, untitled] (Unfinished).
Approx. 200 p., typescript and carbon, 10 p. in
holograph.
- Text begins, "On the 11th of October 1912 I came
down the staircase..."
- 177/92
box 6 [Novel, fragment of draft, untitled]
Unnumbered. 26 cm.
- Text begins, "Geoffrey had sent to Margaret a spare
set of his proofs..."
- 177/93
box 6 [Fragments].
Irregularly numbered, ab. 200 p., 26 cm, holograph.

PLAYS *** SCENARIOS.**

- 177/94
box 6 Air. (Scenario)
3 p. and 9 p. 26 cm. holograph draft and later
version. 2 pieces.
- 177/95
box 6 Bridge Fiend (The Bridgers) (a fragment)
15 p., 26 cm., holograph.
- 177/96
box 7 Dinner for Eight. Comedy in one act.
28 p., 26 cm., holograph.
- 177/97
box 7 The Earthquake - a dialogue.
27 p., 25 cm., holograph.
- Original title crossed out "Defective nature".

PLAYS *** SCENARIOS (CONTINUED).**177/98
box 7The Sexton. A play in one act.

26 p. holograph and 33 p. typescript of same. 2 pieces.

Holograph draft in "exercise book", several pages torn out. Play followed by one page of ms. draft and one page draft for Benson's will, dated Aug. 29.

ESSAYS.177/99
box 7By the North Sea.

20 p., 26 cm., (irregularly numbered) holograph.

Text begins, "When I strolled down after breakfast to the Quay.

177/100
box 7A Criticism on Critics.

78 p., 26 cm., typescript.

Text begins, "Oscar Wilde never wrote a more amusing piece..."

177/101
box 7Games.

12 p., 26 cm., typescript.

"There are probably but few of us so fortunately..."

177/102
box 7The Inventions of the Nineties (Looking backward).

14 p., 26 cm, typescript.

Notation on title page in pencil "4 copies." "Looking backward," at bottom "7 p.m., Feb. 25th" (n.a.).

ESSAYS (CONTINUED).

- 177/103
box 7 The Modern Novel.
24 p., holograph and 29 p. typescript of same. 26 cm, 2 pieces.

"The position of the critic of contemporary fiction...".
- 177/104
box 7 Queen Mary.
17 p., holograph and 7 p. typescript of same. 26 cm, 2 pieces.

Cover has note in different hand "M.S.S." by E.F.B. (I have found no evidence as to whether it has been published or not) H.M.D."
- 177/105
box 7 Some Post-War Aspects of English life.
30 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Signed at end. Text begins, "When any catastrophe, accidental or deliberately provoked, occurs...".
- 177/106 Speech given by E.F.B. "at the opening of the shelter he presented to the town," 4 p., 26 cm, holograph.
- 177/107
box 7 Two types.
10 p., 26 cm, holograph.

Signed at end. Text begins, "The proverb which tells us that it takes all sorts...".
- 177/108
box 7 The Technique of Spook-Stories.
7 p., 26 cm, pencil and ink holograph.

Signed at end.
- 177/109
box 7 Victorian Biography and Afterwards.
6 p., 23 cm, holograph.

First page cut in two.

POEMS.

177/110 Cenacolo (S. Giorgio Maggiore) Venice, 1908.
box 7 7 p. & 6 p., draft and holograph transcript (in different hand (?)).

177/111 Dawn in the Garden (June 16, 1910).
box 7 9 p., holograph and 7 p. typescript of same, with holograph corrections. 2 pieces.

Subtitle: Third Ballade of Chopin.

177/112 Summer in Venice (A Venetian Garden).
box 7 3 versions, holograph in different hand (?), 3 pieces in folder.

177/113 The Other Side of the Question.
box 7 2 p., 23 cm, holograph.

Subtitle, "With Congratulations to William Wadsworth".

177/114 Poems, Fragments, Shorter Poems ecc. 1910- and n.d. 12
(?) pieces. Holograph.

Venetian Garden

see

Summer in Venice.

TRANSLATION.

177/115 Annunzio, Gabriele d', Watchers by the dead.
LI& Trans. from "La Veglia funebre ... by E.F. Benson.
box 7 18 p. 26 cm, typescript with holograph corrections.

CORRESPONDENCE, CONTRACTS, ETC.

- 177/116
box 8 Benson, Edward Frederic.
Contracts and agreements with publishers, accounts rendered, royalty statements, 1929-1938. 22 pieces in folder.
- 177/117
box 8 Brandt & Brandt, firm, literary agents.
Letters to Benson, 1932-1939. 26 pieces in folder.
- 177/118
box 8 Longmans, Green & Co., firm, publishers.
Royalty statements and correspondents, 1930-1939. 1 folder.
- 177/119
box 8 Watt, A.P. & Son, firm (Literary agent?).
Letters to Benson, 1927-1940. 19 pieces in folder.
- 177/120
box 8 Benson, Edward Frederic.
Letters to Benson from various correspondents, 1913-1939. 17 pieces in folder.
- 177/121
box 8 Benson, Edward Frederic.
Letters from Benson to various correspondents, (drafts(?)), 1931-1938. holograph. 7 pieces.
- 177/122 Clippings and printed short stories clipped from magazines. 1924-1936. 1 folder.

Removed to
Arthur Christopher
Benson Coll. 656.

- Benson, Arthur Christopher.
Letters to Arthur Christopher Benson from Gordon (G?) Wordsworth re purchase of Mount Scawfell, September 1924-February 1925. 22 holograph letters, 1 typescript letter.
- Together with copies in Wordsworth's hand of letters from H.S. Watson, one letter from John Bailey and one from Birkett (attorney).

CORRESPONDENCE, CONTRACTS, ETC., (CONTINUED).

- 177/123 Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.
box 8 1. Letter, signed to Alphonse James Albert Symons.
London, December 8, 1936. 1 p., holograph.
2. Postcard, signed, to Alphonse James Albert Symons.
London, December 28, 1930. 1 p., holograph.
[Picture on postcard is of E.F. Benson sitting in
his garden].

2 items [removed from E.F. Benson's The Kaiser and
English relations, London, 1936. PR4099 B6K].

The letter presents A.J.A. Symons with a copy of The
Kaiser and English relations, and the postcard
conveys good wishes for Xmas and the New
Year.

I. Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940--Portrait.
I. Symons, Alphonse James Albert, 1900-1941.

Removed to

- William Colles 3. Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940
Papers, Coll. Letter, signed, to Morris Colles. London,
1116. June 1899. 3 p., holograph.
Colles was a literary agent.
I. Colles, William Morris, 1855-1926.

177/123 Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940. Letter to
box 8 Mrs. Arkwright. Lamb House, Rye, Sussex,
September 27, 1932. 2 p., holograph.

177/124 Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940. Letters
box 8 to Mrs. Gill. v.p., 1894-1932. 87 items. Holograph.

Mrs. Gill was Benson's typist. These are letters of
instruction concerning the manuscripts he
wanted typed.

CORRESPONDENCE, CONTRACTS, ETC., (CONTINUED).

177/125 Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940. The
box 9 Challoners. n.p., February 18-March 10, 1904. 3
vols. 31 ½ cm, holograph.

Bound in marbled boards with red cloth spines. First
published by Heinemann, London, 1904. Gift
of Lt. Col. Martin D. Lister, October 1962.

177/126 Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940. Pencil
box 9 portraits of E.F. Benson's mother and father, Mary
Sidgwick Benson and Edward White Benson,
Archbishop of Canterbury. n.p., 1891 and 1899. 2
items.

Reproduced in E.F. Benson's "Our family affairs," pages 178
and 214.

1. Benson, Edward White, app. of Canterbury, 1829-
1896 - Portrait.
2. Benson, Mary (Sidgwick) 1841-1918 - Portrait.

177/127 Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940. Miscellaneous
box 9 geneological and unidentified manuscript material
relating to the Benson family. 30 items.

1. Benson family.

177/128 Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940. Copies
box 9 of family documents. 7 items.

1. Benson family.

177/129 Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940. Letters
box 9 to various persons. v.p., v.d., 5 items, plus 1
holograph piece of ephemera.

IV. Papers of E.F. Benson listed in The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas

BENSON, E.F. - Works

[Benson, Edward Frederic (?)], 1867-1940.

The Babe by F. D'A. C. De L'Isle.

Tms with slight A emendations (13 pp).

Cover sheet from The Authors' Syndicate, Ltd.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.

The Brontës.

AmsS with A emendations (12 pp).

nd.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.

Charlotte Bronte Vol. II.

Ams/second draft S/inc with A emendations in one quarto notebook [167 pp and 34 loose pp].

nd.

[Benson, Edward Frederic], 1867-1940.

A Fair Decoy by F. D'A. C. De L'Isle. [pseud.]

Tms [21 pp].

nd.

[Benson, Edward Frederic], 1867-1940.

Guy's candidate.

Ams (22 pp).

nd.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.

Life of Ferdinand Magellan.

Amss with A revisions.

1929, January 26.

Bound.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.

Mezzanine.

Coppard, Alfred Edgar, 1878-1957.

[Review of] Mezzanine. By Edward Frederic Benson.

Typed/cc ms.

Benson, Edward Frederic.

My Family Affairs.

H[ewlett], M[aurice Henry], 1861-1923.

[Biography and memoirs: My family affairs by E.F. Benson and other books].

Amsl with A emendations [10 pp].

Tms (9 pp).

nd.

Benson's autobiography published 1920.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.

The Myth of R.L. Stevenson.

Amss with many A revisions.

nd.

[Benson, Edward Frederic], 1867-1940.
R.L.S.

Tms with extensive A revisions (30 pp).

nd.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
 [Review of] The Victorians and their reading, by Amy Cruse.

Tms with A corrections by Benson and notes and markings by printer (11 pp).

nd.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.
 Sir Francis Drake.

Ams S with A revisions in 2 vols.

1926, July 6.

Bound.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.
 Sir Francis Drake, Chapter 1.

Ams.

nd.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.
Spook stories.

Coppard, Alfred Edgar, 1878-1957.
 [Review of] Spook stories, by Edward Frederic Benson.

Typed/cc ms.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.

Spook stories.

Coppard, Alfred Edgar, 1878-1957.

[Review of] Spook stories, by Edward Frederic Benson.

Tccms [1 p].

nd.

Boxed.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.

The Story of a Mazurka.

Ams with A revisions (28 pp).

nd.

BENSON, E.F. - Letters

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.

4 ALS to [unidentified recipient].

1892, May 24.

1896, November 18.

1896, November 26.

1899, July 18.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.

ALS to [unidentified recipient] "Monty".

nd.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.

6 ALS to [unidentified recipients].

1 nd.

3 inc d.

1922, July 28.

1926, November 18.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.

8 ALS to Ainslie, Douglas.

nd.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.

33 ALS.

1 Telegram to [The Authors' Syndicate], most directed to W.M. Colles.

3 nd.

4 inc d.

1899-1925.

BENSON, E.F. - The Authors' Syndicate (Recip.)

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
2 ALS [Authors' Syndicate].

1901, May 2.

1901, October 1 [receipt stamp].

Included with these: 4 ALS Amalgamated.

Press to Authors' Syndicate; 4 TLS D.

Appleton & Co. to Authors' Syndicate; TLS Authors and Newspapers Association to Authors' Syndicate; ALS Caroline Barbey Beissier to Authors' Syndicate; ALS, TLS Kathleen M. Bovet to Authors' Syndicate; 2 ALS S.C. Brown, Langham & Co. to Authors' Syndicate; TLS Century Company to Authors' Syndicate; ALS Louis Conard to Authors' Syndicate; TLS Daily Express to Authors' Syndicate; TLS Daily Mail to Authors' Syndicate; ALS Vve. C. Bernard Derosne to Authors' Syndicate; 5 TLS Doubleday, Page & Co. to Authors' Syndicate; 3 ALS M. Dupont to Authors' Syndicate; ALS Mlle. d'Etoyas to Authors' Syndicate; FLS Elly Eutsch to Authors' Syndicate; TLS Leslie's Magazine to Authors' Syndicate; 43 TLS, 1 TL William Heinemann to Authors' Syndicate; ALS Cosmo Hamilton to Authors' Syndicate; 2 TLS Illustrated London News to Authors' Syndicate; 3 TLS Herbert Jenkins Ltd. to Authors' Syndicate; ALS Hertha König to Authors' Syndicate; 3 ALS Elisabeth Lilljebjorn to Authors' Syndicate; 1 ALS, 3 TLS J.B. Lippincott Co. to Authors' Syndicate; TLS London Magazine to Authors' Syndicate; 2 TLS Methuen & Co. to Authors' Syndicate; ALS Charles C.B. Moss to Benson; TLS Nash's Magazine to Authors' Syndicate; 2 ALS L'Opinion to Authors' Syndicate; 4 ALS, 1 TLS Curt Otto to Authors' Syndicate; 2 ALS, 2 TLS Pall Mall Magazine to Authors' Syndicate; 2 ALS Georges Pancol to Authors' Syndicate; ALS Anna Rudoeff to Authors' Syndicate; ALS Sea-Pie to Authors' Syndicate; TLS Walter T. Stephenson to Authors' Syndicate; TLS Strand Magazine to Authors' Syndicate; 2 ALS, 1 APCS Bernard Tauchnitz to Authors' Syndicate; 2 ALS E. de Valisart-Vermory to Authors' Syndicate; 2 TLS Ward, Lock & Co. to Author's Syndicate; ALS Grace von Wentzel to Authors' Syndicate; 2 TLS Windsor Magazine to Authors' Syndicate; TLS Windsor Magazine to Benson.

BENSON, E.F. - Letters

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.

ALS to Beare, Miss.

____, December 4.

Enclosed in ALS Beare to Margaret Collins.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.

ALS to Bramley, Charles.

1937, September 14.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.

ALS to Bullock, George.

1939, March 8.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.

7 ALS to Colles, [William Morris].

1 nd.

1901-1923.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.

ALS to Colles, [William Morris].

1902, November 1 [receipt stamp].

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.

ALS to Collins, Margaret.

[1912], July 21.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
ALS to Fowler.

1924, October 7.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
74 ALS to Gill, Mrs.

4 nd.

5 inc d.

1894-1931.

Benson's typist.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
2 ALS to Gillett, [Eric].

1935, April 29.

1939, May 2.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
ALS to Glyn [?], Miss.

nd.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
ALS to [Harpers].

____, September 25.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.
ALS to "Lady Jeune" (?).

nd.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
2 ALS to Lane, [John].

nd.
_____, October 31.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.
5 ALS to LeBlond, Mrs. _____.
1930, May 9 - 1932, December 26.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
ALS to Mrs. [Marie Adelaide] (Belloc) Lowndes.
1933, September 28.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
ALS to [Sir Compton] Mackenzie.
1931, September 8.
Included with this: TccL Mackenzie to Benson.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
ALS to Mew, Egan.
1897, December 2.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
ALS to Nelson, George M.
1929, March 11.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
ALS to PEN.

1932, March 31.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
3 ALS to [Leonard Alfred George] Strong.

1932, November 13.

1933, January 25.

1935, June 9.

BENSON, E.F. - Recipient

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.
ALS to [Whitefriars Club].

____, September 8.

Benson, Edward Frederic. Recipient.

B[enson], A[rthur] C[hristopher], 1862-1925.
ALI to [Benson, Edward] Fred[eric].

1918, November 4.

Written with this: Directions to be followed in case of his death.

Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd.
TLS R. Percy Hodder-Williams to Benson, E[dward] F[rederic].

1931, June 18.

Keighley Public Library.

TLS R.S. Crossley (Librarian) to Benson, E[dward] F[rederic].

1931, June 10.

Nicholson, Graham and Jones Solicitors.

2 TLS to Benson, E[dward] F[rederic].

1931, July 2.

1931, July 6.

PEN

Tccl to Benson, Edward Frederic, 1868-1940.

1928, April 25.

Included in TLS Barclay's Bank to PEN and Tccl/reply, September, 1927
re Benson's subscription.

PEN

Tccl Hermon Ould to Benson, E[dward] F[rederic].

1930, October 6.

PEN

Tccl Hermon Ould to Benson, E[dward] F[rederic].

1932, April 27.

Robinson, F[rances] Mabel.

ALS to Benson, [Edward Frederic].

____, June 27.

BENSON, E.F. - Misc.

Benson, Edward Frederic. Misc.

Ainslee's Magazine.

TLS to [The Authors' Syndicate], directed to W.M. Colles.

1902, December 6.

The Amalgamated Press (1922) Limited.

3 TLS Marjorie Pryor (Editress) to The Authors' Syndicate.

1925, January 7.

1925, January 9.

1925, February 12.

Benson, Edward Frederic, 1867-1940.

[Autographs].

3 autographs [1 p. each].

2 nd.

1918, October 5.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.

4 cancelled checks endorsed by Benson.

1931-1934.

Benson, Edward F[rederic], 1867-1940.

Memorandum of agreement with G.P. Putnam's Sons.

1 Printed DS with A deletions and insertions [2 pp].

3 Tcc/copies [2 pp each].

1895, December 1.

Benson, E[dward] F[rederic], 1867-1940.

Memorandum of agreement with Thomas Nelson and Sons.

TccDS with A insertions and deletions (3 pp).

1913, July 23.

Cox, Percy L.

ALS to Colles, Will[iam Morris].

1906, July 17.

Harper & Brothers.

TLS Cass Canfield to The Authors' Syndicate.

1925, August 5.

MacCarthy, Sir Desmond, 1878-1952.

[Review of] Charlotte Bronte by E.F. Benson.

[1932].

Accompanied by TLS from British Broadcasting Company to Longmans Green and Company, Ltd. 1932, April 21.

National Provincial Bank Limited.

TLS to The Authors' Syndicate, directed to W.M. Colles.

1925, May 20.

Nelson (Thomas) and Sons.

TLI to The Authors' Syndicate, directed to W.M. Colles.

1916, November 4.

Pears (A. & F.) Ltd.

TLS Leslie W.E. Sherwood (Advertising Department) to The Authors' Syndicate, directed to W.M. Colles.

1925, February 26.

Putnam's (G.P.) Sons.

TLS to The Authors' Syndicate.

1912, March 28.

Stuart, Esnie.

2 ALS to The Authors' Syndicate.

1925, February 25.

1925, February 27.

The Windsor Magazine.

10 TLS.

1 TL/copy.

1 APCS A. Hutchinson to The Authors' Syndicate, directed to W.M. Colles.

1 nd.

1925.



