

FRANCES CORNFORD, POET

PETER MABER

The poems of Frances Cornford are at once familiar and strange. She writes from experience, but is content to leave much unspoken, letting both her speakers and her readers reside in mysteries. Her characteristic subjects are marginal: children and the elderly, servants, country folk, and animals; and she only partially individuates and animates these characters. The poems frequently present moments apart, that appear removed from the business of the world and from the passage of time. Mood dominates over action: miniature moments are coloured by seemingly straightforward emotions; and yet there is always a distancing at work in language and in form, which complicates and which can forbid direct empathy.

Self-effacement is a common strategy. ‘So let me in this Cambridge calm July | Fruitfully live and undistinguished die’ concludes ‘Travelling Home’;¹ yet, paradoxically, these lines can be understood as drawing on a highly distinguished tradition in invoking the modesty topos, an association which is heightened by this being the title poem of a collection. There is distinctiveness in the lines too, with their surprising play with time: the specific month is made to stand for both a burgeoning life, and for death, while the lines preceding point to an ancient lineage, with the speaker watching the East Anglian clouds ‘As the Icenian watched them long ago’. The poem pits isolation against tradition, and movement against stasis.

Although Frances’s² work as a whole resists categorisation, there are times throughout her writing career where it intersects with dominant modes. The way she came to conceive of poetry as a whole tells us something about her influences, as well as illuminating the motives behind that quality of simultaneous nearness and distance. Asked to speak as ‘Guest of the

¹ ‘Travelling Home’, *Travelling Home and Other Poems* (The Cresset Press, 1948), p. 10.

² Throughout this volume we refer to Frances Cornford using her first name, in respect of her own wishes; see her letter to Jessie Stewart, discussed by Jane Firman in the Preface and Chapter 4, and by Samantha Evans in Chapter 12.

Week' on *Woman's Hour* in 1959, Frances summed up her understanding of the relation between poet and poem: 'we all want to see our poem, our offspring, standing on its own legs, as an independent creation, and it is indeed most important that the umbilical cord between the poem and the writer should be cut, otherwise it may remain, *embarrassingly* personal and emotional'.³ She speaks, of course, for so many writing poetry or writing of poetry in the wake of Eliotic impersonality, and goes on to call up 'the paradox [...] that poetry must be *personal*, because it springs from a first hand experience (whether inward or outward) and *impersonal* (whether grave or gay) because it must reach something in us which is universal'.⁴

Frances certainly admired T. S. Eliot, but was no modernist, and showed no interest in radical poetic experimentation.⁵ It is significant that the poet from whom she draws her examples in this talk is Wordsworth, and in this matter of personal distance she tentatively invokes his 'Emotion recollected in tranquility' as a 'formula — excellent anyway for himself', a formula explicitly rejected by Eliot in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'.⁶ Frances's poetry shares much common ground with Romanticism, and with Victorian sentimental and nature poetry: she would not subscribe to Eliot's belief in the 'dissociation of sensibility', or accept the need for difficulty in modern verse.⁷ Instead, her advice here again echoes Wordsworth in counselling the would-be poet to speak plainly, even in pursuit of that distancing effect: 'you must never think that especial or vast poetry words are necessary to convey that sense of strangeness which is an authentic part of the poetic experience.'⁸

³ Transcript from 'Guest of the Week' on *Woman's Hour* (1959), Frances Cornford Papers, Cambridge University Library, GBR/0012/MS Add. 10410.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jane Dowson observes that in the notes for multiple poetry readings Cornford referred to Eliot's poetry enacting a 'joyful liberation' from 'moribund clichés'. See *Frances Cornford: Selected Poems*, ed. by Jane Dowson (Enitharmon Press, 1996), p. xxi, hereafter *SP*. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the main text.

⁶ 'Guest of the Week'; Eliot rewrites what he calls this 'inexact formula' in 1919 in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Essays: New Edition* (Harcourt Brace, 1950), p. 10.

⁷ T. S. Eliot coins the term in 1921 in 'The Metaphysical Poets', *Selected Essays*, p. 247.

⁸ 'Guest of the Week'.

Contemporary supporters of Frances felt the need to account for and defend the perceived continuity across her work that might seem indifferent to the global upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century. Edwin Muir, reviewing the *Collected Poems* in *The Observer* in 1954, finds such unity and insularity, which he justifies by speculating on how ‘our picture of life’ is formed by ‘the place we are first born into’, and that ‘we have always to return to the beginning to make the image complete’.⁹ Frances ‘works within her limits and is always equal to her theme’, with her ‘integrity’ and ‘faultless propriety’; despite the ‘exquisite neatness of her poems’, he cautions against dismissing them as ‘trifles’.¹⁰ It is not the case though that she turned her back on the World Wars, and she created a distinctive, elliptical kind of war poetry from within her own, circumscribed experience, drawing on fleeting observations of soldiers departing, for example, and bringing her command of nature and elegiac poetry into these contemporary contexts. It might also be said that one of the ways in which the most successful poems resist being ‘trifles’ is in creating moments of tension in both form and content that apply pressure to that which is superficially idyllic.

Whilst there is continuity across Frances’s large body of poetry, there is evolution too, although her self-appraisal may exaggerate the differences between the stages of her writing. The early poems, she came to believe, belonged to the ‘Georgian idiom’ of ‘faded poeticisms and jog trot rhythms’.¹¹ It is typical of her resistance to placement that she comes to reject this first, formative intersection with the poets who would become known as the Georgians through her friend Edward (Eddie) Marsh’s anthologies.¹² These poets broadly brought about a revival of Romantic sensibilities, with an emphasis on metrical formalism. Frances herself was not included in any of the volumes, but her early poetry corresponds closely with these

⁹ Edwin Muir, ‘Poets of Two Ages’, *The Observer*, 5 December 1954.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ ‘Notes for a Talk’, Darwin and Cornford Papers, British Library, Add. 58385.

¹² 5 volumes of the anthologies *Georgian Poetry* appeared between 1912 and 1922, edited by Marsh together with Harold Monro, whose Poetry Bookshop published them.

tendencies. An increased sophistication, both of diction and of rhythm, was in fact brought about in no small measure through her friendship with Rupert Brooke, who both at the time and in retrospect plays a key role in that putative movement.

Brooke and Frances met at the 1908 University of Cambridge production of Milton's *Comus*, in which Brooke played the Attendant Spirit and Francis Cornford, to whom Frances became engaged later that year, was *Comus*; Frances worked backstage, painting scenery and making costumes.¹³ They were soon exchanging ideas about poetry. In a discussion about blank verse for a play of her own that Frances was working on the following year (in 1909), likely *Death and the Princess: A Morality* (later published in 1912), Brooke advises her:

even for the feeling and atmosphere you want to get — it mustn't be taken too much for granted that simple verse is right and complicated verse always wrong, for your purposes. I mean that simplicity is not always expressed by simple lines, or complexity by elaborate blank verse harmonics: that you needn't think yourself *a priori* always bound to a series of lines that end at their own ends, and have few breaks or madneses — though you would be *nearly always* bound to it, I imagine.¹⁴

Brooke goes on to contrast Marlowe's metrically 'simple lines' with Shakespeare's 'immensely varied and complicated and suggestive and built-up verse', citing examples from *The Tempest* that are 'far more in your atmosphere'. A clear and direct presentation of mood was presumably Frances's aim in this play; Brooke's encouragement to explore ways of mirroring or counterpointing the surface of her poetry in metrical form, in order to reinforce this presentation, paves the way for the development of Frances's poetry; and it reminds us of the subtlety and complexity of Brooke's greatest poetry, and the limitations of generalising a 'Georgian School'. Brooke went so far as to coin a term, 'the Heart-criers', for those poets among the Georgian anthologies who 'believe all poetry ought to be short, simple, naïve, and

¹³ The production formed part of the Milton tercentenary organised by Christ's College. See *The Letters of Rupert Brooke*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), pp. 119–20.

¹⁴ *The Letters of Rupert Brooke*, pp. 196–97.

a cry from the heart': he associates the early Frances with such affectations of innocence, but he takes pains to distinguish himself from such a group.¹⁵

Although Brooke's criticism initially seems to have been supportive and developmental, Frances ended up being stung by it, especially by the 'Heart-criers' comment, when she read it after his death in Marsh's 1918 memoir of Brooke. Marsh was quoting a letter Brooke had sent him in 1912, which included a parodic triolet Brooke had composed and shared with Frances in a private jest at how she might rewrite Shakespeare's sonnets, and which Marsh also chose to print.¹⁶ The effect was now very different: 'I cried bitterly over the Heart-Cry Triolet letter, the triolet over which I'd laughed so much, when R. showed it me', Frances wrote to Marsh in July 1918 after its publication.¹⁷ Perhaps her increasing emphasis on impersonality was in part an attempt to make amends for this unfair critique, which left her regretting her 'v. small if sincere penny whistles'.¹⁸

Yet, at least in his comments to Frances directly, Brooke does appear to have had a constructive influence. His flagging up of the subtleties that may paradoxically lie within the most effective simplicity in poetry not only anticipates that which is best in Frances's later work, but also might stand as a corrective to those critics who would use the term 'simplicity' as a catch-all for Frances's poetry, as if it demands no further scrutiny. *The Dublin Magazine*, reviewing *Travelling Home* in 1967, for example, finds 'unaffected simplicity' a constant in Frances's poems.¹⁹ Muir, on the other hand, is more cautious: 'By the assurance of her art she achieves an apparent simplicity'; and *The Listener* appreciates that successful simplicity might be hard won: 'Frances Cornford is that rare thing among writers today: an artist whose

¹⁵ Letter to Edward Marsh, quoted by Marsh in *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke: With a Memoir* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1918), p. lxxviii. Reproduced in full in *The Letters of Rupert Brooke*, pp. 361–62.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Letter to Eddie Marsh, 30 July 1918. Frances Cornford: Letters to Sir Edward Marsh, Cambridge University Library GBR/0012/MS Add. 9280.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *The Dublin Magazine*, 24.2, April–June 1949, p. 64.

simplicity is the result of a long and eager struggle with the secrets of word and form.’²⁰

Kathleen Raine would later testify that, in her own experience, this was indeed Frances’s approach : ‘[Frances] almost went word for word with me in my poetry trying to hammer out — it was really hammering out — a simplicity.’²¹

A recurring and somewhat cryptic concern in the reviews is with authenticity: ‘Was the simplicity of the verse of Frances Cornford restrictive — or true?’ asks *Contact* in 1961, taking simplicity as a given.²² Timothy Rogers, writing in *The London Magazine*, likewise sets a premium on an undefined notion of truth, in believing that ‘Although [the poems] hover sometimes just a little precariously between a true and false simplicity, that very precariousness seems to enhance one’s appreciation of the best’.²³ Again it appears that simplicity is a given, with ‘false’ here framed as a negative, presumably referring to a perceived misrepresentation rather than to the concealment of complexities. Joy Grant is the originator of this view, in *Harold Monro and the Poetry Bookshop*, but here with simplicity’s success being viewed as wholly subjective: ‘Mrs Cornford’s work hovers somewhere between true and false simplicity, according to your taste.’²⁴

Despite the tendency of such diagnoses to be dismissive — even as they are attempting praise — and the impossibility of definitively settling such debates about authenticity in literary representation, closer scrutiny of what the detected simplicity might consist of, its functions and its limits, may offer insight, not least in the light of Brooke’s interest in admixtures of the simple and the complex, and of Frances’s own stated pursuit of the familiar and the strange. The movement, mixture, and surprise to be encountered along

²⁰ *The Listener*, 41 (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1949), p. 372.

²¹ In Rosalie Murphy and James Vinson (eds), *Contemporary Poets of the English Language* (St James Press, 1974), p. 348.

²² William H. Ryan, Evan S. Connell, Jr., and Calvin Kentfield (eds), *Contact: The San Francisco Collection of New Writing, Art and Ideas*, 2.7 (1961), p. 20.

²³ Timothy Rogers, ‘Frances Cornford (1886–1960)’, *The London Magazine*, 32.5–6 (August–September 1992), p. 107.

²⁴ Joy Grant, *Harold Monro and the Poetry Bookshop* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 115.

this exploration are captured in beautiful lines from ‘Towards the Coast’: ‘We leave the intricate earth [...] | The road, the dust, the windmill, all are touched | With a simplicity of coming strangeness.’²⁵

‘Missing so much and so much’: The Light Verse and Its Responses

‘To a Fat Lady Seen from the Train’ is the poem for which Frances would become best known, and which she would come most to regret.²⁶ It first appeared in *Poems* (1910), and was frequently reprinted, becoming a standard in poetry anthologies as well as being much parodied. Joy Grant suggests that the poem’s appeal may lie in ‘the surprising way in which it expressed an adult thought in childish language’, the surprise being heightened in its original context of poems in some measure ‘written for a juvenile public’.²⁷ It provides an excellent example of how simplicity in Frances’s work can be deceptive without necessarily being dishonest: with its plain diction and repetitive lines the poem creates the illusion of transparency; yet its questions remain unanswered and their motivation and tone are ambiguous:

O why do you walk through the fields in gloves,
 Missing so much and so much?
 O fat white woman whom nobody loves,
 Why do you walk through the fields in gloves,
 When the grass is soft as the breast of doves
 And shivering-sweet to the touch?
 O why do you walk through the fields in gloves,
 Missing so much and so much?²⁸

It is unsurprising that the poem has been received in very different ways. One of the first reviews, in *The Nation* in 1911, describes with a maliciousness of its own the poem’s ‘suave, relentless malice [...] (quite justifiable malice, however)’, claiming that this might be

²⁵ In *Different Days* (Hogarth Press, 1928), p. 48.

²⁶ See, for example, ‘Views and Recollections of a Sunday Poet’, 27 March 1956, Darwin and Cornford Papers, Add. 58387.

²⁷ *Harold Monro and the Poetry Bookshop*, p. 115.

²⁸ *Poems* (The Priory Press and Bowes & Bowes, 1910).

‘fundamentally feminine’.²⁹ Among the failures of insight of the gender essentialism here is the failure to look to poetic tradition: one of the poem’s surprises is that it taps into a male tradition of singling out corpulence in women that goes back at least as far as John Skelton.³⁰ The insistence on the poem’s justification is also misplaced: the poem precisely does not justify its terms, but rather implies criticism within its rhetorical questions from a wholly subjective position.

Jacqueline Wilson’s changing response to the poem neatly summarises its ability to make us do a double take. In *Poems that make Grown Women Cry*, she describes how as a teenager she ‘thought it so searingly sad that the fat white woman was missing out on life’, whereas now she ‘take[s] issue with its pitying tone. Why is the narrator so sure she’s interpreting the woman’s circumstances?’³¹ The honesty of the poem, we might say, rests on whether the speaker’s presumptions are taken to be those of the poem itself, or whether the poem can be seen as dramatising the speaker’s impositions, giving us pause for thought. That its tone can be read so differently, from malice through to pathos — and in both these readers with an investment in that malice or pathos — demonstrates its capacity to lead us strongly, but not always in the same direction. As such, it is a poem whose simultaneously open and closed ways of seeing might, to the vigilant reader, counterpoint each other to interesting effect.

It is not a stretch though to read the poem’s voice as duetting with the young Frances herself. A dislike of the clothes of their childhood was common to the Darwin children: Gwen Raverat devotes a whole chapter of *Period Piece* to clothes as ‘a major cause of rows,

²⁹ *The Nation*, 9 (1911), p. 228.

³⁰ See Elena Levy-Navarro, *The Culture of Obesity in Early and Late Modernity: Body Image in Jonson, Middleton, and Skelton* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 45–66.

³¹ Anthony and Ben Holden (eds), *Poems that Make Grown Women Cry: 100 Women on the Words that Move Them* (Simon & Schuster, 2016), p. 83.

naughtiness, misery and all unpleasantness, right through my whole youth’;³² ‘all the fashions from 1890 till 1914 seemed to me then, and seem to me still, preposterous, hideous and uncomfortable’ (although she notes that ‘Frances alone had a secret wish to be prettily dressed’) (*PP*, pp. 255–56). In a curious echo of Frances’s poem she describes how ‘my heart went out to a fat French lady we met once in a train, who said she was going into the country for a holiday “pour prendre mes aises sans corset”’ (*PP*, p. 259). Frances’s poem, which Raverat told her she ‘simply love[d]’,³³ might be understood in part as a rejection of late Victorian and Edwardian custom, with its stifling of the senses and above all of any direct experience of nature: the joyous opposite of these fashions in *Period Piece* are the games the children play outside around the river; opposing the white gloves are many poems in a late romantic style that do experience an idyllic nature ‘shivering-sweet to the touch’. The poem then by extension signals the poetic values Frances holds, and would continue to hold, dear. But there is also an inescapable snobbery in the address of ‘woman’ here — she is not as Raverat’s ‘lady’ — that may mock her pretensions to this dress, and which ends up, if we invest in this speaker, enforcing the class values of this particular period.

Grant is right that ‘To a Fat Lady’ stands apart from the rest of *Poems*, but its mingling of the adult and the childlike might itself be a symptom of its youthfulness: we might recall the riotousness of the parodies in Jane Austen’s juvenilia. More immediately the poem tallies with the humour of the annual Darwin Christmas play, written and performed to the family then in Cambridge by the children, and often gently mocking family members.³⁴ Frances wrote many of the verses for these entertainments. The limits to which the children could push the parody were being tested: in *Period Piece*, Raverat describes how one skit was

³² Gwen Raverat, *Period Piece: A Cambridge Childhood* (Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 253, hereafter *PP*. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the main text.

³³ Letter to Frances Cornford, 1910, Darwin and Cornford Papers, Add. 58398.

³⁴ See *PP*, pp. 248–52. Festive parodies continued up until Frances’s marriage to Francis in 1909, for which event Raverat wrote a play whose title was sometimes too-well heeded: *The Importance of Being Frank*.

added by her younger sister Margaret, sending up ‘a certain Miss S., who was rather apt to impart information to us, in a voice that went up in a pedagogic manner, at the end of each sentence’ (*PP*, p. 149). Frances unwisely suggested that Margaret perform this in front of Miss S.’s great friend their Aunt Bessy, the offence caused resulting in children going home ‘in tears, simply shattered by remorse’.

Although atypical in its risk-taking, there is much here that is common with later work; not just the embrace of nature, but also the format of observation from a distance, and the interest in figures in isolation. Leaving elements unspoken is also characteristic, although the imposition is not. The most cutting of the parodies, G. K. Chesterton’s, from a 1932 sequence of poems that write back to poets from the perspective of their silent subjects, is motivated by a perceived abuse of privilege, and exposes the hypocrisy of a speaker who is hardly experiencing nature directly herself:

Why do you rush through the field in trains,
 Guessing so much and so much.
 Why do you flash through the flowery meads,
 Fat-head poet that nobody reads;
 And why do you know such a frightful lot
 About people in gloves as such?³⁵

The lesson had already been learnt, so that by the time of *Autumn Midnight* in 1923, Frances was ventriloquising the voices of babies and old women, and in her ‘Notes for a Talk’ she would state her desire to show the reader what it feels like to be ‘old, a child or an animal’.³⁶

The triolet, in spite of Brooke’s mockery, is a form that she continued to explore. Already in *Poems* (1910) she was putting it to varied uses, to the extent that a review in *Country Life*, despite the humorous poems, finds the volume dominated by the ‘tragic note of early youth’, and holds that the light French forms are put to ‘too grave’ a use, with the result

³⁵ G. K. Chesterton, ‘The Fat White Woman Speaks’, *The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1980), p. 37.

³⁶ Add. 58385.

that the triolets fall ‘flat’.³⁷ The reviewer might rather be detecting a deliberate, bittersweet mismatch.

The triolet, as a form whose repetitions allow for the turning around of not much more than a single moment or thought, clearly appealed to Frances’s interest in presenting isolated people and occurrences. The much later ‘A Montreux Hotel’ seems to comment on the potential for these singular moments to be elevated to the status of epiphany:

The waiter brought a vision by mistake,
I only ordered coffee and a roll.
Breakfast is all you hope for when you wake;
The waiter brought a vision by mistake,
For there, through slatted shutters, was a lake,
O pure, O placid, like a seraph’s soul.
The waiter brought a vision by mistake,
I only ordered coffee and a roll.³⁸

The contrast of the romantic phrasing of the sixth line, as the vision embedded within the mundane, at once lifts this moment of pure stillness, and gently mocks it: a particularly successful strategy given that elsewhere Frances’s antiquated diction can sometimes appear strained. This triolet shows that light verse can say something meaningful — even in teasing grand meaning.

‘That special freshness or awe’: Frances’s and Gwen Raverat’s Ways of Seeing

‘Both of us are best when we are romantic fairy tale country sort of people’, Gwen Raverat wrote in a letter to Frances, pointing to ‘a real connection between your work and mine’.³⁹ One point of connection is in their particular ways of seeing the world. In *Period Piece*, Raverat punctuates her account of her childhood and adolescence with several extraordinary, pivotal moments of sight and insight, in which the everyday becomes charged with

³⁷ *Country Life*, 25 (Country Life, 1910), p. 571.

³⁸ Frances Cornford, *Collected Poems* (The Cresset Press, 1954), p. 107, hereafter *CP*. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the main text.

³⁹ Letter to Frances Cornford, GBR/0012/MS Add. 10410.

significance. At Down, whose perfection becomes a Darwin ‘axiom’, the ‘large round water-worn pebbles’ on the path are ‘literally, *adored*; worshipped’ by the young Raverat: ‘This passion made me feel quite sick sometimes’ but ‘it is probably the most important thing in life’ (*PP*, p. 141). Not only are they what ‘makes life worth living’, they are also ‘the driving force behind the artist’s need to create’ (*PP*, p. 142). Even without the precedent of James Joyce, epiphany is the fitting term for these heightened experiences of the everyday and their quasi-religious presentation; as with Joyce too, they coincide with an awakening of artistic sensibilities. They also overlap with the vivid awareness of Virginia Woolf’s ‘moments of being’, or, earlier, with Walter Pater’s perception of the momentary meeting the timeless in the paintings of the school of Giorgione.⁴⁰

In Raverat, these moments of transcendence are shown to achieve their effects through their freedom from the human world: they are moments apart, moments of escape: the Down descriptions are introduced after reference to the children’s cries of “‘Visitors! Danger!’”, and running away at the sound of the door bell (*PP*, p. 141). Retaining their charge as memories, Raverat tells us that these moments will last ‘Long after I have forgotten all my human loves’. A later episode makes the contrast with the oppressiveness of society still more explicit. At nearly sixteen, Raverat pleads with her parents to be sent away to school, craving ‘a breath of fresh air blowing into my life from the world outside’; but when she goes she instead finds there ‘poison gas’, again yearning for ‘an air which I could breath’ (*PP*, p. 69). The ‘one vision’ which she takes away from this time cuts into the stifling oppression: ‘a flash, seen through the garden hedge, of some sheep in the next field, with the frosty, winter light running along their backs. It seemed like something from another world:

⁴⁰ Pater refers to the school of Giorgione’s ‘exquisite pauses in time, in which, arrested thus, we seem to be spectators of all the fulness of existence, and which are like some consummate extract or quintessence of life’ in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Literature* (Macmillan, 1873), p. 149.

the real world, to which I should escape some day. It kept me alive' (*PP*, p. 74). The real strikes with such force because of its seclusion from the worlds of society and civilisation.

These special moments almost always take place outside, but with a notable exception: the young Raverat is 'desperate with love for the blisters in the dark red paint on the nursery window-sills at Cambridge'; although importantly it is decay that is here celebrated, again a rupturing of the oppressive emblems of society (*PP*, p. 142). One effect of the early 'poison-gas' sensations is felt later in life when Raverat tells us that once, whilst calling on some strangers, and awaiting the lady of the house, she found the 'alien feeling of the furniture' so 'appalling' that she was compelled to climb out of a drawing-room window to escape (*PP*, p. 70). But an epiphany of a slightly different sort involves the meeting of both inside and out. The chapter on 'Propriety' closes with an experience that she can only 'try to describe': the six-year-old Raverat leaves an outdoor luncheon to return indoors; from the nursery window she watches the party from afar. The voices of the men and women are 'in a pattern of light and dark', and then there is another contrast, 'with the sun shining, it began to rain': 'And suddenly the world stood still. It simply stopped, and I was quite alone and outside. I did not belong, I was separate, just looking on; *outside*' (*PP*, p. 117). It is the first of many such episodes she tells us: 'it was always terrifying and lonely, and seemed to point the contrast between ME and all those other friendly people, who sat there talking under the trees' (*PP*, p. 118).

The emphasis on the liberation to be found in moments of isolation, and in the actual — 'another world' being in fact 'the real world' — is best understood in the context of remarks made earlier on in the 'Propriety' chapter: Raverat refers to 1850–1914 as a period when 'the English middle classes were locked up in a great fortress of unreality and pretence; and no one who has not been brought up inside the fortress can guess how thick the walls were, or how little of the sky outside could be seen through the loopholes' (*PP*, p. 104). It is

her knowledge from within which enables her now to expose its workings, and which in retrospect seems to lie at the root of the visions and the desire to escape. Much of the darkness of Raverat's youth, as Frances Spalding has shown, is missing from *Period Piece*; yet there are these undercurrents running through it, counterpointing its sweetness.⁴¹ Its final note cuts emphatically through the nostalgia, describing the liberation that in old age she 'may at last be allowed to say: Oh dear, Oh dear, how horrid it was being young, and how nice it is being old and not having to mind what people think' (*PP*, p. 282).

These elements of *Period Piece* not only accord with so much of the thematic content of Frances's poetry, but contextualise and in some ways account for its particular ways of seeing. The contrasts and counterpoints of nearness and distance, of the sweet and the sad and of the free and the restrained, speak of both her personal circumstances and a world in transition. She shares with her cousin too a romantic artist's eye tempered, perhaps, by the Darwinian eye of scientific observation.

In his entry on Frances in *The Facts on File Companion to British Poetry, 1900 to the Present*, James Persoon argues that the sense of in-betweenness in her work might, metaphorically, be related to her dual Darwin and Wordsworth ancestry: she is 'heir to two of the most noteworthy and iconic figures of the 19th century, who often were seen to be in opposition to each other', and is 'halfway between' the two in being 'a poet, but a very practical, clear-headed one, who prefers the precise observation of small moments (such as Darwin's finches) to grand Wordsworthian pronouncements.'⁴² They turn their attentions to a poem whose very subject is ancestral resemblance, 'Family Likeness', from *Travelling Home*; but find it also to be a poem from which Frances herself is 'curiously buried', the 'I'

⁴¹ See Frances Spalding, *Gwen Raverat: Friends, Family and Affections* (Pimlico, 2004).

⁴² James Persoon, 'Frances Cornford', *The Facts on File Companion to British Poetry, 1900 to the Present*, ed. by James Persoon and Robert R. Watson (Facts on File, 2009), pp. 98-99.

of the poem ‘surrounded early and late by images of the family’ that sound ‘quite male’.⁴³

Whereas the poem at first appears conventional in its ‘polite and self-effacing diction; the stability and comfort of rhyme; the “poetic feel” of such a synecdoche as *brow*’, attending to this positioning of the speaker reveals the ‘in-betweenness or halfway quality of her status’.⁴⁴

We might go further, and suggest that rather than purely being figurative brows, these are also necessarily the literal brows of young and old, whose differences fail to mask the hereditary connection: the poem’s dual ways of seeing are those inscribed in the looking ‘Through microscope or at a picture-book’ (*CP*, p. 81). These slippages between the literal and the figurative, and moreover between the conventional and the exceptional, create out of the past a new way of seeing.

The epiphany, then, is an important notion too for Frances’s poetry. When addressing the question of poetic subjects in her *Women’s Hour* talk, Frances argues against any exclusive poetic domain, advising the aspiring poet that ‘Anything that strikes you with that special freshness or awe with which things often strike children, is a right subject for you.’⁴⁵ Much rests in her own poetry on whether the mundane can undergo such transfiguration and yield special insights, or whether it leads nowhere and becomes stultifying; and this is true perhaps not just for the subjects, but also for the poems themselves. The potential limitation of the avoidance of grand subjects was picked up on in one of her first reviews, by Edward Thomas writing in the *Morning Post*, in which he describes the early poems as being ‘of a fresh and joyous spirit’ but suggests that ‘So far Mrs Cornford has not set this spirit anything

⁴³ The subject is of course itself Darwinian; Darwin wrote of ‘inherited habits’ in his metaphysical notebook, and the theory of pangenesis: of how characteristics could be passed from generation to generation. In 1838 Darwin wrote: ‘My father has seen innumerable cases of people taking after their parents, when the latter died so long before, that it is extremely improbable that they should have imitated.’ C. R. Darwin, *Notebook M*, Cambridge University Library, Darwin Archive, MS DAR 125.

⁴⁴ *The Facts on File Companion to British Poetry*.

⁴⁵ ‘Guest of the Week’.

to do but to utter brief ejaculations of a lyrical kind’;⁴⁶ while her poetic scope did grow more ambitious, it nonetheless remained for the most part within the parameters of the personally observed. Crucial to the workings of these transformations then is the individual self that does the observation; the tendency towards isolationism can both effect and limit the process of transformation.

‘The blundering and cruel ways of nature’: Poems of Place and of the Natural World

One of Frances’s first successful poems, ‘Autumn Morning at Cambridge’ (from 1902) is marked, gently, by division. The poem is reminiscent of early Yeats, in particular ‘The Song of Wandering Aengus’, with its plucking of apples and glittering in rhyming couplets; but Frances’s symbolism is more conventional. The speaker ‘pulled an apple down’ as ‘all the bells were ringing’, so that, with the church context, Eve and Eden are called to mind (*CP*, p. 17). In the second stanza, which moves predominantly into dactyls and anapests, the wider world emerges, postlapsarian perhaps, with its fallen ‘old leaves’ being swept up; and another world still is glimpsed as ‘the men go to lecture with the wind in their gowns’: a male world of learning from which the speaker appears cut off.

‘Autumn Morning at Cambridge’ importantly introduces the writing of place, specifically Cambridge, which would remain a primary interest, together with the pastoral mode. But the association of her poetry with the theories of her grandfather is first made explicit not in a nature poem but in a rare city poem, the villanelle ‘London Streets’, from 1908, which takes its refrain, ‘O Providence, I will not praise | Your blundering and cruel ways’ (*CP*, p. 21) from Darwin’s 1856 exclamation, ‘What a book a devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horridly cruel works of nature!’

⁴⁶ Edward Thomas, *Morning Post*, 31 March 1910. Reproduced in *Edward Thomas: Prose Writings: A Selected Edition: Volume IV: Writings on Poetry*, ed. by Edna Longley (Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 439.

(contracted to ‘The blundering and cruel ways of nature’ in the poem’s epigraph).⁴⁷ The villanelle form’s associations with the pastoral tradition are heavily ironised, with its repetitions providing no stability but rather correlating with the oppressive ubiquitousness of the devastation. Its visions, invoked in the negative, are of ‘This city where the dun fog stays, | These tired faces in the rain’; ‘And all men’s miserable days, | And all their ugliness and pain’ (*CP*, pp. 20–21). The apostrophe to Providence is sarcastic; the rejection of religion is made more explicit still in the refusal to ‘join the hymns men raise | Like slaves’. The speaker takes some solace in her ability to ‘love the truth and see it plain’: in its insistence on a brutal realism and its implied application of the principles of natural selection to contemporary human society, it corresponds with late-nineteenth-century Naturalism.

This poem is almost without parallel in the later oeuvre, but its ways of seeing inform and underlie many of the later visions of the natural world. One other dark city poem, ‘Apartments’, appears in *Different Days* (1928), and is reminiscent of William Morris in ‘The Message of the March Wind’. The poem offers the possibility of deliverance from the dirt and grime by means of the pathetic fallacy: ‘the forgiving sun’, which has risen ‘in pure sky’ moves from the green world to enter ‘the city room, that has no pride, | Goldenly’, bringing a message to the decay: ‘And to the blistered washing-stand says: Hope’ (*CP*, p. 46). Like Thomas Hardy (a family friend), Frances’s continued use of the pathetic fallacy in a post-Darwinian world is ambivalent; at times it can achieve a particular poignancy in exposing the romantic conceit as a vain protest against the overwhelming arbitrariness of nature; but then again, it might also be read as an invitation to cultivate empathy, needed more than ever when Darwinian principles have laid bare the workings of nature. Even in the bleak rejection of ‘Country Idyll’ (from ‘Poems 1948-1953’ in the *Collected Poems*), with its starkest use of

⁴⁷ Quoted in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, ed. by Russell Re Manning (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 460.

ironic form, there is a residual notion of the conceit in not disavowing that a cow might have ‘dignity’ and ‘hope’; or perhaps this is no conceit at all:

Deep in the stable tied with rope,
The cow has neither dignity nor hope.

With ugly, puzzled, hot despair
She needs the calf that is not there,
And mourns and mourns him to unheeding air.

But if the sleeping farmer hears,
He pulls the blanket higher round his ears. (*CP*, p. 99)

In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin had advised that ‘In observing animals, we are not so likely to be biassed by our imagination; and we may feel safe that their expressions are not conventional’.⁴⁸ He is attentive to the ‘cry of distress’, and notes of cows in particular how ‘The mother calls incessantly for her lost young ones; for instance, a cow for her calf’.⁴⁹ Perhaps, then, the poem might be viewed more literally, advancing Darwin’s theses; either way, the poem is deeply affective, and extends the respect Frances’s poetry gives to marginalised subjects.

A poem composed in 1907, just before the Darwinian villanelle, ‘Pre-Existence’, is conspicuously without any sense of change in world view, even as it recalls Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ as a poem set on a shore which questions the world. The speaker, playing with pebbles and sand as she watches the tide, dreams:

How all of this had been before,
How ages far away
I lay on some forgotten shore
As here I lie today.

The waves came shining up the sands,
As here today they shine;
And in my pre-Pelasgian hands
The sand was warm and fine.

⁴⁸ C. R. Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (John Murray, 1872), p. 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

I have forgotten whence I came
 Or where my home might be,
 Or by what strange and savage name
 I called that thundering sea.

I only know the sun shone down
 As it still shines today,
 And friendly in my fingers brown
 The little pebbles lay. (*CP*, p. 19)

It is the continuity with a distant ‘savage’ time that is unsettling here, and it leaves open its import: there is the possibility of a gesture to *The Descent of Man* in the collapsing of a ‘savage-civilised’ binary,⁵⁰ but equally a cyclical view of history could be being called up in a manner more akin to Yeats. The penultimate stanza is highly effective in its use of the present perfect tense to disorientate: the ‘I’ of the dream seems to merge with that of the present.

In her memoir, Frances explained that the use of the term ‘pre-Pelasgian’ fell within her rule of diction because of its usage being not uncommon within her circle: ‘I wrote a poem about pre-existence, in which I said how in my pre-Pelasgian hands, the sands were warm and fine. The adjective was not a learned affectation, I had got used to hearing talk of Jane [Harrison] and Francis’s work, as well as Professor Ridgeway’s, that it swam naturally into my verse.’⁵¹ ‘Pelasgian’ is a Greek term, used several times by Homer, and is usually taken to signify those who preceded the Greeks, or the indigenous population of the Aegean.⁵² To be pre-Pelasgian therefore is to go back into the unknown, and that Frances chooses this term rather than ‘prehistoric’ importantly forges a link with classical culture, even as it ranges back still further; and with Homeric epic, even in the midst of a short lyrical poem. As Frances reveals in her memoir (see Chapter 4), she moved with ease amongst the classics, and this is a further rich tradition on which her poetry draws.

⁵⁰ See, for example, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (John Murray, 1871), p. 35.

⁵¹ Frances Cornford, *Memoir*, p. 29. GBR/0012/MS Add. 10410, published for the first time in this volume.

⁵² The classical scholar Gilbert Murray, another Cornford family friend, cites the etymology as being from ‘Pelasgoi’, meaning ‘the next people beyond the border’, and therefore those who are at once near and strange, in *The Rise of the Greek Epic* (Oxford University Press, 1907), p. 43.

‘On the Cliff’ (from ‘Poems 1948–1953’), enacts a mind stirred from stillness in contemplating humanity’s relation to nature:

O sky, grass, earth!
How calm it is to lie
Stretched here, unloved, unhated,
By your complete indifference reprov[ed].

But earth, grass, sky,
Were we not once by birth
Closely related?

Unquiet creature, No!
Cousins perhaps, yet very long ago
And many, many, many times removed. (*CP*, p. 97)

Nature’s ‘reprove’ might be to the vanity of assuming an anthropocentric purpose in the workings of the world, with the light irony of an attitude to humankind still being imputed to nature in the personification. There is an echo of Hardy’s ‘Hap’ in the idea of even a malignant controlling force being absent from the universe. Frances’s speaker appears to gain solace completely at odds with Hardy’s; but then the calm certainty of the first stanza gives way to a questioning of the apparent disconnection, that sees the speaker transformed into an ‘Unquiet creature’, the corollary of being ‘unloved, unhated’. What is this close relationality that might qualify nature’s indifference? The emphasis on genealogy suggests not so much a reference to belief systems of the past, as to Darwinian heredity, which would also explain the last stanza’s reply, pointing to the long distant past, and many stages of remove. The initial gentle paradox of nature’s ‘indifference reprov[ing]’ now becomes magnified in the reply of this concluding stanza, which imagines a voice beyond the internal dialogue, of nature itself responding to man: the apostrophe is answered through personification, but rather than purely ironizing such stylised poetic devices, the twist here is that nature speaks as a way of reinforcing Darwinian evolutionary principles. The poem, despite its elliptical brevity, has great range in extending the terms of Hardy’s engagement with nature, and is

particularly successful in reinforcing its debate through the residual patterns of rhyme and rhythm. It leads us far beyond the ‘romantic fairy tale’ view of nature.

‘The human chaos of the night’: Poems of War

Frances’s most explicit engagement with the cataclysmic upheavals of her time comes in a cluster of poems in *Travelling Home* that relate to the Second World War. These are not political poems, and deal with the war for the most part tangentially; they are honest and direct though in the way that they focus on that which is visible to her — young men about to be sent off to fight, the grief of relatives of the dead. They spoke in particular to the women left behind;⁵³ acknowledging this significance, Catherine Reilly’s anthology *Chaos of the Night: Women’s Poetry and Verse of the Second World War* takes its title from ‘Autumn Blitz’:

Unshaken world! Another day of light
After the human chaos of the night;
Although a heart in mendless horror grieves,
What calmly yellow, gently falling leaves! (*CP*, p. 88)

Rather than appearing triumphant, the poem speaks of the strangeness of life going on and nature appearing unchanged even amidst the bombing: it recalls the recurring trope of the sun shining on devastation in Greek tragedies. Another four-line poem, ‘Parting in Wartime’, which achieves added poignancy in following ‘Parting in Peacetime’, makes this classical precedent explicit:

How long ago Hector took off his plume,
Not wanting that his little son should cry,
Then kissed his sad Andromache goodbye –
And now we three in Euston waiting-room. (*CP*, p. 86)

For Jane Dowson, this is mock epic with ‘a sleight-of-hand deflation of mythologised classical heroes’ (*SP*, p. xvi); yet this might also be read as a touching parallel between the

⁵³ Jane Dowson refers to the ‘fan mail’ Frances received on account of these poems in *Women’s Poetry of 30s: A Critical Anthology* (Routledge, 1996), p. 44.

present and a moment of familial intimacy before battle that occurs in Book 6 of the *Iliad*.

‘From a Letter to America on a Visit to Sussex: Spring 1942’ extends these effects in an excellent example of Frances’s later attempts at a freer form, describing the military manoeuvres around Cambridge amidst unchanging nature, beginning: ‘How simply violent things | Happen, is strange.’ (*CP*, p. 87). It again makes a classical link in foreseeing that ‘soon, | At home on any usual afternoon, | High overhead | May come the Erinyes winging.’

The War puts pressure on Frances’s pastoral mode, and its insouciance is put to unsettling effect: ‘A Wartime Sketch’ is an address to the willows of the Cam, and the longed-for calm seems to come not so much with the end of the war, as with the observing soldier’s death:

Drink the unflowing waters with green hair
You Cambridge willows, calm and unaware;
Soon he will vanish like a summer’s midge,
That calm-struck soldier leaning on the bridge,
And things be always as they always were. (*CP*, p. 102)

The apparent callousness is undercut by a bitter straining of the syntax, almost a parody with its delaying of the referents and repetitive last line that tells us that, more probably, nothing will ever be the same. The comparison with the midge, startlingly dismissive, depends for its full effect on its allusion to Wilfred Owen’s ‘Spring Offensive’, where the ‘wasp and midge’ precede the devastation of the battlefield.⁵⁴

In ‘Casualties’, the insignificance of human life in the face of war is powerfully rendered in the ‘War-god’ which ‘uses’ flesh ‘Like any gadget of a great machine’; this poem does give us a sense of transformation in making a stark comparison with the wounded ones’ childhood ‘flesh once pitied where a gnat had been’, the insect here standing in contrast to a permanent destruction (*CP*, p. 88). In ‘Soldiers on the Platform’ too change is being enacted: again there is a brutality, mimicking the process of war, in the description of the ‘young, bare,

⁵⁴ Wilfred Owen, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p. 99.

bullock faces': the conscripts are as calves to the slaughter, except the poet sets up a more explicit distancing from this façade as we are given access to their minds: united in their isolation, each thinks himself alone with the secret knowledge that 'in the midst of life we are in death' (*CP*, p. 88).

Frances would have known the dramatic power of these moments before disaster not just from the poets of the Great War, but through the fate of her own poem 'Youth', on Rupert Brooke, published in 1910 in *Poems*, but which contributed to his standing as the 'Lost Flower of Youth' after his death in 1915:⁵⁵

A young Apollo, golden-haired,
Stands dreaming on the verge of strife,
Magnificently unprepared
For the long littleness of life. (*CP*, p. 19)

Frances also wrote an elegy on Brooke's death, 'No Immortality' (and later renamed 'Contemporaries'), dated April 1915 (he died on April 23rd), which pits time's decay against Brooke's 'timeless beauty', and replaces Apollo with a forgotten 'Greek boy', pointing to life's futility if 'on you | Can such oblivion fall' (*CP*, p. 37). The 'long littleness', then, comes to stand for the surviving, 'timeless beauty' of his youth.

One of the most substantial of the wartime poems, 'Figures on the Platform', demonstrates Frances's capacity to move from close observation into broader meditation. The poem moves from the specificity of wartime conscription, observed during a specific journey, out into allegory of existential homelessness: 'Even the kit-bag and the trundled can | Are cared-for and considered more than man | Who has been travelling since his life began' (*CP*, p. 97). The man the speaker's gaze follows 'Envies the soul of the baby on his knee, | Escaped in peace from its small house of sense', and this longing for escape extends in the

⁵⁵ See James Corsan, *For Poulton and England: The Life and Times of an Edwardian Rugby Hero*, p. 309.

bleak last stanza to a death wish. We move from the Eliotic conceit of the 'sip' of tea holding 'no hope' and 'tasting sad, of spoon', to a rhetorically far grander vision of the universe:

O, if our journey's end were coming soon,
But will it ever come in a thousand hours?
We are the prey of adamantine powers,
Remote, uncaring, cold, yet easily crossed;
They may not punish us for being lost
If we remain their puppets, twitched and tossed,
They may not quite malevolently mind
Our presence here, if hopelessly resigned. (CP, p. 98)

The troubled journey's end might stand not just for death, but for self-knowledge, continually thwarted amidst the tangle of these all-controlling, arbitrary agents: the forces borrowed from Thomas Hardy for the nature poems now lend themselves to the Weltschmerz of the War.

Against the 'Poetess': Gender and Personal Poems

The critical response to the poetry has made much of the fact that Frances was a woman. At worst this has manifested itself in dismissive gender stereotyping, as in the review in *The Nation*. Brooke would satirize the foolishness of such reviews in a letter to Frances where he anticipates the response to their first volumes:

The *Daily Chronicle*, or some such, that reviews verse in lumps, will notice thirty-four minor poets in one day, ending with *Thoughts in Verse on Many Occasions, by a Person of Great Sensibility*, by F. Cornford, and *Dead Pansy-Leaves, and other Flowerets* by R. Brooke; and it will say 'Mr Cornford has some pretty thoughts; but Miss Brooke is always intolerable' (they always guess the sex wrong).⁵⁶

Above all, Frances hated the term 'poetess', writing in the 50s that 'She, we all feel, is somebody with far too much fervent, personal emotion per square yard, so to speak.'⁵⁷

The waning of interest in Frances's work between the 60s and the 90s meant that the newly available feminist critical discourses were late in being applied to her work. Jane

⁵⁶ Rupert Brooke, letter to Frances Cornford, quoted by Marsh in *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke*, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 36. Reviewing *Autumn Midnight* in 1923, *The Nation and Athenaeum* refers to Frances as a 'poetess' who 'writes of children, houses and furniture, gardens and hills and sand-dunes, and knows more than a thing or two about such things'. Darwin and Cornford Papers, Add. 58389.

Dowson is the critic in recent times who has done most not just to bring Frances back into the limelight, but to bring about a reassessment of the role gender plays in her work. In *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry*, co-authored with Alice Entwistle, she includes Frances in her consideration of 'lyrical androgyny', arguing that Frances had 'an acute problem with female authorship', and citing her belief that 'when writers enter into [the creative] state of mind they are neither male nor female, they are androgynous, though fortunately the voice in which they describe the regions from which they return will be either a man's or a woman's.'⁵⁸ This 'androgynous' element might also be understood as a manifestation of the wide early-twentieth-century desire to get away from the notion of the author as direct presence. As Dowson concedes, deep anxieties about gender are 'not immediately obvious in her poems.'

Frances believed that anthologies of women's poetry perpetuated the marginalising notion of the 'poetess'. Recent anthologies have sought redress. Frances is among those poets in Fleur Adcock's *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry* who demonstrate 'intellectual "wit"' which, according to Dowson, serves to counter the stereotype of sentimentality.⁵⁹ Dowson included Frances in both an anthology, *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, and a study of women poets who 'resist femininity',⁶⁰ maintaining that her poems are 'compassionate without being sentimental',⁶¹ and that she 'was "fiercely committed to avoiding subjectivity" (*SP*, p. xxii). Yet Frances did also write poems that could be categorised as sentimental, and many that put different kinds of subjectivity to work.

The difficulty in making Frances stand in for any systematic argument about gender has much to do with her in-betweenness: as Dowson notes, her poems about women display

⁵⁸ *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry*, p. 36.

⁵⁹ See Dowson, 'Poetry 1920–1945', *The History of British Women's Writing, 1920–1945*: vol. 8, ed. by Maroula Joannou (Palgrave Macmillan), p. 161; and *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry*, ed. by Fleur Adcock (Faber and Faber, 1987).

⁶⁰ See Dowson, *Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910–1939: Resisting Femininity* (Ashgate, 2002).

⁶¹ *Women's Poetry of 30s*, p. 45.

‘mixed feelings’ and ‘dual perspective[s]’;⁶² Frances’s stated intention of combining personal and impersonal modes helps to explain why she can appear direct to some and distant to others. The representation of her role as a woman in the poetry is amongst the ‘halfway’ qualities proposed by Persoon: it is ‘neither conventionally maternal nor overtly feminist’.⁶³ A possible contributing factor to the ambivalence to motherhood Persoon detects, for example in ‘The New-Born Baby’s Song’, with the baby’s surprisingly brutal ‘bite’, is the debilitating depression Frances suffered from for three extended periods during her life, including for two years after the birth of Christopher, and when John was just one (discussed by Eugene Paykel in Chapter 9).⁶⁴ Dowson reads ‘She Warns Him’ in relation to the ‘emotional deadness’ recorded in her diaries, and sees the darkest of the fairy tale poems, ‘The Sick Queen’, as being about ‘maternal self-negation’: ‘Can it be this body bore them?’ the Queen asks herself when observing the lively emotions of her children, who ‘can laugh and weep | Over a tiny thing’ (*CP*, p. 54). The glove returns as a symbol of façade, in a self-illustrating parenthesis aiming at containment: ‘(This poor body like an outworn glove, | That yet subdues a spirit which no more knows that it can love.)’ The strain here is acute: the glove is no longer fit for purpose, both in tenor and vehicle. Can an absence be subdued? The true condition of the spirit remains indefinable, suspended in being defined only as what it ‘no more knows’.

Frances wrote many poems rooted in her personal experience; they reveal the experience of a particular woman of a particular class in a particular place, but resist making the leap into becoming emblematic; there are no great shifts in her representations either, through which to view the changing social and political positions of women, or the changing

⁶² *Women’s Poetry of 30s*, pp. 44–45

⁶³ This together with ‘Family Likeness’ Persoon finds to ‘stand the poet in an uncomfortable spot, celebrating that which is at one and the same time debilitating and worthy’. *The Facts on File Companion to British Poetry*. This poem, together with ‘Mother to Child Asleep’, is included in *The Picador Book of Birth Poems*, ed. by Kate Clanchy (Picador, 2012).

⁶⁴ See *Women’s Poetry of the 30s*, p. 45.

connotations of femininity. This is not to say that her experience and its representation did not speak to women. In response to Frances writing in praise of *A Room of One's Own* in 1929, Virginia Woolf replied with admiration for her poetry ('I like your poems — I wish you did write more of them') and self-deprecation: 'Your is so much more important a contribution to life than mine.'⁶⁵ Yet in the same letter Woolf also implied a very particular kind of identification when she suggested Frances's poems spoke to her as 'a harassed middle class middle aged (47 to your 43) woman'. In part joking, Woolf may have had in mind 'The Sick Queen' (published in *Different Days* the year before by the Woolfs' Hogarth Press), given her shared history of depression; or perhaps the poems about the need for servants, such as 'Charm for Obtaining Domestic Help', whose humour today falls completely flat and whose prejudices seem the least dramatised of any of the poems.⁶⁶ 'The Spanish Maids in England' is presumably an example of Frances's desire to represent the under-represented, revealing the 'severance and pain' of the position of the two maids Ascención and Salomé, yet it uncomfortably takes as its focus a stereotype of 'indolence' in the sun (*CP*, pp. 98–99).

A tenderer view of the relationship with family servants is revealed in 'Nurse', from *Mountains & Molehills*, later renamed 'The Old Servant': it is a kind of elegy, struggling with the unnamed servant's death and figuring the poet as a child again. The servant is shown to occupy the role of a mother:

I cannot but believe, though you were dead,
Lying stone-still, and I came in and said
Having been out perhaps in mud and rain:
'O dear, O look, I have torn my skirt again,'
That you would rise with the old simple ease,
And say, 'Yes, child', and come to me. (*CP*, p. 57)

⁶⁵ Virginia Woolf, letter to Frances Cornford, 29 December 1929, Darwin and Cornford Papers, Add. 58422.

⁶⁶ In 'Occasional Verse', *CP*, p. 111. The poem takes the conceit of 'hidden Names' of mystical Greek being uttered as a spell to conjure up the (presumably foreign) help, to work 'for half-a-crown an hour'.

The rest of the poem piles up, in an emotionally charged headlong rush, all that this servant has done, her capacity to ‘Mend, touch and heal’, and her ultimate sacrifice: ‘Your child who might have been, you did not bear, | Because the endless riches of your care | Were all for us’ (*CP*, p. 58). This limited life, in contrast to the release enacted by the syntax, continues even from the grave: the poem cannot imagine any other life for the servant, who ‘darning finished’ returns to ‘being dead’; but it acknowledges its limited childhood perspective. Frances’s note on the manuscript is the more touching for its raising of the servant further, from anonymity: ‘Goodbye. Bless you. This is the poem about Louisa.’⁶⁷

‘A Peasant Woman’, by contrast, could not speak any more plainly of the demands made on working class women, this time by men, and with the poet’s characteristic observation without direct commentary; it speaks beyond its stated class too, and is Frances’s most feminist poem:

I saw you sit waiting with your sewing on your knees,
Till a man should claim the comfort of your body
And your industry and presence for his own.

I saw you sit waiting with your sewing on your knees,
Till the child growing hidden in your body
Should become a living creature in the light.

I saw you sit waiting with your sewing on your knees,
Till your child who had ventured to the city
Should return to the shelter of his home.

I saw you sit waiting with your sewing on your knees,
— Your unreturning son was in the city
Till Death should come along the cobbled street.

I saw you sit waiting with your sewing on your knees. (*SP*, p. 23)

The melodramatic death individualises the story in a way that detracts from the wider sense of the lives of a majority of women suspended by duty. Duty is so often presented as a

⁶⁷ GBR/0012/MS Add. 10410.

double-edged sword: it can be ‘both a security and a restraint’ as Dowson notes;⁶⁸ and as Persoon finds, can be ‘at the same time debilitating and worthy’.⁶⁹

Reading the mock-instructional poem ‘Ode on the Whole Duty of Parents’ in the light of ‘A Peasant Woman’ reveals a continuity that threatens to darken its tone:

The spirits of children are remote and wise,
They must go free
Like fishes in the sea
Or starlings in the skies,
Whilst you remain
The shore where casually they come again. (*CP*, p. 59)

The first line views the children as they would conventionally view adults, setting up a reversal which grants them freedom and makes the parents secondary. The children’s casualness is at the expense of the parents’ solidity; more than joking about the monumental task of being a lifelong parent, there are moments that unsettle, as when the speaker reveals that she is ‘unstable’ before having to ‘become a tree’. ‘You must’, ‘you should’, commands the poem; but can you? It is not straightforwardly a poem of celebration.

Frances was in a liminal position within Cambridge itself, bound to the University as a Darwin, and as the wife of an eminent don, yet also a woman with limited education. In ‘A Glimpse’, which celebrates ‘Cambridge, my home’, the division is not as strong as in ‘Autumn Morning’; the figure of a student is compared with ‘the elms | Bark-wrinkled, puddle round their roots’ as ‘Seeming as everlasting’, thereby bridging the previous gap between the University and her favoured domain of nature (*SP*, p. 13). Yet the ‘Stone, serious familiar colleges’ are not quite her friends, and the sense of continuity, ‘The same since I was born, the same to be | When all my children’s children grow old men’, is also an enforcement of exclusivity when we focus our attention on that last word. The poem’s title refers not just to the poem’s brevity, but also to a momentary look into the eternal, almost as if from the

⁶⁸ *Women’s Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 45.

⁶⁹ *The Facts on File Companion to British Poetry*.

outside. Writing in her diary aged 16, Frances lamented her inability to access the world of undergraduate studies; and how ‘never never never’ would she be able to gain entry: ‘That door is closed to me, I can peep in and see a glimpse’.⁷⁰

Frances’s experience of writing with a sense of separation made her a great elegist; one of her greatest poems is ‘The Scholar’, about her husband’s death, but also about his otherworldliness in life; it takes us through different degrees of distance, beginning with the title. It achieves its power from its evenness of tone, speaking of the sadness of separation, even in life, without the least trace of bitterness:

You often went to breathe a timeless air
And walk with those you loved, perhaps the most.
You spoke to Plato. You were native there. (*CP*, p. 99)

The simple statements conceal in that calm aside — ‘perhaps the most’ — the implications for the speaker of this greater love. The poem’s conceit, of travelling in the realm of literature, is sustained without strain. Homer is introduced, fittingly, by means of his favoured device, the simile:

Like one who made blind Homer sing to him,
You visited the caves where sirens swim
Their deep-indented coast.

The shifts in focus occur mid-line, again seamlessly:

With us you seemed
A quiet happy sailor come of late
From those strange seas you best could navigate,
Knowing a world that others only dreamed.
Almost we looked for spray upon your hair,
Who met you, silent-footed on the stair,
Like an Elysian ghost.
So on that day
You left us on a deep withdrawing tide,
We dared not beg you, with one sigh, to stay
Or turn from your discoveries aside. (*CP*, pp. 99–100)

⁷⁰ Darwin and Cornford Papers, Add. 58390 B.

For all its sense of division, this is also a poem of continuities. Chief amongst these is the passage from life to death, and that sense of a natural departure is bound up with the speaker's acceptance of death. The 'Elysian ghost', of a man dematerialised in life by his intellectual wanderings, works in the opposite way too, giving an afterlife to the realm of culture past; art, the poem suggests, is an enduring actuality, that can be known and not just dreamt. And thus the poem brings its own solace, corresponding with the elegy tradition of the transcendence of death through art.

*

Frances was always a poet interested in the intersections of the timely with the timeless. In the logic of her poems, the past and the future can coexist with the present so that the familiar turns strange, or the strange familiar. In the light of the unpredictable afterlives of her own poetry, it is especially poignant that 'All Souls' Night', a poem about returns, should return to become a 'Poem on the Underground' in 2019, with its haunted and haunting description of a love who 'came back to me | Under the November tree': 'He did not think me strange or older, | Nor I, him.'⁷¹

'Mother to Child Asleep' looks in the other direction, at the changing perceptions that will come in the life of the child: 'These tiny, fringed eyes | Must look on all that dies'; an understanding of time is figured as coming about 'In some strange dawn', in which the familiar world will 'Dissolve like dreams.'⁷² As the mother contemplates mortality in relation to a new life, distinctly of herself, yet not herself, and wilfully set free, it is as though Frances is simultaneously addressing her poetry:

Ah, though I might, no magic must be willed
On your vexed waters, vexed when mine are stilled.

⁷¹ Frances Cornford, 'All Soul's Night', *Poems on the Underground*, 17 March 2021 <<https://poemsontheunderground.org/all-souls-night>> [accessed 4 December 2024].

⁷² In *Mountains & Molehills* (Cambridge University Press, 1934), p. 20.

On that strange morning you must sail alone,
My utterly-sleeping own.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Chesterton, G. K., *The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton* (Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980)

Cornford, Frances, 'All Soul's Night', *Poems on the Underground*, 17 March 2021

<<https://poemsontheunderground.org/all-souls-night>> [accessed 4 December 2024]

Cornford, Frances, *Collected Poems* (The Cresset Press, 1954)

Cornford, Frances, *Different Days* (Hogarth Press, 1928)

Cornford, Frances, Letters to Sir Edward Marsh, Cambridge University Library

GBR/0012/MS Add. 9280

Cornford, Frances, Memoir, GBR/0012/MS Add. 10410

Cornford, Frances, *Mountains & Molehills* (Cambridge University Press, 1934)

Cornford, Frances, 'Notes for a Talk', Darwin and Cornford Papers, British Library, Add.

58385

Cornford, Frances, *Poems* (The Priory Press and Bowes & Bowes, 1910)

Cornford, Frances, Transcript from 'Guest of the Week' on *Woman's Hour* (1959), Frances

Cornford Papers, Cambridge University Library, GBR/0012/MS Add. 10410

Cornford, Frances, *Travelling Home and Other Poems* (The Cresset Press, 1948)

Cornford, Frances, 'Views and Recollections of a Sunday Poet', 27 March 1956, Darwin and

Cornford Papers, British Library, Add. 58387

Darwin, C. R., *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (John Murray, 1871)

Darwin, C. R., *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (John Murray, 1872)

Darwin, C. R., *Notebook M*, Cambridge University Library, Darwin Archive, MS DAR 125

Dowson, Jane (ed.), *Frances Cornford: Selected Poems* (Enitharmon Press, 1996)

Keynes, Geoffrey (ed.), *The Letters of Rupert Brooke* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968)

Marsh, Edward (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke: With a Memoir* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1918)

Owen, Wilfred, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (Wordsworth Editions, 1994)

Pater, Walter, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Literature* (Macmillan, 1873)

Raverat, Gwen, Letter to Frances Cornford, 1910, Darwin and Cornford Papers, British Library, Add. 58398

Raverat, Gwen, *Period Piece: A Cambridge Childhood* (Faber and Faber, 1952)

Woolf, Virginia, Letter to Frances Cornford, 29 December 1929, Darwin and Cornford Papers, British Library, Add. 58422

Secondary Sources

Adcock, Fleur (ed.), *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry*, (Faber and Faber, 1987)

Clanchy, Kate (ed.), *The Picador Book of Birth Poems* (Picador, 2012)

Corsan, James, *For Poulton and England: The Life and Times of an Edwardian Rugby Hero* (Matador, 2009)

Country Life, vol. 25 (Country Life, 1910)

Dowson, Jane, 'Poetry 1920–1945', in Maroula Joannou, *The History of British Women's Writing, 1920–1945*: volume eight (Palgrave Macmillan)

Dowson, Jane, *Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910–1939: Resisting Femininity* (Ashgate, 2002)

Dowson, Jane (ed.), *Women's Poetry of 30s: A Critical Anthology* (Routledge, 1996)

Dowson, Jane and Alice Entwistle, *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2005)

The Dublin Magazine, 24.2, April–June 1949

- Eliot, T. S., 'The Metaphysical Poets', *Selected Essays: New Edition* (Harcourt Brace, 1950)
- Eliot, T. S. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Essays: New Edition* (Harcourt Brace, 1950)
- Grant, Joy, *Harold Monro and the Poetry Bookshop* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967)
- Holden, Anthony and Ben Holden (eds), *Poems that Make Grown Women Cry: 100 Women on the Words that Move Them* (Simon & Schuster, 2016)
- Levy-Navarro, Elena, *The Culture of Obesity in Early and Late Modernity: Body Image in Jonson, Middleton, and Skelton* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 45–66
- The Listener*, 41 (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1949)
- Manning, Russell Re, *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2013)
- Muir, Edwin, 'Poets of Two Ages', *The Observer*, 5 December 1954
- Murphy, Rosalie, and James Vinson (eds), *Contemporary Poets of the English Language* (St James Press, 1974)
- Murray, Gilbert, *The Rise of the Greek Epic* (Oxford University Press, 1907)
- The Nation*, 9, 1911
- Persoon, James, 'Frances Cornford', *The Facts on File Companion to British Poetry, 1900 to the Present*, ed. by James Persoon and Robert R. Watson (Facts on File, 2009), pp. 98–99.
- Rogers, Timothy, 'Frances Cornford (1886–1960)', *The London Magazine*, 32.5–6, August–September 1992
- Ryan, William H., Evan S. Connell, Jr., and Calvin Kentfield (eds), *Contact: The San Francisco Collection of New Writing, Art and Ideas*, 2.7, 1961
- Spalding, Frances, *Gwen Raverat: Friends, Family and Affections* (Pimlico, 2004)

Thomas, Edward, *Morning Post*, 31 March 1910. Reproduced in *Edward Thomas: Prose Writings: A Selected Edition: Volume IV: Writings on Poetry*, ed. by Edna Longley (Oxford University Press, 2023)

