

FROM PAINTER TO POET: FRANCES CORNFORD AND VISUAL ART

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Before she took to writing poetry in earnest, Frances Cornford aspired to be a painter. As a girl she attended drawing classes in Cambridge alongside her cousin Gwen Raverat run by the artist Mary Charlotte Greene.¹ Her early papers show her love of caricature and illustration, often of her own humorous poems and those of her half-brother Bernard.² Poetry was always there: as she told Rupert Brooke, she wrote her first lines at the age of seven;³ but it was not something she took seriously: ‘Of my verses I scarcely thought, because they came fairly easily to me’ she wrote in her memoir of her early years.⁴ Yet Frances⁵ came to recognize that painting, which for her was a much more laboured art, was not where her energies were best spent; with characteristic modesty she concluded that ‘I was strangely without talent considering I had some imagination’.⁶ Yet her early aspiration to be a painter remains important because it sheds light on her artistic influences and drive which would carry forward into her life as a poet. Frances’s study of painting, both creative and critical, formed her as an artist and provided a visual training which would inform her poetry’s distinctive ways of seeing.

Frances’s artistic taste and creative ambition were nurtured by her mother Ellen, who introduced her to a great range of literature, music and visual culture. Frances’s early journals suggest that her desire to be a painter was strongly bound up with her relationship with Ellen. In March 1902 she produced her ‘first home oil-study’, ‘A portrait of Mumma’, and was

¹ See Gwen Raverat, *Period Piece: A Cambridge Childhood* (Faber and Faber, 1952), pp. 63, 207.

² See Darwin and Cornford Papers, British Library, Add. 58381.

³ Christopher Hassall, *Rupert Brooke: A Biography* (Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 276.

⁴ In Frances Cornford, *Memoir*, Chapter 4, and Frances Cornford Papers, Cambridge University Library, GBR/0012/MS Add. 10410.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Frances Cornford, *Memoir*, Chapter 4, and Frances Cornford Papers, Cambridge University Library, GBR/0012/MS Add. 10410.

proud of ‘my first really own canvas’.⁷ During Ellen’s illness, art provided Frances with a focus and a distraction; she wrote in this context of her excitement at going to visit William Rothenstein, who gave her lessons in drawing, at his Hampstead studio, having been ‘looking forward to it for weeks and weeks’.⁸ But art remained a continued point of connection with Ellen, as she could keep her mother updated on her artistic progress.

Art was also a site of struggle for Frances. On Oxford Street she bought reproductions of Holbein’s paintings, yet trying to copy one went ‘so badly’ that she was left feeling ‘so angry’ and ‘insulted’. She willed herself on:

I must plunge, I must plunge in. Sometimes I am afraid of the endless weariness and despair and hopelessness that I know I must find there. I forget the joy the privilege to be able even to feel the spray in ones [sic] face even if one never gets into the crash of the waves.⁹

The way in which she articulates her artistic struggles has literary prescience: she anticipates by nearly twenty-five years Virginia Woolf’s writing of Lily Briscoe’s struggles as an aspiring painter in *To The Lighthouse*, with the refrain that ‘whispers in her ear, “Women can’t paint, women can’t write...”’.¹⁰ Frances’s ‘spray’ has its counterpart in Lily’s ‘feathery and evanescent’ surface, while the elusive ‘crash of the waves’ resembles Lily’s apprehension of the ‘bolts of iron’ that must ‘clamp together’ the ‘fabric’.¹¹ Her fear of discovering ‘endless weariness and despair and hopelessness’ once committed pre-emptively Lily’s experience of the ‘moment’s flight between the picture and her canvas’ in which ‘the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears’.¹² Like Lily, Frances was ‘struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: “But this is what I see; this is what I see”’.¹³ Even Frances’s choice of the word ‘plunge’ anticipates the association of that word with freedom

⁷ Darwin and Cornford Papers, British Library, Add. 58390 B.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, rvd edn (Hogarth Press, 1930), p. 78.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 264.

¹² Ibid., p. 34.

¹³ Ibid.

for Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway. It should come as no surprise, then, when we later see Woolf writing to Frances in admiration of her poetry; at the time of Ellen's death, Woolf, then still Virginia Stephen, wrote to Frances to offer sympathy, wishing that she could help.¹⁴

Frances's relationship with painting became even more complicated at this tragic moment: Frances had declined to share unfinished drawings with Ellen, unaware she would die shortly afterwards, resulting in an overwhelming sense of guilt; she berated herself in her journal: 'and now I can never show them to her'.¹⁵ She felt now that she needed 'some strongest hard interesting work' as a means of coping, and determined to produce 'a book containing short interesting abstracts of lives of all painters' giving 'some idea of the history of painting'.¹⁶ Though this work never progressed, she kept a stock of adages which suggest an interest in transcendent artistic philosophy: 'All painting is only one way of struggling after the great It'; 'Technique is only a means to an end'; and she quotes Whistler as saying 'an artist only paints in his spare moments he spends the real part of his time thinking [*sic*]'.¹⁷

As Frances reveals in her memoir, this intense period of an attempted escape into art following Ellen's death came crashing to an end following her enrolment at Westminster Art School. On her return to Cambridge in 1908, after her three years of recuperation in Switzerland, she 'was still as determined as ever (and of course with as little talent) to be a painter';¹⁸ but following her meeting with Rupert Brooke, notwithstanding her painting of scenery for the *Comus* production, her creative energies took the different course that would define her. Suddenly poetry was everything; hearing Milton brought to life, Frances joined Rupert in defining herself in relation to verbal art: 'how seriously we took the poetry which

¹⁴ Letter from Virginia Stephen to Frances Darwin, 25 February 1903, Darwin and Cornford Papers, British Library, Add. 58422.

¹⁵ Add. 58390 C.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Memoir, Chapter 4.

we felt we understood in our bones'.¹⁹ As I explore in Chapter 10, Rupert would go on to become a major influence on the direction her poetry would take; but qualities which remain in her work, carried over now from painting to poetry, are a preoccupation with colour and form, with foreground and background, and with the relationship between directness and indirectness (the 'crash of the waves' versus the 'spray').

Creativity abounded within the household, and between the Darwin cousins, as Frances was growing up. The children would collaborate annually on writing plays, performed before the family at Christmas. Frances would affectionately recall, including in her public talks, how she would play games with Bernard based on writing poetry.²⁰ An inter-artistic collaboration took place in 1898 and 1899 when, between the ages of 12 and 13, Frances painted watercolour vignettes for the Wychfield Almanacks, family calendars named after her childhood home. Bernard wrote poems that appear to respond to Frances's images (rather than Frances simply taking on the role of illustrator); her paintings are some of the few which survive, and in spite of her youth (and her later self-criticism) give a sense of how accomplished she was.

For April 1899 Frances has created a portrait of the painter, set in an idealised landscape, which is presented alongside Bernard's verse:

Shed not your tears, sweet April showers,
For see the lady Frances seated
Enthroned amid the golden flowers,
Nay rather weep when she's retreated.

Surrounded by spring flowers, the young Frances sits beneath a tree, wearing a red bonnet and holding a basket. If Bernard's lyrics seem a mere exercise in rhyme, Frances's painting shows a far more sophisticated approach to composition. There is a delicate play with curves, from the path to the right to the counterpointing of branches to the left and of stalks in the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See, for example, 'Lunchtime Talk at Foyles', British Library, Add. 58386.

foreground. Frances's brushstrokes might tend towards the blur, becoming somewhat crude in the depiction of flowers, yet she achieves a sense of animation in her rendition of dappled sunlight on the banks and in the folds of her dress.

June and December show Wychfield itself. Bernard writes with typical mockery:

Behold the home, no daub you know it —
Of F the artist, B the poet!
To think that genius so great
From one small cot should emanate!

But Frances's watercolour is altogether more serious. Once again Frances's interest in light is in evidence: the house is transformed through a spectrum of shadow to broad daylight; the play with palette makes up for an absence of formal rigour, which shows more readily through the architectural subject.

Perhaps Bernard spoke truer than he purposed when he wrote for December:

She's painted it again, you see
But from a different point of view,
I hardly call it fair on me
Or you.

Changes in perspective are clearly one of Frances's great artistic interests, even in these early manifestations of her artistry. Now that the house is covered in snow, the quirky renditions of form take on a charming naivety: it is as if the house itself is bowing beneath the weight of the snow.

Frances's painterly eye carries forward into her poetry; that in itself does not guarantee it will lend itself to illustration; but in Gwen Frances had an illustrator with whom she shared an artistic vision. Gwen was always a strong supporter and admirer of Frances's poetry; she wrote in 1910 after the publication of Frances's first collection, *Poems*, to say 'I like the nursery rhymes and London streets and fear of life and lots of others'.²¹ In 1915 Gwen began illustrating Frances's poems, providing woodcuts for *Spring Morning*, at

²¹ Gwen Darwin, letter to Frances Darwin, February 1910, Add. 58398.

Frances's request, with Frances asking that the images respond in some way to her poems.²²

The volume was printed by Harold Munro's Poetry Bookshop. As Frances Spalding indicates, *Mountains & Molehills* represents the summation of Frances's and Gwen's collaboration, as a more fully developed and beautifully-printed volume. By contrast, *Spring Morning* is a short pamphlet, imperfectly printed, with very small images; yet it is significant in what it represents, not only in terms of the collaboration but also in inaugurating a new style of illustration in print, a modern reinvention of white-line wood engraving (wherein the ink is rolled onto the surface of the relief as opposed to being held in the furrows), which sees the white lines become expressive of atmosphere rather than delineating form, extending the modes of impressionism that Lucien Pissarro had brought to wood engraving.²³ Thomas Balston, in his study of English wood engraving, makes the case that this volume holds the honour of being the joint-first 'to be illustrated by modern wood-engravings'.²⁴

Changes in perception are at the heart of several of the poems Gwen illustrates. 'Youth and Age' is constructed in question-and-answer couplets, which wittily and poignantly lead us away from obvious answers: 'Say, is it dim and grim and all full of fear?' may initially be answered with the reassurance of 'Not at all, not at all, my pretty dear'; but the couplets that follow serve to deflect: 'Will there be no hope? Nothing to desire? | You shall be comforted sitting by the fire'.²⁵ By the end, the initial response has become anything but reassuring: 'When the first thrushes sing, shall I not hear? | Not at all, not at all, my pretty dear.' Gwen's engraving captures both the symmetries and the surprises: a young man and an aged man walk away from each other, but a signpost points in both directions 'To Man's End'; while the young man walks arms and head raised, as if uncertain of his direction, the older man appears steadier, aided by his walking stick, hunched but calm. Both appear to

²² See Frances Spalding, *Gwen Raverat: Friends, Family and Affections* (Pimlico, 2004). p. 240.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Thomas Balston, *Wood-Engraving in Modern English Books* (National Book League, 1949), p. 9.

²⁵ Frances Cornford, *Spring Morning*, illustrated by Gwen Raverat (The Poetry Bookshop, 1915), p. 7.

have their eyes closed, or are quite possibly blind; the path they are on is revealed, curving into the background, to be circular; the idea of the double is reinforced by Gwen's skilfully symmetrical rendition of the men's suits. Technically, the print engages its own reversals, moving from the ink providing the contours in the foreground, to forming the mass of the landscape in the background, with the lines in relief. An addition that is wholly Gwen's own is a black imp poised at the top of the signpost, looking down on the younger man's uncertain (yet wholly certain) journey.

Perhaps visual counterpoint would be a better term than illustration for Gwen's woodcuts in *Spring Morning*, since she advances her own visions, while taking cues from the poems. The cover image, of the same name as the volume and its eponymous poem, shows a solitary figure walking uphill in the dawn, which appears to be breaking over the sea. The poem makes no reference to people; perhaps Gwen is representing the solitary poet herself. Something of the poem's 'moisty wood' is hinted at to the left of Gwen's image; but there is no real sense of its flora and fauna. Nor does 'May Morning' — juxtaposed to the poem itself — with its pair of young women dancing, or embracing the morn, give much direct illustration of the poem, except for the gentlest of 'open hills'.²⁶ Instead, these images make their equivalence in atmosphere, utilising white-line engraving innovatively to evoke the play of light.

One of Gwen's most accomplished early woodcuts, 'Poplars', accompanies 'In France'.²⁷ Again a contrast in perspective marks Frances's poem: the speaker's insistence that 'to see them there is none | But I and the September sun' is then qualified: 'The girl who in their shadow sits | Can only see the sock she knits'; the perceived failure of engagement with nature recalls 'To a Fat Lady Seen from the Train', which Gwen had said she 'simply love[d]'

²⁶ Ibid., p. 1.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

after its publication in 1910.²⁸ Gwen's image derives from her own experience of France, which she frequently visited and where she lived on and off, following her marriage to the French painter Jacques Raverat in 1911. Perhaps the inspiration was the poplars at Prunoy, which she had so admired during a stay there that year.²⁹ The printing was not the sharpest — Gwen was displeased with Harold Munro's lack of care both here and in the mise-en-page — and there is possibly a figure within the shadows beneath the poplars to the left of the image, which might represent the poet in a form of third-person focalisation of the poem's first-person voice;³⁰ but there is no discernable trace of the girl, or of the other living creatures of the poem, a dog and cows, all similarly preoccupied. Instead, Gwen's image reinforces the poem's Wordsworthian sense of solitude; and, in its ingenious interplay of the poplars' leaves and the lines of the sky, captures something of the anthropomorphic spirit of the trees as 'golden ladies come to dance'.

Frances's collaborations with Gwen reveal complementary visions of a natural world responsive to the human senses through reinventions of visual and verbal impressionism. The project was generative for both artist and poet. Gwen's image of poplars evolved into a more sophisticated wood engraving, *Poplars in France*, in 1916: as Spalding writes, this was 'technically one of the most challenging wood-engravings [Gwen] ever produced, owing to the way in which the trunks of the poplars constantly interrupt the fine lines in the sky'.³¹ For Frances, the volume consolidated her position as a poet for whom the visual and the verbal are of equal import; for whom words provide the fullest ways for her to realise her unique ways of seeing.

²⁸ Letter to Frances [after February 1910], Add. 58398.

²⁹ See Spalding, *Gwen Raverat*, p. 190.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

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