

A sealed room furnished by the past: J. L. Carr's "A Month in the Country"

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In this novel the summer of 1920 is viewed simultaneously through the eyes of the main character and those of the story's narrator, younger and older versions of the same self. Neither viewpoint is, in the conventional sense, reliable, but the traumatic skewing of being that each has suffered leads them to a deeper penetration of the nature of existence.

"A Month in the Country", J. L. Carr's fifth novel, appeared in 1980. It was awarded the Guardian Fiction Prize, shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and later made into a film.¹⁾ It is short (111 pages), simple in story-line and rather leisurely in pace, all of which give a misleading first impression of slightness.

The story can be briefly sketched as follows. It is the early summer of 1920. Tom Birkin steps down from a train in the remote North Yorkshire village of Oxbodby. He is in his mid-20s and carries the scars of much experience: trench warfare, shell shock, and the breakdown of his marriage. He has come to Oxbodby to begin a new life and a challenging new job: the restoration of a medieval mural in the parish church. Camped in a meadow nearby is Charles Moon, another survivor of the Great War. He is engaged in searching for the tomb of Piers Hebron, who was excommunicated and buried in unhallowed ground in the late part of the fourteenth century. Though from quite different backgrounds, Birkin and Moon find common

1) "A Month in the Country", directed by Pat O'Connor, 1987.

ground in their war experience and in being outsiders, and immediately strike up a friendship.

Through a long, idyllic, seemingly endless summer, Birkin makes progress on restoring the mural, and soon realises that he is working on a masterpiece. In the meantime, he gets drawn into the simple, leisurely life of the community, umpiring cricket matches, dining with the station master's family, even standing in as a preacher. Slowly, imperceptibly, his mental wounds begin to heal and he enters "a propitious season of living, a blessed time" that he has never known before. Then, as the heat of the summer intensifies, he becomes involved emotionally with Alice Keach, the vicar's wife, and the promise of the novel's epigraph from Samuel Johnson's Dictionary: "A *novel* - a small tale, generally of love", is fulfilled. The story ends with the first leaf-fall of Autumn. The tomb has been found and the mural restored: Birkin, about to depart from Osgodby and never to return, stands poised at the churchyard gate.

The story is cast in the form of a memoir, written and narrated by its main character, Tom Birkin, and its place and date of composition (*Stocken, Presteigne, / September 1978*) are given on the last page, where we learn that its "author's" present is equivalent to our own and that fifty-eight years divide him from the period recalled.

The main action of the novel correlates two sets of events separated by a broad expanse of history: the death of Piers Hebron and the painting of the church mural (ca. 1373-1420), and the exhuming of Piers' remains and the mural's restoration in the summer of 1920. The result is a degree of chronological relativity which is extended considerably by the insertion into the frame of the novel of an alternative present in the life of the main

character, again separated by a span of years. The immediate advantage for the novel is in mood, for by distancing its author's present from that of his younger self, Carr is able to overlay the story with nostalgic yearning, and thus sharpen our sense of the fragility and evanescence of its events. The source of this yearning is Tom Birkin, now in his eighties, looking back on what once was and what might have been:

“We can ask and ask but we can't have again what once seemed ours for ever — the way things looked, that church alone in the fields, a bed on the belfry floor, a remembered voice, a loved face. They've gone and you can only wait for the pain to pass.” (p. 111)²⁾

The elder Birkin keeps a firm hand on the reins of his narrative from first to last, relaxing, chatting with us as if on intimate terms and occasionally taking rambling detours, but never quite allowing the story to find its own way forward. The foregrounding of the narrator in this way has a two-fold effect: reminding the reader that the events described happened long ago and, as they come filtered through a memory, confirming their factual truth. The effect is that the summer of 1920 is experienced as something beckoning from afar and, at the same time, as a palpable presence standing very close, so close that we can almost overlook a discrepancy between the acceptable limits of memory and the effortless completeness of the record itself. Emotional embroideries are another matter — they are less easy to ignore:

“Day after day, mist rose from the meadow as the sky lightened and hedges, barns and woods took shape until, at last, the long curving back of the hills lifted away from the Plain. It was a sort of stage-magic.....Day

2) All page references are to the Penguin edition, 1980.

after day it was like that and each morning I leaned on the yard gate dragging at my first fag and (I'd like to think) marvelling at this splendid backcloth. But it can't have been so; I'm not the marvelling kind. Or was I then?" (p. 49)³⁾

Birkin places himself here in meditative pose against a romantic backdrop, the theatrical trope implying, and the final lines confirming, the contrivance and wishful thinking involved in the scene. It is, of course, idle to speculate what his younger self actually looked out on or what may have been in his thoughts as he smoked his morning cigarette. Instead, we should be weighing the broader implications of this reconstruction of the past. The lines should alert us, in other words, to an important fact about the main character: he is a composite figure fashioned out of the sometimes true, sometimes distorted data of memory, with touches of romantic idealisation thrown in for good measure.

Unlike the narrator, Birkin junior has the good sense to put the past behind him and live in the present but, on a number of occasions, his gaze is directed futurewards as if reciprocally curious about his elder self:

"The marvellous thing was coming into this haven of calm water and for a season, not having to worry my head with anything but uncovering their wall-painting for them. And, afterwards, perhaps I could make a new start, forget what the War and the rows with Vinny had done to me and begin where I'd left off. This is what I need, I thought — a new start and,

3) There is one further occasion when the narrator questions his memory:

"I didn't know what I hoped might happen, nor how long I stayed there, nor have I any recollection of returning to the belfry and to bed. Since, I sometimes have wondered if it was a dream." (p. 107)

afterwards, maybe I won't be a casualty any more.

Well, we live by hope." (p. 15)

As the memoir is a record of only a short span of time and not a complete autobiography, its writer is under no contract to supply data on matters outside its chronology, and, by definition, this must include answers to the questions implied here. So there is actually nothing inconsistent in the fact that, amid copious marginalia, there is no reference to what course the narrator's life subsequently took nor clue to the later fortunes of his marriage or future happiness. Nevertheless, it seems more than a trifle perverse that a writer who categorically refuses to map out the fifty-eight year interim between his memoir's events and its date of composition should so often taunt us with his omniscience and encourage speculation about the biographical content of his later life. The ominous aside "Well, we live by hope" which ends this passage is but one example. Looking back from the last page, the story seems, for the absence of such data, the more remote from the present, and this remoteness is confirmed in its final reflection:

"All this happened so long ago. And I never returned, never wrote, never met anyone who might have given me news of Oxgodby. So, in memory, it stays as I left it, a sealed room furnished by the past, airless, still, ink long dry on a put-down pen." (p. 111)

This statement is doubly disturbing for it relegates events that are still vivid in our minds to an inaccessible room in Birkin's memory, and also, by claiming that the past still "stays as [he] left it" and that the metaphorical pen which wrote it was put down long ago, it effectively rules out the existence of the memoir. We are left puzzling over two rival versions of Birkin's month in the country, one still stored in unchanged form in some

airless attic of his mind and another freshly written on the page before us. The paradox can be resolved by distinguishing between two different conceptions of the past which coexist in the novel: first, the past as a completed transaction (“ink long dry on a put-down pen”), something that can never be repeated in a literal sense, and, second, the past that is ever accessible to memory and which may be endlessly relived (by reproducing it, for example, in memoir form).

If the novel can stand reduction to a simple formula, then these two pasts are its subject and the closing image of a sealed room, which paradoxically may and yet may not be opened, provides a unifying motif. The image recalls other repositories of past time, the mural and Piers Hebron’s tomb, both sealed in different ways against intrusion and full of antique lumber and mysteries, waiting to be opened, waiting to be solved.⁴⁾ But Birkin’s sealed garret of memory has its own share of mysteries, the questions that he, our guide through its dark recesses, leaves unanswered. Why did he never return to Oxgodby, or write, or otherwise keep open doors into the past? Why, having so early turned the key on this vital part of himself, should he now some sixty years later seek to reverse the act? And why, having granted us access to this secret inner room, does he bolt all the rest of the doors in the house against us?

There is a boundary beyond which exploration of the space that surrounds a fictional work becomes absurd. This study will endeavour to remain on this side of it while pursuing answers to these questions.

* * *

4) Such as the identity of the falling man with the crescent scar on his forehead who was limewashed out years before the rest of the painting, or the reason for Piers Hebron’s excommunication.

Like his elder self, the Birkin who steps down from the train in Oxgodby is a secure bolter of doors — those which give access to himself, that is — but because of the privileged terms by which we see this fictional world through his eyes, we may not immediately ascertain the fact. We need to be vigilant whenever a fictional character is the teller of his own tale, and the more so here where there are clues to tread warily from the start.

Charles Moon calls by the church to introduce himself soon after Birkin's arrival and gives a full and very frank account of himself, including one or two pieces of classified information about his work (the probable site of Piers' grave which he is in no hurry to "find", and his secret excavation of the ruins of a basilica). Birkin takes to Moon instantly, and that he manages to say nothing about himself in return we simply put down to his friend's talkativeness. But then a chance to reciprocate comes:

"Come over and I'll brew up."

I told him that I'd already eaten breakfast.

"Oh come on, "he said." I don't need to be told you didn't get that twitch on the North-Eastern Railway, so we may as well start straight away swapping stories about the same bloody awful place. Come over and have a mug. God knows we both must have wondered if we'd ever drink another. And anyway, it's your turn to tell me about *your* job." (p. 21)

When and what Birkin told Moon about his restoration work is not recorded (Colonel Hebron turns up and cuts short their conversation), but that he did not soon take up the invitation to swap stories about the war is clear from the long-view device used to close the scene:

"That was a fairly typical beginning to most days — a mug of tea in

Moon's dug-out, usually not saying much, while he had a pipe. I'd ask him how things were going, who'd looked into his hole; then he'd ask me how things were going up my ladder, who'd wandered across to the church and, now and then, through pipe smoke, he would look speculatively at me. Now who are you? Who have you left behind in the kitchen? What befell you Over There to give you that God-awful twitch? Are you here to try to crawl back into the skin you had before they pushed you through the mincer?" (p. 24)

This gives a perspective over a period of time, and we may well wonder why the intimacy promised by their first exchange should so have eluded them: the two are viewed here exchanging just enough information to keep communication open but looking at each other across a void. That Moon would like to bridge it is evident from the close-up of his puzzled face, peering through the pipe-smoke. On the other side, Birkin seems quite at home in the silence:

"I saw his questions but didn't answer them. Not because I lacked candour but because talking wouldn't help. They'd told me only time would clean me up, and I believed them. Anyway, all that was past and gone and, in those first days at Oxgodby, I was engrossed in my work. It was tremendously exciting: perhaps you can understand if I explain that, to begin with, I wasn't sure what I was uncovering...." (p. 25)

But we need to be careful: this isn't the young man at all — it is his elder self making excuses for him, in substance, that he had good reason for not wanting to talk about the war at this time, even with a fellow casualty like Moon. We take his word on this, but on the claim that he did not lack candour, we may well pause since the quality is not much in evidence here. What also seems to undermine the claim is the narrator's sudden change of

subject amid his excuse-making. It is possible, of course, to take the whole aside as a sort of transcript of his young self's thoughts as he switches hurriedly from an uncomfortable subject to the neutral one of work but, for the reader, this does not radically alter our impression of being treated just like Moon nor take away the feeling of being short-changed. Nevertheless, from such evasiveness and other hints in the scene, we learn something of vital importance about Birkin: he has been badly affected by the war, and it is confirmed later that he has been shell-shocked. Elsewhere, we are given a case-history of the condition:

““But now we're different. We know. We're men apart. Maybe wives know. Yes, of course they must. And people do understand. I met a chap who went back to teaching. Like you, he'd been a signaller out in the middle, with only a wire trailing back to his battery. He told me that, for the first four weeks, if a pupil dropped a desk lid he'd throw himself on the floor. At first they used to snigger. Then they didn't laugh any more, only stared horrified or in pity. Finally they just pretended not to notice...I keep reminding myself that I'm still a bit round the bend and perhaps always shall be.” [Moon] laughed. “You too?”

It was a question that he didn't expect to be answered: the side of my face had been clicking away as he talked.” (p. 79)

But the illness takes many forms, and Birkin's is recalled in the reference to his facial spasm that, with his stammer, is the sole outward sign of his inner wound. His symptoms also determine his treatment as a man apart:

“I looked thoroughly unreliable; my topcoat betrayed me. There was my face, the left side, too....It began at my left eye-brow and worked down to my mouth. I'd caught it at Passchendaele and wasn't the only one either.”

(p. 8)

But more significant is the fact that they block the channels of communication, perhaps too the very will to communicate. Unlike the soldier who went back to teaching in Moon's tale, Birkin's illness exiles him to a domain of solitude and silence, and this may provide a reason for his retreat to Osgodby ("a world of new people who only knew as much of what had happened to me as I cared to tell them" (p. 78)), his contentment with the isolation of his labour:

"Our jobs are our private fantasies, our disguises, the cloak we can creep inside to hide." (p. 51)

and the tenuousness of the communicative lines he establishes with others.

The problem is, up in Osgodby where nobody's business is his own, "normal" folk see things a bit differently:

"“My Dad says it must be a miserable job working all day on your own up there, no-one to talk to or nothing.”” (p. 29)

"“Mam says you're overmuch on your own and traipse around like a man in a dream and need to be got into company.”” (p. 38)

and thus, from the safety of his sanctuary in the church, Birkin, at first rather reluctantly, is "drawn into the changing picture of Osgodby" and, in the process, made to furnish the still room of his elder self's memory with something like a story.

Initially, the bright world outside the half-light of the church seems

dream-like and unreal:

“I was drawn into the changing picture of Osgodby itself. But, oddly, what happened *outside* was like a dream. It was inside the still church, before its reappearing picture, that was *real*. I drifted across the rest. As I have said — like a dream. For a time.” (p. 37)

and the shadows on the chancel arch have more substance than the flesh-and-blood people who come and interrupt his work. Besides Moon, this usually means Kathy Ellerbeck and Alice Keach who call in at the church from a natural desire to cultivate his acquaintance and to provide company. Birkin responds amiably enough to Kathy’s precocious and Mrs Keach’s more discreet enquiries but, during conversations, keeps each at a safe distance by remaining up on his scaffold and, with his back towards them, continuing to work. Birkin makes little conversation and what he does say is usually couched in a tongue-in-cheek or teasing vein that only increases the distance:

““I can’t see much from down here, Mr Birkin. Please — what are you at now?”

“I’m valeting a gent’s overcoat.”

“Is it very soiled?”

“Very! You can’t beat tallow candles for laying down a nice grease base for other muck to stew in. You modern women don’t know you’re born.”

(The thing that keeps you from screaming...well, that’s extreme...let’s say, it helps if you can guess how things once were. What I’m really getting at is that it’s not all that easy to find your way back to the Middle Ages. They weren’t us in fancy dress, mouths full of thees and thous, quoths, prithees and zounds....” (p. 53)

The bracketed section following the exchange is part of a long aside that extends a further seventeen lines before the dialogue resumes. The narrator often sets off his own reflections by inserting them between parentheses, and a series of them punctuate this scene. But what is unusual on this occasion is not just their regularity and length but the way their point of view keeps hovering between that of the narrator and one more appropriate to his younger self (“The thing that keeps you from screaming...”; “So, in my job, it helps...”). It is as if they were doubling for the young man’s lengthy spells of self-communion which Alice Keach had first to penetrate to engage in what Birkin describes as “not a conventional conversation — no more than a remark, a question, answer, exclamation” (p. 52)). But if this is the case (and a comparable device was considered earlier), then the intrusions *qua* intrusions substitute quite naturally for the young Birkin’s silences (“That was how we talked. And, after a longer silence than usual, I would know that she had gone” (p. 55)), while their contents illustrate the work centred preoccupations of a mind “lost” in thought. Here then, as in an earlier sketch from the narrator’s portfolio, Birkin is represented in typical pose — eyes averted, mind somewhere out there on the front line of his own inner world with only a slender wire trailing back to others.

But even in face-to-face conversations and with no mural to distract him, Birkin’s attention has a way of disengaging itself from his interlocutor and wandering off to nearby objects:

“[Keach] may well have said much more but I didn’t hear him because I was examining the stove with great attention. Some mechanical things fascinate me. Until that day, chiefly clocks or anything run by clockwork. I’d not considered the possibilities of coke stoves. There seemed to be several knobs and toggles for which I could see no purpose: plainly, this

damned big monster was going to provide me with several pleausurably instructive hours learning its foibles...” (p. 7)

Birkin's first conversation with the Revd. J. G. Keach is a bizarre one, full of misunderstandings, non sequiturs and abrupt changes of subject, and it is clear that the young man's impeded speech (represented by lacunae in the dialogue) has its own part to play in the communicative breakdowns. About half way through the scene, while negotiating terms for using the church stove, Birkin suddenly switches his attention from what the clergyman is saying and through a page-long meditation (the beginning given above) becomes utterly absorbed in the intricacies of the object before him. Birkin has little reason for liking Keach, who does nothing to conceal his opposition to the restoration work and who reacts to his request for lodging in the bell tower with unholy spleen. In the same circumstances, we may well feel we might want to turn off too. But there is a similar lapse of concentration later in the scene:

“[Keach] began to say something quite irrelevant — perhaps that was one reason why it was hard to keep listening to him. But there was a quality in his voice too which sapped the spirit and possibly there was a great deal that I missed (I may have been brooding on Moon and Mossop's Damoclean scythe).” (p. 10)

and this time, partly because Birkin sows a seed of doubt about his own conduct, we feel less confident about absolving him. What hinders a conclusive judgement is the fact that beyond the record of some part of what Keach said we only have Birkin's viewpoint to work from. The episode is recalled later, however, and we find ourselves looking back at it from a quite different viewpoint, that of Charles Moon, who on a few important occasions

provides a competing perspective on his colleague's behaviour and on events in general. This is one of these occasions. Moon and Birkin are discussing Keach, now receding into the distance after a stinging condemnation of Moon's search for Piers' grave:

““However does the charming Alice put up with him?” Moon said. “Imagine having to eat at least three meals a day and have to listen to his bleating. And then share a bed!”

“Perhaps he's different at home,” I said. “In fact, he *is* different. Anyway, *I* have to listen to him, labouring as I do in his vineyard.”

“What does he go on about?”

“Well, for one thing, the church stove.”

“You've told me about that. And it was weeks ago; he can't still be talking about it.”

“I don't know. No, really I don't. I know that he's talking. But about what I'm not sure. He doesn't seem to expect any answers. In its way, it can be rather soothing.”

Moon giggled. “You're a queer devil, Birkin,” he said. “What are you like at home, I wonder?” (Now that made me think)” (p. 65)

That Keach can be decidedly more genial at home is confirmed by the visit to the vicarage which Birkin refers to here. But beyond that and the first scene we looked at, no further conversation with the clergyman is given from which to assess the fairness of Birkin's charges, which we would certainly have to accept at their face value were it not for Moon's amused deflection of them here back to their source. Moon, of course, is drawing on his own experience of Birkin's communicative oddities.

The stove episode is not the sole example of its kind. In fact, Birkin's

susceptibility to spells of rapt absorption before objects of an aesthetic or mechanical interest (the bas-relief of Laetitia Hebron, the Anglo-Saxon baluster in the belfry, the Ellerbeck's organ or the cabinet in the Keaches' living room, for instance) can be documented from a number of scenes. A further single example, however, must stand for all.

When Birkin goes to take his first Sunday lunch at the Ellerbecks, he knows that he has a substantial debt of kindness to repay and that the invitation itself comes with strings attached: Kathy, with her usual blunt honesty, has made that clear. Birkin is to provide a counterweight to another guest, Mr Jagger, a visiting preacher with a literary bent and a talent for boring his listeners ("He's a bit above our heads, but [Mam] says the two of you will get on like a house afire" (p. 37)). Thus, all eyes are on Birkin. Disappointingly, the narrator does not record what part he played in stoking the coals of conversation, but that it was not a large one is evident from his remark that "conversation did not flow freely around the Ellerbeck table" and from his amused sketch of the family meekly submitting to a long lecture "on the excellence of the works of Mr Thomas Hardy". Further

"[Jagger] was so assured and self-appreciatory a talker that really there was no need to do more than demonstrate wakefulness by an occasional nod"

(p. 39)

and Birkin is able to withdraw his attention and allow his eyes to "take stock of the room's crowded decor", moving from one item of furniture to the next until they finally settle on

"an oil-lamp suspended from the ceiling by four brass chains. Reluctantly, I had to concede that its magnificence ran my

Bankdam-Crowther pretty close. It had two knobs and a cut-off designed to immediately extinguish flames if it got to flaring, a beautiful pink cut-glass paraffin reservoir, a standard plain glass lantern and an encircling opaque globe to diffuse a benign glow over the Ellerbeck household.....I would like to have risen and examined it more closely. Mechanically, it was a much simpler machine than the church stove but, aesthetically, greatly surpassed it." (p. 40)

The oil-lamp comes to dominate the scene, foregrounded by the sharp descriptive detail and by the intensity of Birkin's absorption. Indeed, the object achieves a dimensionality which is quite lacking in Jagger and the Ellerbecks who seem paper cutouts by comparison. But, then, few of the memoir's characters go much beyond that description and we may pause to consider to what extent a faithful rendering of the young man's restricted viewpoint may have affected characterisation as a whole. Finally, we should note the location of the scene: it follows and seems to illustrate Birkin's comment (quoted earlier) that the world outside the still church was rather like a dream. If this accounts for what takes place in the Ellerbecks' parlour, then no wonder Birkin is so withdrawn. Yet the wakeful clarity of his vignette of the oil lamp, at least, seems to confirm that this object is *real*, in the same way that the mural's "reappearing picture" is. From this beginning, we can thus trace in the scene a paradigm of the mural's dominance of the memoir.

The task of restoring this painting provides a haven from unendurable memories, and, at first, occupies his thoughts as an obsession, overturning the normal relations between reality and day-dream:

"Bringing back that long-dead man's apocalyptic picture into daylight

obsessed me....Even when I wasn't on the job I found myself dwelling on that immense spread of colour." (p. 37)

Further, when the outer world impinges on his absorption, the impersonal routines of his labour provide a safe, neutral ground for communicating with it, for Birkin is demonstrably at his most relaxed in others' company (and this includes our own), when chatting about his work. But this is not the whole story, and as we become caught up ourselves in that fascinating combination of patience, skill and calculated gamble that comprises his work, and in his expert appraisal of the marvellous window that inch by-inch opens before him in the dirty wall, we recognise that the task engages the finest elements in his being. We see too that the mural's holding power is not just the temporary anchorage in reality it offers him but the sum of its own intrinsic beauty and worth, the timeless communicative power that continues to haunt his memory into old age and inspire such passages as these:

"By the end of the second day a very fine head was revealed. Yes, a very fine head indeed, sharp beard, drooped moustache, heavy-lidded eyes outlined black. And no cinnabar on the lips; that was a measure of my painter's calibre; excitingly as cinnabar first comes over, he'd known that given twenty years, lime would blacken it. And as the first tinges of garment appeared, that prince of blues, ultramarine ground from lapis lazuli, began to show that really confirmed his class he must have fiddled it from a monastic job...This was no catalogue Christ, insufferably ethereal. This was a wintry hard-liner. Justice, yes there would be justice. But not mercy. That was writ large on each feature for when, by the week's end, I reached his raised right hand, it had not been made perfect: it was still pierced."

(p. 26)

"So, each day, I released a few more inches of the seething cascade of

bones, joints and worm-riddled vitals frothing over the fiery weir. A few wretches were still intact. To these he hadn't given a great deal of attention; they were no more than fire fodder. All but one. And he, I could have sworn, was a portrait — a crescent shaped scar on his brow made this almost certain. His bright hair streamed like a torch as, like a second Simon Magus, he plunged headlong down the wall. Two demons with delicately furred legs clutched him, one snapping his right wrist whilst his mate split him with shears.

It was the most extraordinary detail of medieval painting that I had ever seen, anticipating the Breughels by a hundred years. What, in this single detail, had pushed him this immense stride beyond his time?" (p. 60)⁵⁾

The memoir celebrates expertise and craftsmanship in many fields and is full of tributes to particular painters, musicians and writers (mostly English). Birkin disclaims his own inclusion within their ranks, preferring to describe himself as "the labourer who cleans up after artists" (p. 29), but it is actually his own possession of skills he values only in others which makes his detailed record of the mural's restoration so fascinating to read. In fact, the passion, dedication and skill that he pours into the work establish something more than a resemblance between him and the nameless man who had stood and laboured in the same high place some five hundred years before. And, in the vacuum produced by the absence of strong ties with others, we might call the bond that forms between them the central relationship of the novel. In retrospect, we realise that the impression of intimacy derives in large part from its being an introverted relationship with his own self (complementing that between "author" and main character), and that the shadow he traces in

5) J. L. Carr's art historical leanings are confirmed by the forty-one volume series of historical and architectural maps of the English counties which he compiled and published, 1968-77.

the brush-strokes of the painting and with which he daily communes is the mirror image of his own soul.⁶⁾

Of all the links between Birkin and this “departed friend” it is the terrifying vision that each carries in his mind which identifies them most closely. This the painter has transmuted into art:

“Ah yes, this was his Great Work. Whatever he’d been employed on before must, could only have been a work-out for this. He’d sweated here, tossed in his bed, groaned, howled over it.” (p. 76)

and his creative agony is duplicated in Birkin’s nightmares:

“...sliding forward into machine-gun fire and no pit to creep into, slithering on through mud to mutilating death. And then my screams too joined with the night creatures.” (p. 14)

for though their visions of hell are different in kind, they are alike in intensity. Unlike the painter, however, what Birkin has seen at Passchendaele and Bapaume and on the unnamed battlefields of his marriage, he has no desire to give expression to. Instead, working painstakingly, minutely on the same surface with brushes, dry colours, diluted hydrochloric acid and the rest through the summer of 1920, he iterates the artist’s creative process, restoring, recreating the painting, in order that it may speak to his

6) The novel explores a parallel set of correspondences between Moon and Piers Hebron. Among others, one may cite the verbal play on Moon / crescent, the connection they have in common with the Middle East, their social exclusion for perversion (Piers’ profession of Islam and Moon’s homosexuality), and the fact that both sleep beneath the ground.

own time. And speak it does, not just of the terrors of an out-worn apocalypse, but of newer hells:

“Then [Mrs Keach] didn’t speak for some time. I’d have been astonished if she had: at close quarters, face to face, my wall was daunting and she was daunted. I heard her draw in breath. Then she said, “Do you believe in hell, Mr Birkin?”

Now that was a thought! Hell? Passchendaele had been hell. Bodies split, heads blown off, grovelling fear, shrieking fear, unspeakable fear! The world made mud! But I knew it was bible hell she had in mind, hell that went on and on, an aching timeless hell. So I answered, “Well, it depends. Hell’s different things to different people and different things to the same person at different times.”

She didn’t question this: I swear she read my mind. She knew. “Then what about hell on earth?” she said.....

“Yes, “I answered. “I’ve been there; I have a map of it in my head, and Mr Moon will bear me out. They kept sending us back there and that hell was worse than this chap’s.”” (p. 77)

For Moon too, the mural:

“brings back the whole bloody business in France....Those red evenings when the barrage was starting up and each man wondered if this was to be the night...

“And he shal com with woundes rede
To deme the quikke and the dede”” (p. 61)

Thus, what once provided a cloak to creep inside and hide becomes a trysting place with darkest thoughts, and this puts a new slant onto Birkin’s words:

“It was inside the still church, before its reappearing picture, that was *real*.”

The Osgodby Judgement was its painter's greatest but also his final work for, while depicting the torments of the damned, a fall from his scaffold cut short his own life. Ironically, the last thing that he painted was the enigmatic figure of a falling man. It is the model of a fate that may await Birkin too, for the man who taught him his craft also warned him of its dangers:

““It's a profession, my boy, [but] a bloody perilous and penurious one....Why we're near enough extinct; there's only the two of you in it, and George Peckover's eyesight's getting so bad he'll fall off a ladder any day now.” (p. 17)

Such forebodings resound through the novel, but Birkin has less to worry about from ladders and bad eyesight than from the existential tight-rope that he walks in his mind: one foot wrong and the hell which, like the painter, he carries within will dash him to pieces on the stone-flagged floor below. Yet, it is this same precariously balanced man whom the dead artist entrusts with the task of resurrecting him:

“Here I was, face to face with a nameless painter reaching from the dark to show me what he could do, saying to me as clear as any words, “If any part of me survives from Time's corruption, let it be this. For this was the sort of man I was.”” (p. 27)

The appeal could almost be Birkin's own, petitioning his author self for his own rescue from the hand of Time. But the young man who tells Moon that he cannot imagine old age happening to him (p. 66) has still to learn the

destructiveness and irreversibility of Time which is the wisdom of the elder Birkin.

The "author's" pervasive brooding on the past defines our common predicament in a world of change and his own acute sense of the closeness of the grave. Yet, the fact that he has been able to discipline his recollections into artistic form, and that they will almost certainly survive him, seems to offer evidence that some of our losses may be retrieved. Beyond the mural's vision of resurrection, the memoir makes no claims for our mortal flesh, but it does examine the relative but consoling truth that, through our works, Time can be defeated and the past restored. It is thus far from incidental that Birkin's past self should have been an art restorer, and that his present one is a writer. And it is also appropriate that the painting he redeems from oblivion should depict Christ, the archetype of restorers, awakening souls on Judgement Day. For Birkin, "a sort of impresario, conjuring and teasing back" (p. 67) this painting, its painter and his own youth from the "darkness", has similar power to perform wonders.

Birkin pulls off the restoration of the painting without "putting a foot wrong" (p. 99) and, token perhaps that the flesh can be restored, begins to recover from his emotional trauma. His physician is his own labour ("working in rhythm and feel[ing] a reassuring confidence that everything's unravelling naturally and all will be right in the end" (p. 36)) and, with his reestablishing of a sense of purpose and peace of mind, the ending of his self-imposed exile from his own kind. Little by little, a more relaxed and sociable Birkin begins to emerge, one not "on edge any more" (p. 67), whose facial spasms and stammer are receding, and who can now talk about matters which were off-limits before.

From a mid-point in the story the focus accordingly shifts from a Birkin locked in solitary communion with the mural to one more readily sharing his thoughts and feelings with Moon or Mrs Keach. But the much greater openness and give-and-take of conversations is still not enough to displace all the impressions we have formed. For one thing, the mural has lost none of its pre-eminence in conversation:

““How are you two getting on together?” Moon would say, waving a hand at my wall. “Do you ever feel him breathing down your neck, nudging you — “Good lad, Birkin! Attaboy! You must know him pretty well. Go on — tell me about him. Who was he?”” (p. 75)

Birkin is still felt to be editing his words, and conversations continue to be cut short by spells of silence:

““.....You’ve never told me — are you married?”

I told him about Vinny and that she’d gone off with another chap. I didn’t tell that she’d almost certainly bedded down with other men while I was overseas. Nor that she’d left me once before. “Fair enough!” Moon said.

“Feel that we know each other well enough for you not to mind my asking. I’ve never met the right one myself.”

We didn’t speak for some time.” (p. 63)

Alternating with the mural scenes are episodes set in the lush rural landscape of North Yorkshire (context for much nostalgia) and in the homes of the chapel folk with whom Birkin spends his leisure time. They are predominantly descriptive and, as if to offset the intensity of neighbouring scenes, treat their subject mainly in a comic vein. Birkin’s parodic sketch of local hell-fire preaching typifies the humour in its mingling of amusement

with nostalgia, but the main target of many of these scenes is actually the hero himself, clumsily attempting to conform to a new milieu. It is tempting to look further at the complementary scenario of Birkin's otherness they thus seem to offer, but there is insufficient space here, and they are otherwise rather tedious stuff whose poorer inspiration is distinctly felt in much of the writing:

“And so we clattered off, calling farewell to those disqualified by infirmity or alien beliefs from joining us, conscious (as were they) that we were part of the ancient cycle of the farming year and that our passing was token that the harvest was almost in.

Am I making too much of this? Perhaps. But there are times when man and earth are one, when the pulse of living beats strong, when life is brimming with promise and the future stretches confidently ahead like that road to the hills. Well, I was young...” (p. 83)

Life brimming with promise and the pulse of living beating strong, however, carries us back to the main action and a Birkin head over heels in love but feeling no great urgency to inform the lady:

“I was married. Vinny had gone off with him but neither of us had done much about it. She'd shrewdly left the door open so that, if need be, she could slip back — before she went again. And Alice Keach. I was sure that she was a deeply religious woman: marriage for her really did mean “let no man put asunder.” Never forget this was 1920, another world.

So there it was and there it would stay until the day I would go. Then, for a year or two, perhaps we'd exchange a polite Christmas card and, after that, we'd draw further away. But now she was here and, unknowing, mine. Well, that's how I liked to think of it.” (p. 93)

That both are already married certainly complicates the situation as does the fact that Alice Keach's husband is a clergyman.⁷⁾ Yet, at this unpromising point in their affair some eighteen pages off the close of the novel, Birkin seems resigned to the impasse he's in, and we may even detect a note of contentment in his being able to closet and fantasise the relationship in the privacy of his thoughts. But, to be fair to him, having only just emerged from one emotional inferno, he seems to have good reason for not wanting to rush into things:

“...there was Vinny. That had been a sort of hell. But I'd crawled from its pit...” (p. 78)

and it is 1920, “another world”, where following one's natural instincts may be to commit oneself to a term in hell:

““Sex! It's the very devil. Quite merciless! It betrays our manhood, rots our integrity. Isn't it, perhaps, the hell you were asking about, Birkin?””
(p. 91)

as Moon (who has spent the last months of the war having “hell” knocked out of him in a military prison for sleeping with his batman) here attests.

Our unlawful passions then may be our undoing, and though Moon certainly encourages Birkin in his pursuit of Mrs Keach, his warning:

“Hear you're haring round the countryside looking over the girls.....Better keep it quiet that you're wed: every second chap round about has a

7) Mrs Keach's unhappiness and the emptiness of her marriage are expressed in symbolic terms in the vicarage scene (pp. 45-8).

shot-gun.” (p. 73)

is only half in jest for, in certain departments, not that much has changed in Oxgodsby in five hundred years. And if that isn't enough, there is also the ceiling boss near where he is working with its carving of a “golliwog devil thrusting his grinning head between a couple trapped in the wrong bed” (p. 18), to remind him daily, like the great hell panorama before him, of “the God-awful things that [may] happen” (p. 12) should he place any trust in his instincts. But men and women are subject to the same passions as they ever were, and Birkin is no exception — “missing a woman badly” (p. 71) but also reined back by strong inner restraints, he drifts passively into a liaison that will devastate his life.

From her first appearance, the counter pulls of attraction and inhibition colour his vision of Mrs Keach. She comes to him while he is sleeping (on a tomb), and Birkin is “drowsy, only half awake” as he absorbs her strangely flawless beauty that, for a man apt to confound art and reality, increases her enchantment:

“she was quite enchanting. Her neck was uncovered to her bosom and, immediately, I was reminded of Botticelli — not his Venus — the Primavera. It was partly her wonderfully oval face and partly the easy way she stood. I'd seen enough paintings to know beauty when I saw it and, in this out of the way place, here it was before me.” (p. 33)

and in a succession of similarly ambivalent guises (bringing him apples from her garden, a “latter-day Eden” where she cultivates fig-trees; offering him roses that bloom endlessly but have sharp thorns etc), she continues, as she promises at this first meeting, to “haunt” him. That Mrs Keach never quite

resolves into flesh and blood ordinariness does not matter that much: it simply confirms that Birkin only ever sees her through a distorting lens of fantasy and desire:

“I found it pleasantly disturbing to consider the possibility of wandering off with her to some quiet room, eating supper, taking her hand, touching her, kissing. An upstairs room, its window open to the smell and sounds of an orchard and, beyond that, fields. And turning towards each other in the dusk. Well, we have our dreams...” (p. 64)

Soon these dreams have transformed to a love which, so long as it makes no reciprocal demands, still cannot harm him:

“in love! No, better than that — secretly in love, coddling it up in myself. It’s an odd feeling, coming rarely more than once in most of our lifetimes. In books, as often as not, they represent it as a sort of anguish but it wasn’t so for me. Later perhaps, but not then.” (p. 92)

But this anguish cannot be held at bay for ever, and it makes its entrance swiftly enough when he attempts to wed his fantasy to truth.

The rest is the history of Birkin’s endeavours (true to the convention, three in number) to convey his feelings to Alice Keach. The first comes during a conversation about hell on earth. Birkin senses in her bold questioning that she is reaching for a deeper communion but though his marriage is in his thoughts (as we infer her loveless union is in hers), he fails to pick up her invitation to locate this hell in ill-paired relationships and, instead of love, turns the talk to war:

“But even as I spoke, I knew she wasn’t answered. It was neither that nor a bible hell made her ask.

“Oh,” she said. “I’m sorry. It was a silly question...”

That was the missed moment. I should have put out a hand and taken her arm and said, “Here I am. Ask me. What do you want to know? The real question! Tell me. While I’m here. Ask me before it’s too late.””

(p. 78)

We are carried back to the novel’s second epigraph (taken from Housman’s “A Shropshire Lad”, poem XXXII):

“Now for a breath I tarry,
 Nor yet disperse apart —
 Take my hand quick and tell me,
 What have you in your heart?”

and note that both statements, for all their urgency, register a passive desire for the other party to take the real initiative. And we are reminded too of a leitmotiv of the tale:

“It is now or never; we must snatch at happiness as it flies” (p. 85)

Ill-luck in the guise of Mossop thwarts a second chance to “catch the fleeting moment e’er it [flies]” (p. 27), but there is left a third, and this time, as if leaving nothing to chivalry or chance, Mrs Keach unashamedly makes all the running. This final scene approximates in detail to the day-dream (p. 64) which was quoted above, except that here the lady herself asks to be taken to the upstairs room and, at a window overlooking the fields, it is again she who makes the first advance:

“She also turned so that her breasts were pressing against me. And, although we both looked outwards across the meadow, she didn’t draw away as quite easily she could have done.

I should have lifted an arm and taken her shoulder, turned her face and kissed her. It was that kind of day. It was why she’d come. Then everything would have been different. My life, hers. We would have had to speak and say aloud what both of us knew and then, maybe, turned from the window and lain down together on my makeshift bed. Afterwards, we would have gone away, maybe on the next train. My heart was racing. I was breathless. She leaned on me, waiting. And I did nothing and said nothing.” (p. 106)

Mrs Keach makes a third embarrassed exit, and Birkin is left disoriented and stunned: indeed, shell-shocked. But what follows is also familiar. He wanders across the country in a kind of dream and for two days carefully avoids meeting anyone. Then when it is already too late (the Keaches, rather unconvincingly, have fled the village, and a letter from Vinny inviting a return to their marriage hell is winging its way towards him), he emerges from his trance and summons the will to act:

“Then towards evening, I pulled myself together and thought, Well, usually there’s a second chance for most of us; perhaps she’s waiting there as I’m waiting here.” (p. 108)

The description of his visit to the empty house draws much of its powerful effect from image and situational echoes: an unanswered door, a bell that mimics a lady’s mocking laughter and, re-emerging the more poignantly for the change of context, the image of an advance signaller sending messages along a dead wire:

“Then I remembered the bell, its mean little knob sagging from a hole bored through a doorpost, its rusting wire disappearing into the darkness and silence. And I pulled at it, hearing at first only a rasping scrape until, far-off, deep inside the empty house, a bell answered: it stirred the stillness for no more than a moment. Yet, high on some wall, it must have still quivered like a live thing.

What came over me? A sort of madness I suppose, because I gripped that knob more firmly and dragged at it again and again so that the bell’s sound came hurrying along corridors, round corners, down staircases, echoing and reechoing, spreading through the dark and empty house like ripples of her laughter. But now I knew that it was laughter calling to me from the past — clearly, playfully, yet poignantly sad. It was the worst moment of my life.”

(p. 108)

“The worst moment of my life.” The words capture all the anguish of disappointed love and the bitter knowledge, learned too late, that we must snatch at elusive happiness before it flies. They do not belong to the young man, however, but to his elder self and thus carry the additional weight of a lifetime of experience here being reviewed from the margin of the grave.

We feel sorry for Birkin but the outcome actually comes as no surprise, for viewed from a perspective of reluctance to share his thoughts and feelings with others and of self-sequestration in a closed inner world, his failure in the role of lover seems inevitable. We thus concede the perfect ironic accordance of the requital here for Birkin’s door closing. That which faces him in Mrs Keach’s “absurd portico” is no ordinary doorway, however, for as he listens to the echoes of her laughter mocking his failure to seize the chance of love, he realises that he is standing on an existential threshold between a past now forever closed to him and a future that cannot match it

in intensity.

Carr draws on the romance convention of the Fatal Woman for key elements in his treatment of the doomed relationship. We have glanced already at the lovers' first meeting where the young man's sleep, his vision of ethereal beauty, the idealised setting and the undercurrents of enchantment and death each play a role in distilling the other-worldly atmosphere that marks the scene. But the convention also premises the despair which follows: the lover's awakening to a bleak and wintry world after the dream of happiness has fled. Birkin's awakening is a figurative one, but his inner desolation, mirrored in the transformed landscape, is reproduced faithfully from the romantic model. The seemingly endless summer crosses into winter that same night:

“The trees had stripped down to their black bones and had heaped leaves in drifts against hedges and walls.....In yards and gardens, people were pulling up, burning, trimming, strengthening fences.....battening down before winter's onslaught.” (p. 109)

and, like other dream narratives, the story comes to an end where it began, in a prospect as alien and inhospitable as that “enemy country” (p. 1) which first faced Birkin on arrival in Oxbogby:

“All was as it had been — the fields, the high woods, even the crouching cat. It stared hostilely at me as I lifted the loop of binder twine to open the gate.” (p. 110)

The shrunken reality to which he now returns is identical with the world which his elder self inhabits. It is thus fitting that, at this sealed door,

Birkin's two selves should merge into one and the story come to an end. It remains only for him to bid farewell to some of the artifacts he has held in special regard: the Bankdam-Crowther stove, the bas-relief of Laetitia Hebron and, finally, the mural. His numbness dissolves, and the memoir closes with a moving recapitulation of the sorrow which neither growing old nor Birkin's garnering of the past into this record has quite managed to assuage:

“We can ask and ask but we can't have again what once seemed ours for ever — the way things looked, that church alone in the fields, a bed on a belfry floor, a remembered voice, a loved face. They've gone and you can only wait for the pain to pass.

All this happened so long ago. And I never returned, never wrote, never met anyone who might have given me news of Oxgodby. So, in memory, it stays as I left it, a sealed room furnished by the past, airless, still, ink long dry on a put-down pen.

But this was something I knew nothing of as I lifted the loop and set off across the meadow.” (p. 111)

But the novel is clearly much more than an old man's elegy for youthful lands of lost content, and simply to read it as such is to overlook the deeper implications of Birkin's illness and the intimate relation between his story and its background in the Great War. The latter has touched this small community too (the death of Percy Sykes, p. 72), but the more devastating spiritual inheritance of that holocaust — our rootlessness, loss of a sense of purpose in being, and alienation from each other — for which Birkin's shell-shock serves as paradigm, has so far only arrived there in his person (though the same blight may be detected in Moon's Cain-like wanderings and in the fractured emotional relationship of the Keaches). Oxgodby provides

then a last glimpse of a harmony that will very soon be swept away, an organic unity between man, the land and Time which Birkin finds deeply soothing and restorative. But there are clues too that this happiness may be an illusion:

“I thought there might be something to be said for seasons in hell because, when we’d dragged ourselves back from the bloodiness, life had seemed brighter than we’d remembered it.” (p. 77)

one that will last only as long as the fine weather, and since he carries within himself the serpent, Birkin’s expulsion from this garden would seem to be preordained.

The blank interim that follows can be pieced together only from a few oblique clues. First, the act of despair, a return to the living hell of his marriage:

“I had no illusions. She would go off again, would come back again. And I should be there.” (p. 110)

Then, the dragging of himself around the corner to “another view” (p. 99) that can never match the happiness left behind, and on to the full-blown absurdity of an existence he characterises thus:

“I never exchanged a word with the Colonel. He has no significance at all in what happened during my stay in Oxbodby. As far as I’m concerned he might just as well have gone round the corner and died. But that goes for most of us, doesn’t it? We look blankly at each other. Here I am, here you are. What are we doing here? What do you suppose it’s all about? Let’s

dream on. Yes, that's my Dad and Mum over there on the piano top. My eldest boy is on the mantelpiece. That cushion cover was embroidered by my cousin Sarah only a month before she passed on. I go to work at eight and come home at five-thirty. When I retire they'll give me a clock — with my name engraved on the back. Now you know all about me. Go away: I've forgotten you already." (p. 24)

This aside follows the first meeting with Colonel Hebron (with whom Birkin shares more than a passing resemblance) but, in its context, the almost startling vehemence of the outburst is left unexplained. Perhaps Birkin simply caught his own reflection in the mirror of his work. Whatever the case, the genial mask slips and he confronts us with an unsettling vision of ourselves, coldly indifferent to each other, trapped in absurd relationships and drifting through routine-bound and death-terminated lives, trying feebly to make sense of it all — and as if we were looking from same window, he expects us to concur. For, although it may seem jarringly at odds with the supposed happiness of these memories, this is a familiar enough rendering of our waste land world.⁸⁾

If this, in the end, is all that existence affords, then no wonder that the memoir is surrounded by a silence, and that it should record only the dream that has sustained Birkin through his meaningless voyage:

“Ah those days.....for many years afterwards their happiness haunted me. Sometimes, listening to music, I drift back and nothing has changed.

8) Another hint of a darkening of sympathy towards others in his later years may be contained in:

“In those days I didn't dislike children; in fact, I got on very well with most of them.”

(p. 27)

The long end of summer. Day after day of warm weather, voices calling as night came on and lighted windows pricked the darkness and, at day-break, the murmur of corn and the warm smell of fields ripe for harvest. And being young." (p. 85)

It is a dream which has become progressively more rose-tinted as the years have passed and one which he has jealously guarded from too close a brush with truth. Which is perhaps why Birkin never returned to Osgodby, never wrote, nor otherwise tampered with the source of his dream. For he knew from what gossamer stuff it was woven even before he left the village, as his bleak parting words to the bas-relief of Laetitia Hebron show:

"Perhaps you did well to leave early; it may not have lasted." (p. 110)

Yet if Laetitia's married fulfilment may not have continued had she lived, neither might any similar happiness that Birkin found in Alice Keach (for whom Laetitia is a frequent stand-in). It is perhaps fitting then that both ladies have, in their different ways, left "early", for human happiness is fleeting and hard to sustain. But reality with its unkind truths is one thing and dream quite another, and, though ultimately absurd, it is clear that Mrs Keach will continue to haunt Birkin with a vision of unflawed happiness until the day he dies:

"That rose, Sara van Fleet...I still have it. Pressed in a book. My Bannister-Fletcher, as a matter of fact. Someday, after a sale, a stranger will find it there and wonder why." (p. 49)