

THE WORK OF L. H. MYERS

I N all four of his novels¹ L. H. Myers is concerned with the theme of individual development in a civilized society, a society in which leisure and a tradition of culture make possible the practised intelligence and sensibility which he takes to be necessary conditions of development. He doesn't imply of course that leisure and a cultural tradition in themselves ensure any significant development, and in fact in *The Clio* he sees what can be said for this civilized background in the absence of any of the highly developed individuals whom he's really interested in. He there tries to convey the value of formal self-control and civilization 'in the ordinary and slightly gross sense of the word':

'The smell which the punkah wafted forth was human—human, but not too human; warm and yet fresh—a smell delicate and composite; artificial because soaps, perfumes, powders, tobacco, hair lotions and sachet-scented fabrics entered into it; but naturalized and blended into unity by the odour of the human body; a smell of men and women living in the highest possible state of cleanliness; the smell of the fine flower of civilization.'

Sir James Annesley, dying of blackwater fever in the expensive steam yacht on the Amazon, makes the effort of remaining a self-possessed and considerate member of a civilized social group. The howling of the monkeys disturbed his last few nights.

'Whether he looked forward to the usual uproar at dawn, or whether he hoped to die first, was not easy to determine. At about two o'clock he surprised the doctor by concentrating

¹*The Orissers* (Putnam, 1922), *The Clio* (Putnam, 1925), *The Near and the Far* (Cape, 1929), *Prince Jali* (Cape, 1931). The last two are part of a trilogy not yet completed.

his faculties sufficiently to frame one or two definite questions regarding the monkeys' appearance and habits. The doctor went to the professor's cabin and woke him to obtain the desired information. Returning, he said:

"The howling monkey stands about two feet high. He has long silky hair, of a reddish-brown colour on the back, golden on the flanks. It is owing to an unusual development of the hyoid bone that his cry has such extraordinary resonance. The howling monkey can make himself heard easily at a distance of two miles. When he howls he sits at the top of some great tree which dominates the surrounding forest."

"Thank you," breathed Sir James, who had listened with a feeble smile. He died not long afterwards, just before the monkeys began their concert.'

Sir James is not presented as anything other than a rather selfish man of small elegant life. The superficiality (in one sense) of the civilization he stands for is stressed not only explicitly in the triviality of many of the characters, but also by the recurrent contrast between it and the elementary impulses and physical facts below it. The death of Sir James is the most profound statement of the theme; but it also appears in his mild lechery just before his illness; ironically, perhaps a trifle superciliously, in the liberal don's boarding the yacht (and entering the story) in a desperate effort to cope with diarrhoea brought on by a surfeit of stewed turtle; and in Hugo's panic and collapse in the jungle when he thinks a poison snake has bitten him. Myers' aim, in fact, is to provide immediate unargued persuasion of the worth of a highly irrational civilization regardless of the smallness of interest or achievement of its individual representatives.

The Clio as a whole, in spite of the significance of this theme, lacks richness and importance. Its comparative failure is closely related to a difference in the treatment of character between this book and the others, the immediate sign of the difference being that you are invited to feel a little superior to the characters here whereas in the other novels you respect them. Compare Hugo (from *The Clio*) with Hari (from *The Near and Far*) when they are both in love without realizing that their love is returned:

‘Hugo grieved, but not even his mother’s anguish could distract him from the delicious agitation by which he was possessed. For he was still uncertain. His foolish heart still questioned “Is my love returned?” Before him stretched an exquisite vista, full of mysteries and discoveries; ardent, he was waiting to be cured of his unbelief.’

Then the difference of attitude in this description of Hari returning from a journey:

‘He had a foolish hope that he might come upon Sita sitting beside the lake path, and as he dismounted before the old Rajah’s house he gazed up at the windows with the same causeless expectation . . . During the interval he had no thought but this: “I shall know how I stand the first moment I set eyes upon her.” In his mind the idea had become firmly fixed that this meeting would reveal the turn of his fate. Her face, her attitude, the manner of her greeting—he trembled in anticipation; and it was with a still more profound inward tremor that he entered the room.’

The tone adopted towards Hugo is typical of *The Clio*: in that book, although his theme is profound, underlying even the subtlest lives, Myers is attempting to present it in the lives of people who are not, as individuals, of any great interest. It is for this reason that one is made to feel aloof from the characters; it is only the total pattern that they contribute to which can make any claim on our interest. In this technical respect *The Clio* can be classed with, say, T. F. Powys’s novels, although with its less richly specific presentation of the theme and its less bold and well-knit pattern it is far inferior to Powys’s best work. This treatment of character is probably only possible when a novel’s themes are the simple profundities.

In his better work Myers is engrossed with the subtler problems which cannot exist except for those who are living finely, and which besides raising fundamental issues also make up the detailed texture of living; and these novels, instead of being an *expression* of problems and beliefs, are rather a means in themselves of defining the problems and clarifying the beliefs. With this change of aim goes a change in the use of character: the people represented

now are of the kind who have an immediate personal relevance for you apart from the total pattern of the novel. The heroes are at least as subtle and as complex in interest and feelings as you, and the villains—even if you feel superior to them—are formidable. Walter Standish, the anxiously rationalizing business leader of *The Orissers*, is perhaps nearest to being pitiable, but the plot of the novel gives him the material importance and formidability that such people always have. From this point of view he is a more serious creation than Dos Passos's J. Ward Moorhouse ; one never feels (except occasionally in *The Clio*) that Myers is in the least guilty of merely 'placing' people and indicating his superiority to them, for if he deals with them at all it is because they raise genuine problems for him. It is this that gives him his seriousness as an artist. His work, like the personality of Allen (in *The Orissers*), is marked by 'the complete absence in him of that spirit, which, disguised and subtle in operation, so largely insulates man from man—the spirit of competition.' When he does introduce people whom he despises it is because they are seriously relevant to the people he respects. Madeline, for instance, is one of the people who are every day doing injury to your life, detestable and hateful, not just a feature of the human scene to be observed and labelled from a presumed vantage point ; at her final defeat you feel that the author is triumphantly thankful he brought it off—he allows himself for the first time a little fierce mockery :

“ “ Stop! ” cried Madeline, now flushing to a deep crimson. “ From you I refuse to hear a word more! ” And she wheeled round upon her unfortunate fiancé. “ Walter, I have to put you a question! ”

She paused. Her whole being was shaken by an almost delirious excitement. “ Walter! ” she cried in thrilling accents. “ Have you at any time this evening suspected *me* of—of—”

She was unable to finish. Not only was she well-nigh incapable of speech, but there was no idea in her mind distinct enough for articulate expression. Her eyes, however—charged with a dreadful intensity of menace and supplication—conveyed a sufficient meaning.

In the ensuing moments Walter's mind performed prodigies. He realized that, unless he could speak the word, he was lost.

She asked: Had he suspected her of—? Merciful heavens! Of what? That blank provided a God-sent loophole. Besides, in any case, “suspect” was surely much too strong a term? Aye, he was saved. Saved! For he could—and he would—and forthwith, most magnificently he did—step forward and in a solemn voice reply: “Never, Madeline! Never!”

Indescribable instant! At those magic words Madeline’s entire frame relaxed; happy tears gathered in her eyes; a smile of tremulous thankfulness spread over her upward-turned face.

And what pride, what tenderness, in Walter’s answering smile!

Slowly she moved towards him. He took her hands in his. Rapturous silence! ’

These features of Myers’ use of character might seem to invite the charge that we are identified with his people and indulged with wish-fulfilment. I am not sure, however, what ‘identification’ and ‘wish-fulfilment’ are supposed to mean. In reading Myers’ novels you certainly feel sympathy with some of the characters and pleasure when things—material and spiritual—go well with them; just as you feel about real people if you have any social life. But you are not, in these novels, ‘projected’ into any one character; you are ‘projected,’ rather, into the situation, and respond to the whole of it like an invisible and impotent spectator who is nevertheless in social contact with the characters.

It is worth while seeing why Myers’ novels are in this respect so different from those of Powys, into which this projection doesn’t occur, or occurs to an infinitely smaller degree. It might seem to be that Powys’s characters are more simplified and formalized so that they have less verisimilitude. But then Lawrence’s Man who loved islands is also simplified and ‘flat,’ and yet you feel, I think, much more closely in contact with him than with any of Powys’s characters. Powys’s more mannered writing might be held to explain the difference; but the quite ‘natural’ writing of George Eliot in *Scenes from Clerical Life* still allows this impression to remain, that you and she are aloof spectators of the characters in spite of feeling a kindly concern for them or even being deeply moved. The difference seems to go back ultimately not to prose style, nor to degree of formalization in character presentation, but

to the question whether or not the author chooses to express himself in characters who are admittedly his equals in sophistication and sensibility (at least in the direction he is exploring at the moment). If he does (and if he is himself as mature and sensitive as you can appreciate), then you will establish imaginatively a subtle—and perhaps detailed and various—social relationship with his characters. If he does not, your imaginative social relationship with the characters may be profound, but it will not engage you subtly ; it will be simple and generalized—as it may be when you hear of starving multitudes of Chinese or, for that matter, of the unemployed closer at hand. Myers' novels then, except *The Clio*, present characters and situations with which you are invited to enter imaginatively into full and subtle social relationships.

Returning to the themes of the novels (for it is the maturity of his interests and outlook that gives Myers his primary appeal), one can take *The Clio*, in spite of the chronology, as a preliminary to *The Orissers*, in which he focusses upon the more highly developed people which civilized leisure sometimes throws up. One purpose—perhaps his main purpose—is to give form to his intuition of the undying conflict that exists between sensitive and cultured individuals and the world of commercial values and social competitiveness.

' Could John Mayne ever forget these reflections of himself which flashed upon him out of eyes set in a countenance cold and white with contempt? Could Lilian ever forget the shining desire in his eyes to wound and break the innermost spirit within her? How swiftly they grew to understand one another, those two! And how invariably each accretion of knowledge brought about an accretion of disgust! Was there any feeling, opinion, or taste of his wife's that John Mayne did not feel injurious to his own? Was there anything she held in love or admiration which was not the object of his secret hostility and disdain? Much did they learn, and quickly, in those days! It seemed to them that they had been as little children until then. Man's fundamental unity in aspiration was a myth ; the simple old saying that one man's meat is another man's poison was the first and last word in human philosophy.'

The Orissers is built explicitly around this conflict, and in the trilogy the hostility of the world to sensibility and intelligent living is a constant background :

‘ Poor Jali! If he had been fairly quick to learn that those who do not possess any natural refinement bitterly resent that quality in others, he did not yet fully realize that refinement is the hardest thing in the world to dissimulate. His new acquaintances detected evidences of it in his very endeavours to disguise it. His very humility was humiliating to them.’

Almost equally prominent in *The Orissers* is the conflict between those who are, ethically, mere social units, and those who possess insight and live according to a morality which is individually tested and accepted. On the one hand are Walter and Madeline— ‘ Madeline, drawing herself up, all bust and self-respect,’ who headed the diary of her vindictive hostilities, ‘ We must idealize or we should cease to struggle.’ These are the essentially childish people of the world—trying to eat their cake and have it—violating their ideals and blinkering themselves to the fact. On the other hand are, first, Mayne himself and Nina, allied to these people by their worldly values but possessing some insight into their motives and being to that extent antagonistic to their allies ; secondly, Allen, Lilian and Nicholas, people who know and will consciously admit their true needs, who will do what is necessary, even if the social name for it is murder or adultery or seduction, and will take responsibility for having done it. This self-responsibility, however, neither violates genuine social feelings nor belittles tradition, for, as Myers with delicate insight constantly shows, it is the really individual who are capable of the finest social feeling. A sensitive awareness of what social life involves comes out for example in *The Near and the Far* when Amar realizes his obligation to Hari :

‘ His departure left the two others burdened with a good many small embarrassments. To get rid of one of them, to let Hari see where he stood, Amar put warmth into his tone and said : “ I know whom I have to thank for this visit ; I caught sight of you this morning out of the window. Really, my dear Hari, that was a crowning act of kindness.”

Hari actually coloured. “ I can’t think why I didn’t do it before. The Prince showed himself perfectly amiable.”

After this they went on talking about Daniyal, and although the talk had a fair appearance of naturalness, there was considerable strain beneath the surface. Nothing said was more than a half-truth ; to go further in any direction would be, each felt, a dangerous and difficult venture. But contact with Amar's mind (even of this gingerly sort) had the effect of concentrating Hari's attention upon the "vugarity" in Daniyal. His sense of it in the past had remained floating in suspension ; a drop of acid from Amar's particular fastidiousness had been needed to precipitate it.'

And in *The Orissers* even Madeline herself has a fretting intuition that Lilian possesses the finer way of living and the finer impulses as well as an astringent insight into the self-deceptions of her opponents. She has carefully rehearsed a 'scene' in which she is to have the triumph of humiliating Lilian while exhibiting herself as an exemplar of Christian womanliness :

'She broke the silence on the very instant she willed, and found that she was word perfect ; she had at her command not only the phrases she had prepared, but every look and tone, down to the flicker of an eyelid or the sudden catch of breath. Only—it distracted her to feel within her bosom this tumult that so ill accorded with her words and her demeanour. She was giving voice to feelings that were true,—to feelings that were deeply cherished and had been with her but a few instants ago. Why had they thus treacherously fled? Why was she made false to herself in the hour of trial? Why was she condemned to give, even hiddenly, a false justification to this cold, sneering woman's interpretation of her? The unfairness of it made her heart boil. Anger came to aggravate the seethe and surge of nameless passion within . . . Whither were fled the strength and the sweetness that, an hour ago, had belonged to her?—the strength to enforce the conviction of her sincerity upon the mean and frigid spirit of the woman who opposed her ; the sweetness that would neutralize the acidity of the heart that resisted her. Was this the fashion in which the spirit of Christ served its votaries? Or by what art did her enemy contrive to reduce others to her own level, and make nobility seem nothing but a sham? '

Finally she was forced to see her own nature unrationalized :

‘ Thus round and round, she eddied ; and while her lips thus spoke, an anguished, and yet exultant, ferocity peeped out through the eyelets of her mask. At last her heart was making confession unto itself . . . She rejoices in the horror which she excites. She sees Lilian—silenced, fascinated, revulsed—shrink uncontrollably away. Good! ’Tis good! Lilian doubted the other, the saintly Madeline, did she not? Lilian deemed the saintly Madeline no better than a hypocrite? Well! why then does she shrink back, when the real Madeline offers to appear? Why is she afraid of the only reality she knows? Is she affrighted by the creature of her own evocation? What does she find to dread? Does she, perchance, guess that there is one gesture, and one only, by which the real Madeline might express herself? Does she apprehend that the real Madeline might rise, and putting forth a giant’s strength, smite her detested face with open palm? ’

The latter passage illustrates not only Myers’ insight but also the unfortunate prose in which he sometimes presents it and which for many people must be a serious obstacle to the appreciation of his work’s excellence. In *The Orissers* he seems to have accepted ready-made a literary convention in which the differences between conversation and writing are deliberately stressed ; at its worst it is stilted, ponderous, given to clichés (‘ Her visage congested with passion . . . ’), and suggests an unsponaneous larding on of ‘ style ’ :

‘ The light of all his days was concentrated by that man upon the vestiges of the past, and at night, as he sat musing outside his tent, you saw him seeking a further inspiration from the ancient light of stars . . . Whatever was censurable in this attitude, Allen, whose enthusiasm followed a similar bent, was predisposed, as we have already said, to condone.’

At its best the convention succeeds in giving a highly formal lavishness. This effect often occurs in the descriptions of the settings, which also, at their worst, suggest the realistic stage sets of the conventional theatre ; though more often they justify themselves as effective reinforcements of the themes :

‘Stepping out of doors, he paused under the shock of the heat and light. The whole surface of the earth quivered with the exuberance of a life intoxicated by the sun. On the strips of lawn that intersected the flower beds, heaps of freshly-mown grass were smouldering like incense ; sprays of heliotrope and mignonette, torn off by the passing knives, lay tossed upon the green mounds, withering. In the hottest regions of the garden enormous poppies, erect under the blaze, dropped at moments their heavy crimson petals ; and, quivering with almost human trepidations, above each heart, so bared, the pollen-weighted stamens hung.’

In the trilogy the prose has become easier and more spontaneous. Even there, however, it is quite intentionally different from conversation and works within a convention which makes no attempt to conceal the fact that it is a convention :

‘The negro was poking the charcoal with an iron bar, and when a glowing coal of any size fell through the grid he would pick it up and play with it, tossing it high into the air and catching it again. Out of a doorway nearby there stepped a young girl whose extravagantly painted face and bizarre dress showed her to be prepared for the stage. As she came running past, with flashing teeth and glinting eyes and a joggle of her full breasts, the negro reached out an arm like a gorilla’s, and caught her half-naked body against his own glistening flesh. For a moment she hung suspended in his clasp ; but he forgot that he was holding a live coal in the other hand, and a second later with a howl he dropped coal and girl together, to hop up and down on his toes, his head thrown back in a grin of mingled amusement and pain. With shrieks of laughter the girl ran on.’

Even here, where there is freshness and spontaneity, the prose (especially in its punctuation) still retains an air of formal control which in itself furthers Myers’ intention of civilized comment.

In *Prince Jali* Myers sketches the earlier development of an adult individual, watching his tentative self-shapings, his explorations and re-orientations both in his wider social environment

and among 'his own type, the type governed by moral fastidiousness, by sensitiveness, and by generosity.'

'As he looked out over the lake towards his grandfather's house, a longing to fly back to it seized him. Safety and goodness lay over there. But he could not, it seemed, embrace the good single-heartedly—no, not yet! He must first taste other experiences, so that, when he did reject the world, it should be with the disdain bred of complete knowledge and competence. Before embracing the good, he must be assured that he was doing it out of knowledge and strength. Or was this quibbling? . . . '

Taken as an account of an actual adolescence *Prince Jali* is not convincing, even if allowance is made for the extreme precocity which Jali exhibits, in common with several of Myers' characters. It is especially difficult to believe in when it pictures the non-mature side of adolescence—Jali's delirious play-acting after Gokal's poisoning, for instance, and to some extent, his brief deception by the pseudo-advanced Camp. In its more interesting passages it seems to be a retrospective interpretation of adolescence, in spite of its introspective form:

'For the real Jali—who was he? What was he? One really couldn't say. Anyhow he didn't seem to be taking part at all, when it was a question of human intercourse. The true self seemed to be isolated by its own inalienable nature from other true selves. It was appearances that formed the bridge between person and person. Moreover, his true self, the real Jali, was emptiness—was nothing at all. Yes; even to himself he was an emptiness, a nothingness. And didn't it emerge out of all this that what he was inclined to call real was nothingness itself?

Having pushed his thoughts thus far Jali halted somewhat breathlessly. It seemed to him that he was at last gaining light. To live in and for reality was to dwindle and fade, to accept appearances was to wax fat and grow strong. It was by cultivating the appearances and illusions belonging to the outer man that you not only offered to others but obtained for yourself a substantial and intelligible being.'

This passage will serve also to illustrate the quasi-musings, half soliloquy from a character and half author's comment, which Myers relies on extensively. This of course is a deliberate convention, in line with the formality of the prose. Myers has no interest in unveiling thoughts 'in their dumb cradles'; his characters not only speak, but think, in fluent and carefully chosen words, and this has to be accepted as a convention, as an implicit recognition of the fact that Myers as author is all the time communicating with you as reader *about* these characters who seem to be talking. At times, as for instance in conveying the rationalizations of Walter and Madeline, the device of quasi-musing is of the utmost value. At other times it reinforces the impression that Myers leans too much upon generalized description and seems too much to abstract from the immediacy of fact and experience. Conversation, for instance, is often reported in the barest indirect form:

'But he was boiling with rage, and Ali's curiosity offered him his chance. He set about teasing his questioner with hints and partial disclosures, and then, when he saw that nothing could annoy him more than the naked truth, he looked Ali mockingly in the face and made a bare-faced avowal.'

The same tendency to abstraction appears when Myers, instead of being spontaneously and completely absorbed in an incident, obviously fishes it up to illustrate the theme he is stating in general terms. For instance:

'His parents knew as much about him as any parents were likely to have known about such a son. Their love for him and his for them only sharpened his capacity for deceiving them and theirs for being deceived. It was true that besides seeing what he showed them, they saw a little of what he did not mean to show; but it was precisely with that little that he deceived them most. For he almost always knew when he had betrayed himself and would instinctively set about turning that piece of self-betrayal to good account. Thus, when they told him that they proposed to take him to Agra, he simulated pleasure; but his pretence was not good enough, and at once he knew it. Instinctively, therefore, he set about providing them with a misleading

clue to the nature of his reluctance, pretending, first of all, that he was distressed by the prospect of leaving his boy friend Nazim, and secondly, that he would sadly miss his polo lessons. As a matter of fact he had little affection for Nazim, who bored him ; and as for polo, he detested it.'

Though to my mind this is extremely satisfying, even in this form, it would undoubtedly have been more effective if it had been presented as a happening, and not as an illustration of a general theme. It is too easy to make our own generalized ordering of experience ; from novels we look for order implicit in something like the welter of immediate events.

The frequency of abstract statement in Myers' work cannot, however, be considered in isolation. It is of course bound up with the wide sweep of the novels : the amount of personal history and the number of social contacts that he finds relevant to his themes as they come to expression in the characters ; and the extent of the characters' contact (by means of the plots) with the still wider external world. Concreteness and specificity all the time would overwhelm the theme. But one notices, I think, an increase in concreteness towards the end of each novel when the necessary generalized preparations have been finished. This usually goes together with a sort of crescendo in the plot, so that the books end with superbly concrete and clinching incidents, like the meeting of Nina and Lilian at night, or Gunevati's disclosure of her empty mouth.

What is certain is that when he wants to, Myers is capable of conveying most subtle ideas concretely as well as by description, and that formally reported introspection can be most skilfully blended with the presentation of direct speech and physical action :

' Allen sprang to his feet and gripped the young man by the shoulder.

" What right have *you* to talk in that fashion? " He was livid with anger. " If you want to see Cosmo installed at Eamor, why have you not had the courage to say so? "

" I do now say so! "

" You young fool! " cried Allen, whose voice and aspect had in one moment become positively terrifying. " Do you suppose that I am going to sacrifice Lilian to your folly? "

Nicholas gazed at him speechless. Allen's voice and Allen's eyes had a significance that pierced down to the depths of his spirit. He received a revelation, and that revelation was the more devastatingly complete for the reason that it gave him no knowledge that was not dormant in his heart already.

With an unconscious movement he wrenched himself free from Allen's grasp, and taking a few steps away, stared blankly into the forest. There was no thought of resistance in his mind now ; there was not even any hostility. His spirit lay submerged under a quiet, ironic sadness. Softly he laughed to himself. Lilian and Allen! Of course! Their love was no dim, uncertain possibility, but a vital, forceful fact. It dominated the whole situation. No wonder poor Allen had lost his patience.'

By focussing in *Prince Jali* upon a genuine individual Myers necessarily shows up would-be sophistication, 'knowledge of the world,' and the emancipation which amounts to rejecting traditional morality in favour of the equally ready-made attitudes of a clique. Jali in this respect is set over against his cousin, whose socially given destiny, timidly accepted, is to be a catamite of the fashionably homosexual Prince. Amar, in *The Near and the Far*, expresses this maturity of outlook:

'Perhaps even she halted, with most of the world, at that stage where immorality still retains a certain glamour. Nor was she sophisticated enough to hold sophistication cheap.'

The coolness of tone in the writing does much to indicate Myers' freedom from emancipation-worship ; describing Jali's first contact with the larger social world, for instance : ' . . . like all children, he could take a pleasure in being scandalized ; and if the vulgarities remained an offence, the improprieties that he observed were an excitement and a pleasure.'

But there is a certain strain involved in remaining genuinely alone and being judged immature and unsophisticated, and some of Myers' best passages deal with the gratifying shock that an individual is always able to administer to a social unit if circumstances force him to reveal himself. This occurs, for example, when Jali has to stagger his elder cousin by confessing his own sexual precocity. More finely the same thing appears in *The*

Orissers when Allen corners Walter Standish in the train. After a small introductory shock to Walter's nerves he begins:

“ “ Very well! ” And Allen paused to bestow upon him a long, strange smile. “ Secondly, then,” said he, “ I would have you know this: Lilian Mayne is my mistress.”

This time Walter was really not sure that he had heard aright. “ What? What's that? ” he stammered.

The abominable grin appeared again. “ Mrs. Mayne is my mistress! ” Allen repeated, raising his voice.

Walter drew back as if he had been bitten.

“ And in the third place—” Allen went on. “ But no! On consideration I will hold something in reserve. I have said enough to show that I am in earnest about Eamor. I consider that Lilian has a right to it. She and I need it. We mean to have it.”

Walter remained dumb. Every one of his feelings as a gentleman was inexpressibly offended. He was outraged beyond speech.

His perception that Allen was, in some sort, acting a part—and intentionally over-acting it—did nothing to mitigate the shock to his sensibilities. The man was not less of a scoundrel for that, but simply a scoundrel of a more sinister kind. That he should be following a plan of intimidation was bad ; that he should be doing so with brazen openness was worse. His behaviour enforced the conviction that his villainy was not pure mummery, but an illustration—caricatural, if you would, but still a fair enough illustration—of a real villainy underneath.’

There is an elation in this passage, a sort of glee, which reappears when Allen describes the scene to Lilian :

‘ But Lilian still gasped. “ Your mistress! And to Walter! before whom I have always been so—so genteel! ”

“ All the better!” said Allen. “ The shock was the greater. You stand before him now as a very Jezebel. And the more genteelly you behave in future, the more his flesh will creep. For all his man-of-the-worldishness, Walter remains very ingenuous at heart ; and sexual misconduct inspires him with a

particular horror which he is ashamed to confess to." He broke off with a low laugh. "As for his view of me, that leaves nothing to be desired. Nothing upsets Walter so much as a refusal to defer to the ordinary traditions of gentlemanliness. He is at last convinced that I am capable of anything."

"But then . . ."

"What then?"

"Mightn't he . . ."

"Denounce us? Make use of my admissions? Never! Such a decision is entirely foreign to his nature. Do you think his imagination fails to picture the dreadfulness of the scenes that would ensue? No, no! He isn't even tempted to denounce us. He is committed to quite another line. He still firmly refuses to take cognizance of anything that clashes with his benign view of the case. His parting observation to me was that he considered my words about you unspoken." "

It is a glee given by strength, strength coming from insight and moral clearness when they are forced to reveal themselves to the morally muddled.

The Near and the Far takes people who are already capable of individual living and examines their further development. Often it follows up interests touched on in the earlier books. One figure who comes in all the novels is the man who can neither live smoothly with the world nor achieve a stable individuality which satisfies himself. In *The Orissers* it is Cosmo (and perhaps Nicholas too), in *The Clio Harry*, and in the trilogy *Hari*, during the period of his earlier life which comes to an end in *The Near and the Far*. *Hari* is more interesting and important than the others in that he develops towards a workable and disciplined individuality and is shown in process of achieving the calm and certainty which are taken for granted in Allen of *The Orissers*. The achievement of stability doesn't of course come about through the individual's compromising with the hostile herd; the Rajah Amar, trying to combine political opportunism with advanced Buddhist self-discipline, demonstrates the fallacy of supposing that compromise is possible. For *Hari* the chief line of development involves his sexual life, and *The Near and the Far* here examines with more sensitive thoroughness one of the themes of *The Orissers*, the relation,

crudely, of sexual desire to love. In *The Orissers* it appears in its adolescent form in Nicholas who said in his heart 'All that lies between animalism and pure intelligence is rubbish' and who had previously kept himself sexually to women

'from whom he was separated by wide differences, social, temperamental, and intellectual. Such a gulf corresponded conveniently with that other gulf, to his sense so profound, between the flesh and the spirit; and precluded the necessity of pretending to span the latter with a bridge of sentiment. Among men and women at large an emotion, self-judged sublime, was wont, as he knew, to supply a kind of natural arch over the chasm; and the world generally saw nothing strange in the fact that this emotion found its expression and satisfaction in acts which every impartial element of mind could only regard as absurdly incongruous. This never ceased to be a source of wonder to him. Surely, men, as creatures of the flesh, would do better to repose, confessedly, upon animal nature, whilst enjoying the pleasures of the flesh? Surely the recourse to high sentiment was silly and self-deceptive? Why refuse to discriminate between the things renderable unto Cæsar and the things renderable unto God? Lust was a thing to be recognized, licensed, prized, and despised. The confusion of spiritual motives and sanctions with material motives and sanctions resulted—the evidence was everywhere round him—in a general falsification of values.'

In *The Near and the Far* Hari is shown developing beyond this adolescent problem. When he first appears he is devoting himself by a sort of partial dissociation of personality to a love affair which largely expresses his defiance of socialized values, though it is nevertheless more than that and far more than animality (which also appears in *The Near and the Far* in Gokal and Gunevati); in the words of another character when it ended 'it had been a romance and not a mere loveless gallantry.' Hari, unlike Cosmo and Harry, is capable of submitting to the painful process of reintegrating his personality, and the latter part of the novel is concerned with his advance to more complete sexual love. He remains an individual, now far more independent of society than before, since he derives no simple pleasure from defying it; instead

he faces thorny problems of personal relationships which call for self-responsibility and genuinely individual moral decisions.

Plasticity and a willingness to re-examine his experience, which are stressed as necessary conditions for Jali's development, are evident too in the development of Myers' interests and beliefs in these novels. *The Orissers* ends with Lilian and Allen acquiescing in a curious condition of unsatisfactory stability, in which he realizes that

' he had no fundamental need of her. All that he needed, fundamentally, was his work. He had never been—he never would be—dependent on human relationships. So he left her too free. She was attaining to a self-sufficiency which went further than his. He needed the world of time and matter as stuff from which to distil the abstraction of his thought. She, like an Indian Yogi, was learning to need nothing. And this detachment of her inmost self from the seduction of persons and things, was the more baffling in that it proceeded concurrently with a ready obedience to the demands of everyday life.'

Thus at the end of an already long novel Myers raises another fundamental question, one that is related to the problems of sex and love which interweave themselves with the main theme of the novel.

In *The Near and the Far* he takes up this situation again and now faces it more clearly and seriously. Allen's absorption in his work is carried to its conclusion in Amar's decision to retire from the world and leave his wife. His wife, Sita, has the same still placidity and self-sufficiency as Lilian. They are experiments in living which Myers watches with delicate insight; they are, of course, our own potential states of being. Amar cannot be said to fail (the trilogy is not yet complete), but he becomes, for all our sympathy, unenviable. Sita is faced with the challenge to develop further, as though Lilian were being challenged to come back to life, and Myers shows the fears and conflicts in her that lead finally to her effort of development when she decides to break up her calm self-isolation for Hari.

It will be clear that in *The Near and the Far* Myers is using his characters as projections of sets of impulses and possible ways

of life, all extremely different but highly relevant to each other: some are incompatible and a choice must be made, some conflict but challenge resolution. Simple animality in Gunevati, for instance, with Gokal unstably monopolized by a philosophical mind—their meeting and clash; Hari, as a rebel and a romantic (but not unrelated either to Gokal or Gunevati) with Sita too calmly poised—their growth towards a finer harmony.

The close relevance of the characters within the framework of the themes allows Myers to use more successfully here than elsewhere his device of making one character comment on another. In *The Orissers* where (at its most extreme) Allen explains Nicholas to himself with a footnote to the relevant psychological article, and Nicholas draws from his pocket and reads to Allen an essay on Madeline, the speaking character tends to become a mouthpiece for the author. In *The Near and the Far*, however, the comments of Amar on Gokal, Gokal on Amar, or Sita on Hari all reflect back effectively on to the speaker and contribute more to the developing situation than their explicit meaning.

Although it seems useful to attempt a bare indication of the themes of Myers' work it should not be supposed that much of the novel is conveyed in this way. For one thing the rich interweaving of subordinate interests is neglected. For another, one would not imagine from the kind of theme he concerns himself with that his plots would allow of thrilling intrigue and exciting denouements. In fact, however, Myers offers the curious combination of a devotion to the subtleties of social life that suggests Henry James, with the sort of plot that suggests a detective story. It might seem that the plot was merely added on as further entertainment for the reader, and we perhaps ought not to thrust it aside ungratefully on that account. It probably has, however, a good deal more significance than that. It serves first to make it evident that the conflicting scale of values and the independent moral judgment of Myers' characters have their material relevance and are not merely speculative constructions for private entertainment. Allen, for instance, has to commit murder and by means of forging a letter to entangle the impeccable Walter in it. Jali's commerce with Gunevati and Hari's romance bring them into strategic positions in imperial politics, and their personal feelings become highly relevant to the safety and material prosperity of

themselves and their friends. This, in fact, is the discovery that Jali makes when he realizes that his own people are on his side of a gulf that separates them spiritually from the others, and that they are nevertheless set inexorably in the external world:

‘There was some comfort in the thought that he himself might be almost as odious as Daniyal, because then he would not be so hopelessly out of place in the world, nor suffering misery that was undeserved. On the other hand, the world did certainly contain *some* unquestionably nice people. He came back to that with a conviction that was unshakable. His father and mother, Hari and Gokal—they *were* superior to the inmates of the camp. And what about their position?

It suddenly came over him with impassioned feeling that nothing else mattered so much.’

Apart from this significance of the plots, they are in effect so bound up with the characters and the themes that separate consideration of them is hardly possible. Walter’s entanglement in the murder, for example, can only come about through his own dishonesty and capacity for rationalization. And when Lilian presses Walter into her service by sending a revolver shot through his window in the dead of night after she has discovered Nina tampering with the documents, the melodrama clinches the subtler spiritual relationships among the three characters. It is perhaps one of the most curious aspects of Myers’ work that he succeeds in making such subtle themes of personal feeling integral with such violent events of material and public life.

The worth of Myers’ work ought perhaps to be regarded as largely independent of one’s opinion of the novels as works of art, where judgments may differ widely; essentially they are means of communicating, and they would still be of remarkable value if you concluded that they were scientific essays of an unusual kind. Their first value lies in the fact that they do succeed—by whatever means—in conveying extremely clear and sensitive insight into the conditions of adult and self-responsible lives in a civilized society.

D. W. HARDING.

THE RETURN OF ODYSSEUS

My disappointments, large as capsized tugs,
Pull no more the big ship of love.
My eye of fire, motionable coal,
That saw such salutations of the wharf
(And piped a hoot to the woman's tooting colours)
Is out, and weeps annual delugings ;
My engines bucked and wrung. My
Timbers' splinters plaything water patterns,
My sturdy and few tons have gone to roost
Under the infant waters of the sea,
That never grew to man's curious abyss,
Nor walked a brain in the aching shape of dream
Along the narrow deck of singing timber :
What a boisterous business, to be a guide.
But in the nest of nature's slippery scope,
(Where of God the pressure is so tight)
Elongate eyes like spears would be
Would spasm the cranky juice of hatred's darlings,
Spend the volatile dyes of woman's dress,
Precursor of the sorrow's end. Unheard
The cock in the waters crows, Good Night,
There is nothing to do but be swayed by the sea.

While with gynæcologic hands
My hempen fingers purged, I had eased
To birth my iron monstrous love.

RICHARD EBERHART.