

## THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

### *Biographia Literaria*

MY FIRST THOUGHT is that she looks like Twiggy -- impossibly tall and bony, with shoulders as narrow as a child's. On the other hand, she might be a hillbilly queen, in faded jeans and a floppy blue hat, her blonde hair jammed underneath it. And then she looks like what she is, a Midwestern debutante: it is her hands, long and graceful, with garnet rings and a preppy scarab bracelet, that chiefly account for this impression.

I am seventeen years old, and I long above all the things to be tall and skinny, as only a 5'3" female with a bosom that fashion has rendered an embarrassment can, so I am slightly in awe of her -- just as, later, I will discover that her first reaction to me is envy for my hair, which is thick and wavy, in contrast to her own. The year is 1968. We are entering students at what was then called a girls' college, I being a freshman and she a transfer student, and we are both so inordinately shy that we might never have spoken to each other at all. It is doubtful whether either of us has ever initiated a conversation in her life. But it happens that we have both been adopted by a more confident student, a large, booming, good-natured girl who requires companions for hitch-hiking jaunt to Boston and ropes us in. As we loiter self-consciously on the roadway, watching her try to flag down cars, one of us quotes a phrase from Ernest Dowson, a doomed, absinthe-drinking poet of the 1890's, and suddenly ecstasy strikes; we discover we are both in love with Dowson -- that each of us tried, when she visited England that summer, to locate his overgrown grave in a vast London cemetery. Pretty soon we are quoting him recklessly to the truck drivers who pick us up, and telling them about Dowson's tragic, pure love for the fourteen-year old daughter of a Polish waiter. They seem favorably impressed. We conceive of a grandiose plan to rescue him from the world's neglect. For the next three days, we barely stop talking.

And by the time that weekend is over, we are inseparable, friends for life. We are well on our way to creating the private language that will be our chief mode of discourse, our chief entertainment, for the next two years. Literary in tone, in content, in allusion, it is predicated on the notion, already archaic, that the only worthwhile objects of reverence are the productions of poets. But for my friend, at least, this schoolgirlish, purely lexical world we construct will not be enough to keep her safe. For this is a story about mental illness, a textbook case, courtesy of incest, acid flashbacks, and possibly some fatal flaw in her genetic structure: the west of Ireland -- Yeats country -- where her grandfather was born, has the highest incidence of schizophrenia of anywhere in the world.

IN THE BEGINNING, though, there were no signs of grave disturbance, nothing to suggest that something was direly wrong with the chemistry of her brain. We smoked a million cigarettes that fall, sitting cross-legged on the floor, and talked about pity and terror, and the visionary gleam, and how purity of heart was to will one thing. While everyone around us seemed to be organizing and petitioning and listening to Jimi Hendrix, we went on fervently discussing Wordsworth and Coleridge -- she, who was two years more advanced in her knowledge, had introduced me to the Romantics. Though the very same subject was being discussed in the classroom, we were so sure we did it better that we cut most of our classes so as not to interrupt our chats. We yawned in our professors' faces and wrote our term papers at three in the morning of the day they were due, but in that time and place, where license was a deliberate policy, such behavior only served to win us respect. Even our teachers pandered to us, and among the students our eccentricity commanded a

about aesthetic matters in what must have been a very tiresome way: no one was permitted to admire Dickens, for example or Hemingway, or to prefer Shelley to Keats.

Then, during the annual stint of real-life work the college rather improbably demanded from its students, we holed up together in a ratty apartment in Cambridge, phoning in sick nearly every day to our clerical jobs so we could continue our eternal discussion of the *Biographia Literaria*. We spent a great deal of time casting a mythical movie version of *Brideshead Revisited* with people we knew. By keeping our coats and boots on all day, and huddling in the kitchen with the oven on at full blast, we were able to endure the freezing temperatures of our little slum. By subsisting mostly on fudge, we managed to live for two months off the money my father had given me for Christmas. As she would say later, it was like having a happy childhood at last.

But back at the college that spring, everything began falling apart. At a bad party on campus, she gulped down a lot of cheap wine and sat swaying back and forth with a face terrifyingly empty of expression, so blank and stony that she did not seem drunk so much as prehistoric, regressed to some state in which language did not exist. When people came and spoke to her, she simply stared at them fixedly, or with sudden tenderness, reaching out to touch their faces, tracing their features as a blind woman would and crooning to herself.

After that she began drinking in her room at night, always with that stony look on her face, or else the helpless tenderness that seemed connected to no one in particular. And then she started acting much crazier than that. One beautiful spring night I found her huddled in a corner of her room, covering her face with her hands, trembling all over. Another time, after swaying back and forth for hours, she burned a fleur-de-lis pattern into her arm with a cigarette, explaining to me in the slowed-down, trance-like voice of her drunkenness that she was going to be a nun; this was the mortification of the flesh. And once she shook me awake at three A.M. to announce that she didn't want to live in a body any more: if everyone wanted her fucking body so much (this being a reference to certain boys from a nearby college), they could damn well buy it off her and she and I would go live somewhere on the proceeds.

The next day, though, she always acted as if she'd been merely naughty, making delicate little jokes about her drunkenness in a perfect parody of Victorian speech. If I was scared of angering her by insisting that something was wrong. I was also never sure it really was: at the age of eighteen I could easily be made to doubt my perceptions. What if I was just being humorless and narrow-minded? What if it was simply more poetic to be drunk than sober?

Once, however I did sneak off to see the kindly, exhausted lady doctor responsible for maintaining the health of the students, and she nodded her head in sympathy when I said I was worried my friend Julia was going crazy. Then she changed the subject and asked me to tell her how I was doing, which only confirmed my sense that I was the one who was all messed up.

But the next week there was another party, and another bottle of wine, and with that same catatonic look on her face Julia started taking her clothes off on the dance floor. I understood, finally, about pity and terror, as I plunged in and started dragging her off. Cursing me, she broke free, howling and spitting and calling me a Mother Superior, a bourgeois bitch. Then she ran outside and raced frantic circles around the lawn, shrieking at everyone to leave her alone. In the end, because she would not stop screaming, somebody called the health service, and two long-suffering nurses who'd been dealing with the drug madness and drink madness and sheer craziness of the students for years came and gave her a shot. Then they led her, unprotesting, back to the infirmary, and put her to bed to await the doctor.

That was the first spectacular disgrace. Later there would be others -- all of them, like the burns on her arm and the plan to sell her body and the joyless striptease at the party, indicative of a powerful hatred of the flesh. Someone should have recognized, of course, the sexual subtext to all, the shame that was triggering her distress. But the kindly doctor, on the morning after the party, only talked about the pressures of school and let my friend go home to St. Louis to write her term papers by her parents' baby-blue swimming pool. Her mother only forbade her to touch alcohol. Nobody, least of all myself, put two and two together. At the time, the whole notion of sexual abuse, so far from being the stuff of daytime television, seemed inextricably linked to images of trailer parks and dirt shacks in the south. It was widely assumed never to occur in houses with indoor swimming pools.

And perhaps it would not have mattered if someone had guessed the truth, even if some astute doctor had forced her to tell her story. The psychosis was lying in wait, ready to erupt, and erupt it did. Back at college the following spring, she fell in love with a wild man, part of a family as famous for its drunken self-destructiveness as its literary accomplishments. Together they created much ferocious Sturm and Drang for several months. But even he, who had driven his car off a cliff and attacked his ex-wife's lover with a tire iron, was frightened by Julia's less predictable insanity when drunk. Finally he broke off their affair, after which she was rarely sober.

Whereas alcohol sent others to sleep, on her it had just the opposite effect. Night after night she sat rocking tirelessly, intermittently offering up harangues of impressive eloquence. She was very partial to talking about Christ and Judas and the kiss of betrayal, those being her standing metaphors for what had happened to her. In fact most of what she said was about her special, mystical status among us, and our communal role as Judas. The other members of our little band gave up on her, leaving me the resentful recipient of her tirades. Whenever I tried to escape, she followed me unsteadily down the halls of the dorm, accusing me of further betrayal. Even in her deterioration, she was persuasive enough so that there was always a moment when I began to wonder if maybe she was right, if maybe I was the one who was being cruel and unreasonable, even if I had driven her to this state. Then, to show her forgiveness of my sins, she began offering to sleep with me. I remember standing in a phone booth on campus, stacks of quarters piled on the counter, trying to persuade her mother that my friend was in need of psychiatric help, and her mother saying, in her piercing clubwoman's voice, "Tell that child to pull up her socks and paddle her own canoe." Shortly afterwards, Julia slit her wrists and wound up in the psychiatric ward of the local hospital, which at least had the effect of making her parents take her illness seriously. It would not be her last stay in such a place.

Back in St. Louis again, after graduating in absentia, she enrolled in graduate school, from which she sent me back gloomy bulletins: "One decidedly does not get the impression that any of these people 'loves to read.'" Two months into her first term, she started hearing voices, which told her repetitively that she did not exist, offering up relentlessly logical proofs of this proposition. She was scared that if no one thought about her she might disappear, but then she believed she could hear people thinking about her, and it was never anything kind. Finally she shut herself up in the apartment she shared with another student, unable to speak, until this girl, too, phoned her parents, who sent her brother to bring her home.

Sometimes in the years that followed, she received intensive therapy at fancy private hospitals, with beautiful grounds. But when her rich parents washed their hands of her, as they periodically did, she wound up in state institutions instead, places that stank of urine, with wards full of chronic cases who had been there for years. Or so she told me. She would not permit me to visit

her in those places; it wouldn't help, she said, and anyway she didn't want me to see her like that. Sometimes, when I phoned her, she refused to talk to me, sometimes my letters went unanswered for months, but always, eventually, she got back in touch. I still have her letters from that time: "I wish it weren't spring because, although it is beautiful, it is too bright. It sounds weird but the grass is too green, the lilacs too mauve, and everything comes on very sharp and clear....I cried over your letter when it came, but crying isn't like weeping, but more like sobbing for me now. I felt a pang at the thing you said about my seeing you as level-headed, sensible and so on. I have to do that because it shuts out the pain of separation. It diminishes you, makes you less bright, like the grass." And some months later: "It occurs to me how ridiculously arrogant we were sitting around on our green hill awaiting radiance. Now all I hope for is peace. For I think that to be as far as possible an inclusive being and yet to achieve peace must be the goal of existence."

In between her spells in hospitals, she'd spend hours in the library, reading about her disease, as though her one great weapon against sorrow might still be able to help her now. She thought she could decipher schizophrenia as she had deciphered Romantic odes. She was attempting close textual analysis. Meanwhile, as it happened, I too was doing research, plowing grimly through learned journals a thousand miles away. We argued with each other about the radical theories of R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz -- she had gone over to the rationalist, Augustan point of view that we had always scorned so, while I was still in the camp of Keats and Wordsworth : I wanted to believe. There was nothing poetic about madness, she told me impatiently. The people in the loony bins weren't hearing the roar that lies on the other side of silence, and furthermore, electric shock treatment was the only thing that had helped at all.

But even her willful Realismus, which seemed like such a hopeful sign-how could anyone as hard-headed as that be prey to voices? -- could not protect her against the next stage of paranoia, the next siege of voices, when it came. (Later she would allude dryly to her unrequited love affair with reality.) Nor could the doctors help her much, with all their therapy. It was chemicals that did the trick: a heavy dose of the newest, strongest anti-psychotic on the market, and finally she stabilized, as the jargon had it. For the first time since she'd left college, she went six whole months without being hospitalized.

In some narrow sense, she was functional again. She could even hold down a job -- not a good job, not the sort intended for someone with her IQ, but work as a secretary in a lawyer's office. And when her father's secretary quit, he installed her in his own fancy law firm. She lived at home, in the bedroom she'd had as a child; if not exactly the ideal daughter, at least she was no longer an embarrassment. She was always exquisitely dressed, in pale heavy silks and tweeds of a smoky color; the very linings of her clothes seemed to rustle more expensively than anyone else's. Her parents could take her to the country club for lunch on Sundays, seat her at the dinner table with their guests. If I, whom she visited back east on her yearly vacation, was upset by her zombie-like air, the effort it seemed it cost her to answer the simplest question; if I suspected, darkly that they sedated her to the point where she'd give no more trouble (I still half-believed that the doctors, the Establishment, were conspiring to silence the voices of poets and rebels), nobody else seemed to mind -- particularly those who'd had to live at close quarters with her psychosis.

After her second visit, I phoned her mother, as I had done all those years before, to plead with her to do something. I had researched the drug that Julia was on, and found it was meant to be administered only during periods of acute psychosis; it had not been developed for long term use. Nor was it meant to be prescribed in such high doses, unless the patient was delusional

and dangerous, given to violent assaults. Surely her mother must have noticed how -- well, how boring Julia had become, like someone swaddled in fog; didn't she think it was probably because of her medication? Her mother listened in silence and then told me dramatically, as though it would come as a big surprise, that there was nothing to be done, "because, you see, Julia is schizophrenic." No, she would not talk to Julia's doctor, who only wrote out prescriptions now rather than offering therapy. No, she would not make inquiries into other drugs, what was the point, her daughter was schizophrenic.

For eight years then, well into her thirties, Julia worked for her father, driving to the office with him in the morning and home with him at night, spending her weekends with her parents' friends. Instead of Coleridge, she read Agatha Christie novels, the same ones over and over, and slowly, too, so that on her annual visits to me I dreaded coming home after work and finding her on page twenty-seven of the book that she had been starting when I left that morning. Indeed, I dreaded coming home at all. The third year she visited, I stayed late at work one evening, on a flimsy pretext, and found when I returned that her eyeballs had rolled up into her head during my absence. It seemed the Prolixin made her muscles go rigid if she did not take certain other drugs as well, and she had run out of those other drugs. Frantic with guilt, I shepherded her into a cab and took her to the emergency room of the nearest hospital, where an intern phoned her doctor back in St. Louis and gave her a little bottle of pills. Finally, after several hours during which she seemed unperturbed and I grew increasingly panicky, the blue of her eyes descended again from the recesses of her skull. "Don't you think there's something scary about a drug that does that?" I burst out, unable to contain myself. She turned her head in that new, cow-faced way she had and spoke in the slow, puzzled tones of the mentally backward. "The doctor says I've got to take my medication." It seemed there would never be any hope for her again.

BUT JUST a few months later she was miraculously reborn, through a series of events that seemed to vindicate one of R.D. Laing's theories after all: the so called crazy one, he'd said, is just carrying the burden for the rest of the family, acting out the madness the others repress. Julia's stiffly respectable father, with his perfect manners, suddenly went mad, and just as suddenly, she took on all the burdens of sanity. While he was flying from airport to airport, propositioning young boys, getting arrested for public drunkenness, she was propping up her mother at home and going into his office to calm down his clients. Later it was she who flew out and persuaded him to come back to them, to go into treatment, to go to AA.

Shortly after her father's return to normalcy, her sixteen-year old niece ran away from home and announced to the social worker assigned her by the state that her father, my friend's older brother, had molested her when she was six. The family indignantly refused to believe this until Julia came forward and finally told the secret she had been keeping for years: her brother had molested her too, repeatedly, starting when she was ten. After a brief period of remorse her mother got angry at her for airing the family's dirty laundry in public, and she moved out of the house. Suddenly she was demanding that the medication be reduced; suddenly she was no longer dull, placid, bovine; it seemed that a happy ending was finally at hand.

On the minimum dose of Prolixin now, she talked her way into a job in an art gallery, and back into graduate school, too, where she revisited our old loves and found them wanting: "I know this is sacrilege, but one would have to be a truly ideal reader, in the Richardsian sense, to get anything out of Wordsworth's constant assertions of his nature-highs, when there is so little poetry working to get the reader to the same place. Sometimes I think he presses one beyond the normal

call of duty, as it were. But it is good to be on friendly terms with metaphors again. It occurred to me the other day that the whole essence of madness is that everything appears to be a metaphor, in the most sinister way. So you keep torturing your mind trying to figure out what it's all a metaphor for".

Not even the death of her brother, whose murder she had contemplated a thousand times, could destroy her new found sanity. Two years after the revelation of his assaults, he killed himself by turning on the engine of his car in a locked garage. Nobody knew why he had chosen that moment. "The strange thing was," she said, "I was the only one that cried at his funeral. "But then she has never been able to get through any religious service without crying.

Tears aside, she was so strong and buoyant and cheerful she must have believed she was safe forever, the illness was conquered, her future could be like other people now, and once again it was love that proved to be her undoing. She was approaching forty; for what may have been the last time, she rebelled against the idea of spending her life alone. And like so many other women, she conceived of her love as missionary work, insisting that her beloved was in despair and she would be his rescuer, as though only by couching things in those terms was she entitled to pursue what she wanted. As her obsession mounted, those metaphors on which she had claimed to be on friendly terms again got out of hand; her talk became wild and grandiose, and nobody else was allowed to get a word in edgewise. He had turned his face from God when he left the church, and God had punished him with soul-sickness. She was engaged in a struggle with the devil for his immortal soul. He was Mr. Rochester, was Monroe Stahr, was everyone between Sebastian Flyte and the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Then he turned out to be a fairly ordinary cad, and when he spurned her outright, she spun out of control. She went on a lunatic shopping spree, charging a hundred pairs of shoes, setting in motion the purchase of a mansion, from which the courts later released her at her parents' behest. She was rehospitalized, rediagnosed -- now the doctors decided she was not schizophrenic after all, but manic-depressive, although a few months later they changed their diagnosis again..

That time I was afraid she was really finished. For months, she refused to come to the phone, and when she emerged from the hospital, she sounded depleted in some way she never had before, as though one bout of middle-aged dementia had proved more debilitating than all the insanity of her youth. Her characteristic fierceness had vanished; she was wistful and tired, her voice as slow as I had ever heard it. For a moment I imagined she might be rocking back and forth in the old way. "Are you all right?" I asked finally, and she answered, as wryly as ever, "I think I'm finally resigned to the station to which God has seen fit to call me". Impossible to know what effort it cost her to crack that joke, but I had underestimated her. I should have known if she'd survived that far she would once again pull through. But there were certain things she would have to do to keep herself safe. One of them was to abjure, forever, all the excesses -- extravagant metaphors, romantic love -- that for other people might be merely a source of excitement, or at worst of disquiet, but for her were real and serious dangers. I think she decided she could not afford any more brain fevers, of the sort that love can produce, and poems too, for those who approach them too closely.

Today she stays away from men. She has renounced literature. And she is merry again, at least much of the time; no one can puncture pretensions or sniff out absurdity the way she can. Having gone for yet another degree, this time of a different sort, she works as a registered nurse. She knits and crochets and gardens and makes quilts. She has given even grown plump. And unlikely as it seems, she gives the most sensible advice of anyone I know. But she will not read any book that might disturb her peace -- anything wrenching, painful, overly passionate. She has become a great fan of the novels of Anthony Trollope.

So our literary friendship has ended for good. Though we stay on the phone for hours, we no longer talk about Wordsworth and Coleridge, let alone the unrecognized genius of Dowson. Nor do I tell her about the books I review, or the literary essays I write. Yet most of what I know about literature -- and much of what I know about love -- I learned in the first year of our friendship, when I found out what it meant to read as though my life depended on it. If we were wrong about nearly everything, in those interminable talks of ours, I still believe we got at least one thing right. All in all, it was the best education I ever had.