

L.P. HARTLEY'S *THE BOAT*(1) OR  
WHAT SHALL SAVE ENGLAND ?

There is nothing like a war to polarize the good and bad in people. There is nothing like wartime for false catchwords as well as real commitment. More than blood is shed in the process : self-illusions, and wishful thinking. But others may be bred instead : the suicidal gesture and the empty symbol, mere sacrifice and an impersonal flag. And between these two poles Timothy Casson has to travel before he finally comes into his own and is able, as E.M. Forster has put it, to "connect." For it is precisely that area between the beleaguered ego and the beleaguering mass that really counts. And it is the community of individuals — the good and the bad — which inhabit this area, that Timothy flew over and failed to come to terms with. And perhaps it was in order that his enterprise of rowing on a river reserved for fishing should end disastrously, as well as cause the death of both the best and the worst members of the conflicting sides, the community and the mass respectively, before his course could be corrected and he himself integrated with whom he truly belonged. They were all in the same boat, so to speak.

Timothy's boat is in the midst of all this. Timothy has just come from Venice, where a boat has the real function of bringing people together, and perhaps it is half-consciously with this conception in mind that he has a boat made for the purpose of rowing on the river. Unfortunately, the river is reserved for the exclusive use of local fishermen. Under these circumstances the boat is made to gain other significance. Instead of being a unifying power, as it should be, it proves to have a dividing effect.

The image of the boat as Timothy first saw it was resplendent with colour, and transcendent beauty — almost promising of the good life. It looked "almost *sanctified* with blue and red and orange bars of light playing on it, rainbow-like, from those *heavenly* stained-glass windows."(11.20) Timothy called it the Argo, "suggesting a quest.(III.33)

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1. References are to the Putnam edition, 1949.

Thus it is reminiscent of Jason's vessel and his "opening up of the Euxine [Sea] to Greek commerce and colonization." (The *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Micropædia", 1974; vol. 1, p. 508).

That was before he met Vera Cross, through whom the boat was to gain for Timothy more, though ambiguous, sanctity. His unconsummated love for Vera began to tell vicariously on the symbolic significance of the boat, and when Timothy next saw it,

the prostrate god was lying, its outriggers, extended like arms ... It had the air of waiting for something. For what? For sacrifice, perhaps. Yes, yes, the beckoning fair one seemed to say; come with me, cast off, lower away, forget whatever it is that holds you back, (IX.105—106)

The sacrifice which is now apparently demanded by the goddess-boat is a new element in its significance. Its original value as a means of reaching out for community becomes inextricably entangled with Timothy's confining passion for Vera. And it is this passion which really demands the sacrifice. Vera herself does not care for the community, for she is an outsider and the crowd is her true element. Nor does she see any value in the boat, except as a means of confronting that from which she is excluded. Indeed she uses both Timothy and the boat as political tools to divide the village "into two camps". Late in the novel and in preparation for Timothy's hapless adventure on the river, she had a "favour" designed for our people to wear on "the day" — a little paper boat, with "For Freedom" on it — such a charming little device (XXVII. 422). Thus the boat loses its reality and becomes a mere slogan.

Timothy himself has changed on the existential level as the boat has done on the symbolic. As a writer consigned to write on Britain's beauty spots, he had considered it his duty to relate aesthetic values to a social context. He had considered himself responsible for the education of his cook and maid in the arts. Early in the novel he showed them

the ruins of Merrivale Abbey, a Cistercian building romantically situated ... he thought it would strengthen his hand if he could embody in his article the appeal the Abbey made to untutored but beauty-loving minds (111:26).

This is art as a communication of the artist with his fellow men and is quite in accord with his early attitude to the boat as a means "to act with, not against somebody" (XIX. 286).

But as it turns out the community of Upton does not respond. It has its own suspicions; perhaps not of Timothy himself, but of what his boat and the opening up of the river may bring with them: inevitable new forces of change and hence conflict. Eventually the community leaves him little alternative but to seek an outlet in the company of a dog, then in the purely aesthetic experience of art, and finally in the political ideology of Vera— all of which are impersonal and even non-human.

Timothy first pins his hopes on his dog Felix but only to be disappointed. He "would have liked Felix to be a bond with the people of Upton, but it had turned out differently, and instead of being a link with he had become a substitute for human affection" (XIX.300). Timothy's friend Esther was also fond of dogs, but unlike Timothy, she was not "so eccentric as to keep one dog and lavish upon it in secret, all the emotional output of one's nature," and cat her "from people" (ibid.) Actually Felix comes between Timothy and his friend Tyro, who was averse to dogs presumably for their close association with human beings. He was an inveterate nihilist but an unrepentant moralist. Contrary to Rousseau and Dostoevsky he could not conceive of a good human being as such. Ironically, under the effect of the real War Tyro has committed himself to humanity: "even if human beings are entirely quarrelsome (which I take leave to doubt), it does not affect the incidence of right and wrong, in the present issue." (XII. 242) while Timothy, under the effect of his own little "war" of the boat, has committed himself exclusively to, *pax* dog lovers and rats. Consequently the dog becomes "a topic too secret, if not sacred, to be mentioned. To stroke Felix was easier, far easier, than to write a letter." (XIX.361).

The world contracts for Timothy. The boat, once a symbol of spiritual enlargement, gets "embalmed" literally in the shed and figuratively in Timothy's soul. It becomes an unmentionable subject. Even Felix was not satisfied for long with Timothy's stroking, and soon found more congenial company and an outlet for his animal warmth in the kitchen.

It is then that Timothy looked for the immutable and impersonal in the object of art. This is quite the opposite of what he had been seeking all the time : the "something in the motion" of the boat, the "renewal", " the freedom of access to another's heart" and the chance "to act with" somebody, but somebody unlike Vera, who had "no background of companionship." However, the new cravings of Timothy for the immutable and impersonal were easier to gratify through his engrossing interest in art as art, rather than as communication. His acquisition of a Chinese "bull's blood bowl" introduced him to a world where he could practically be insulated from all human ties and personal responsibility. Like the beautiful but unrelated Vera, this bowl could not boast of a "background" either, since it was an absolutely self-contained self-containing world of pure art and aesthetic pleasure. It was cold comfort, but Timothy had to rest satisfied with the thought that the bowl's "unaging glory" would be there when both Felix, that "transitory bundle of flesh", (XX.306) and his own eyes are turned to dust.

Originally the bowl was a further attempt by Timothy to make contact with the community. It was meant to be a wedding present for Desirée Lampard, whose mother a local landed resident and an old acquaintance of Timothy, had the influence to further his plea to use the river for rowing. The mother disapproved of her daughter's suitor, but Timothy hoped to play a part in bringing the match off. Later however, when she consented without giving Timothy the chance to play any part, he himself was barred from the ceremony, presumably he had offended her by breaking into the privacy of her home and publishing an article on Welshgate Hall. Soon after the plans for marriage were called off for consanguinary reasons. In consequence, the bowl never functioned as it had been meant to : a means of social contact. Like the boat it becomes an object of private worship, a reflection on self, and secret ritual. Timothy could only approach it as he used to approach the "embalmed boat," "with due formality and inward preparation". (XX.305).

Timothy acquiesces in his new shrunken world. As he once contemplated the beauty of the bowl he wondered :

Could one live on that ? Could one make oneself independent of human contacts ... ? Left to themselves, unheeded, and unheeding, the emotions atrophy and petrify, leaving the consciousness as

hard and gem-like as the bowl was... one must ... limit one's responses to one's fellows to the "Fares please," and occasional "thank-you's" of a bus-conductor. How grateful people were, at bottom, to the conductor's impersonality ... which required of them nothing but a token action, a routine payment of what was due—and due to the company, a vast anonymous body, not to him. (XX.309)

In this condition, Timothy is ripe for Vera to win over for the impersonal "cause" and the anonymous crowd. And he would have irretrievably gone over board but for the intervention of the rector's wife Mrs Purbright.

Timothy's bull's blood bowl came to a sad end. It was broken by Felix. Seeking comfort for his loss, Timothy went to visit Mrs Purbright, who also kept bowls as well as other objects of art. Before losing his bowl Timothy had bought other antique objects to keep it company. Nevertheless, "he was jealous of the bowl's supremacy; his purchases must be little things, designed to show it off, acolytes kneeling at a shrine." (XXII.330) Mrs Purbright's place on the other hand could take pride in a wealth of bowls, and when she offers him one it is quite a different bowl from his. Unlike the bull's blood bowl this is "a companion," as Mrs Purbright says, "...not so fragile, or so precious, or so perfect, something that could be a handmaid, not a magnet to your thoughts.

"Please take it...if you can fancy something that makes no claims for itself ... I have always found it companionable and it isn't touchy, it wants to go to you—see how pleased it is to be changing hands." (XXXIII.) 358)

Timothy takes Mrs Purbright's bowl but does not learn her lesson, perhaps because the lesson is one with that special power of hers, in which he is still to be initiated. That power is not easy to define. But certainly Mrs Purbright, who is the embodiment of it, is at the centre of things. In her there could be no division, no alienation. Even suffering is part of the picture :

Her feelings about the war were, he Timothy gradually learned, only an intensified version of her general view of the human lot. For her, suffe-

ring was a mystery pregnant with beauty and redemptive value ... At least he imagined that to be her view, but her mind was elusive and tangential and unwilling to let its principles be known (XI.148)

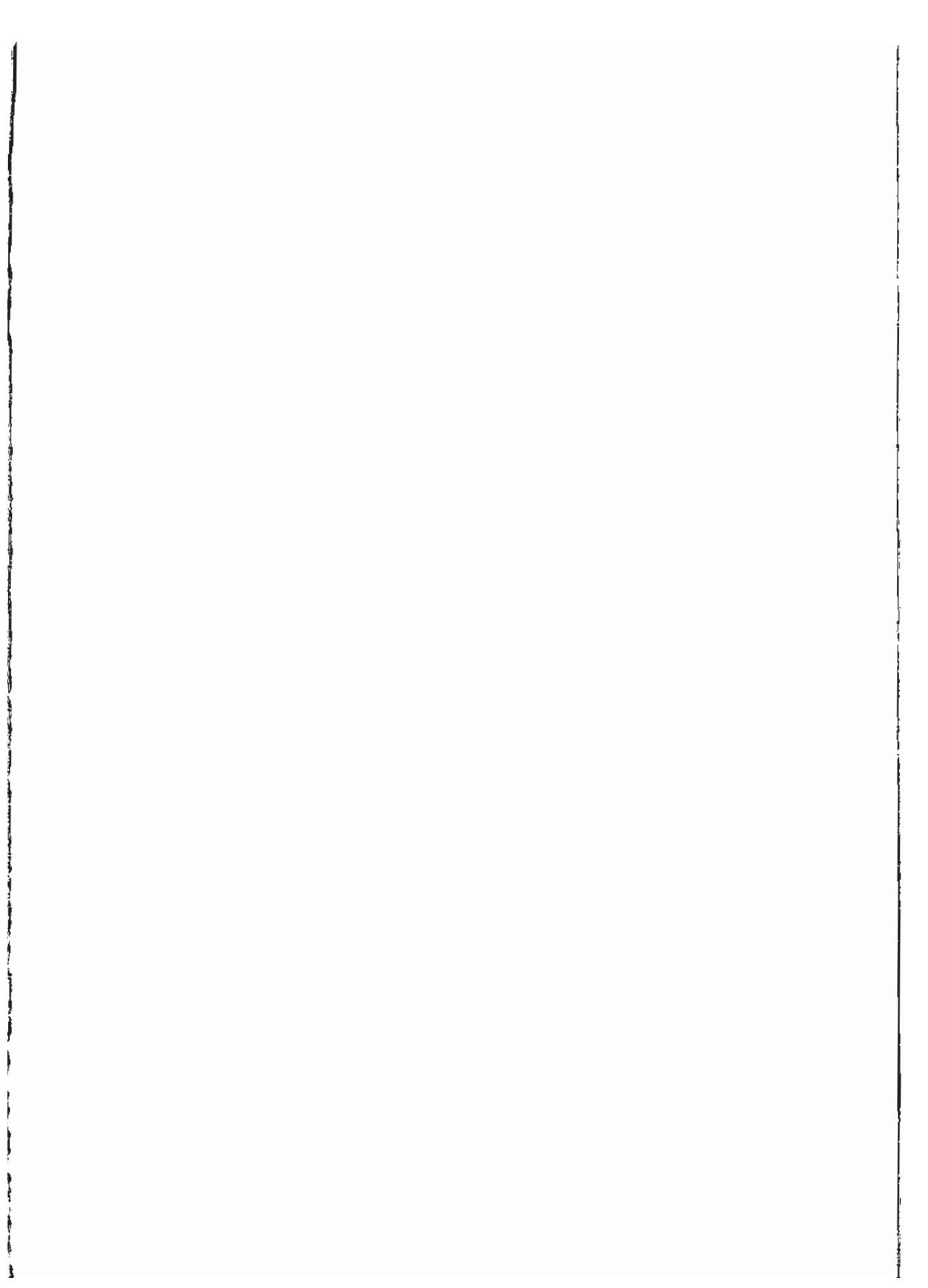
It is to life with all its manifestations, then, that Mrs Purbright was dedicated. To her

"June roses are delightful, no doubt, but are they as precious as the roses of December? Do they cost the tree as much effort, do they bespeak the same tenacity of nature? Which is the more worthy of regard?" (XVIII.273)

She would not judge. "One would not wish to feel altogether in the right," (XV. 229) she once said to Timothy. Nevertheless, there was a rightness and wholeness about her view of things and people. And there was no confining her sense of rightness, which, as life itself, was ever tempering new forces, cultivating beauty, and creating order and harmony. She was so full of the expectancy from life that nothing could startle or shock her.

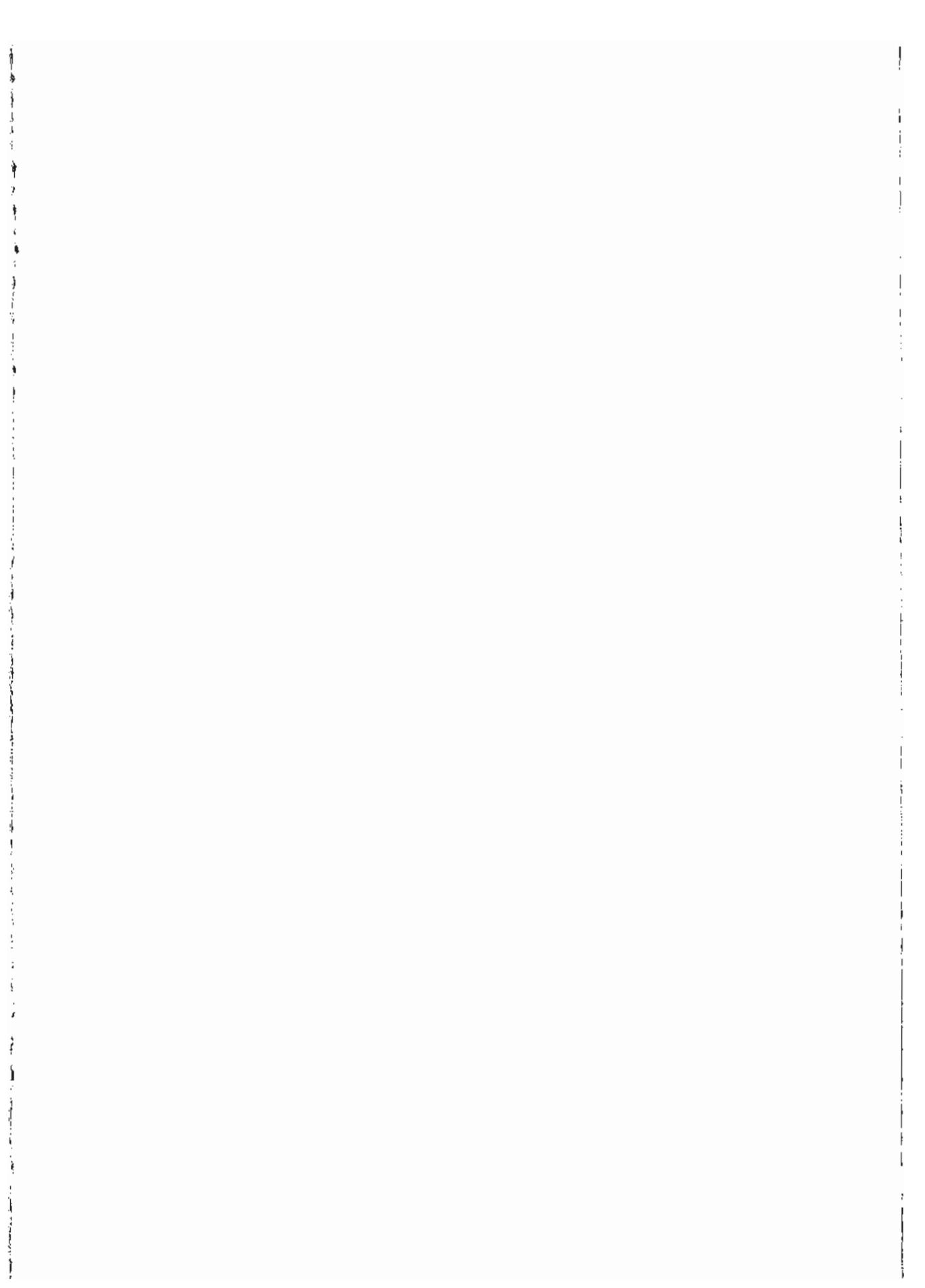
But perhaps her taste would render her character better than any words, which is as it should be. Very evocative of her person was her collection of art objects,

the most heterogeneous agglomeration of objects that he [Timothy] had ever beheld ... spoils from the four corners of the world. Of all styles, shapes, sizes, colours, and substances; of ebony, ivory, mother-of-pearl, silver, lacquer, china, tortoise-shell and lapis-lazuli, they solicited but did not clamour for attention. A League of Nations. But how much more effectively creating unity out of diversity ... Mrs. Purbright's catholicity of taste had wrought a miracle. For what can be more selfish, more intolerant of each other's claims, than works of art? ... they each contributed their own quota of beauty to a collective beauty that was not their own. (VII. 72)



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## ABBREVIATIONS

**A.J.A.** : American Journal of Archeology

**Arch. Clas.** : Archeologia Classica, Rivista dell Istituto di Archeologia di Roma

**J.H.S.** : Journal of Hellenic Studies

**Gnomon** : Kritische Zeitschrift fur die gesamte Klassische Altertumswiss

**Philol. Wochenschrift** : Philologischen Wochenschrift.

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It is this "miracle" of "collective beauty", born of diversity, that Mrs Purbright sought in life. It is the complex but harmonious colour scheme of stained glass, with which she and the boat are associated.

Early in the novel she expressed her hope of seeing in church the community of Upton together with the young social outsiders, with "sleek blond beads, bowed in prayer ... lit by coloured gleams from stainedglass windows." (VII. 88)

The boat too is often seen coloured by stained-glass. Transoms of blue and orange light from the oblong stained glass borders of the windows fell across it — across the teak, the mahogany, the many different kinds of wood of which, so the boat-builder had assured him, it was made. (IX. 105).

The diversity of woods is reminiscent of the diversity of Mrs Purbright's art objects collection, out of which unity and beauty are created. Could the beauty of the boat, also born of a diversity of woods and "sanctified" by "light from ... stained glass," be a way to human communication and communal harmony, what Timothy had wanted: "freedom of access of another's heart" (V. 57)?

Like the stained-glass windows of the church, which should shed light not only on the solitary figure of crucified Christ, but also, as Mrs Purbright had hoped, on a whole community of believers, so those of the boat-house should shed theirs on more than an "embalmed" goddess, rotting away in her shrine, where only signs of decay, "damp and leaves and cobwebs" (XVIII. 276) keep her company. Nobody realized this more than Mrs Purbright. She believed too that the river should be free for all, and could well remember the time when "the Standridges had a boat ... I wonder what became of it? The river was not so private then; more fun in a way, I suppose. You like sharing things, Mr Casson? (VII. 75)

The boat is then for "sharing." It is not a private god to be worshipped in secret, nor an impersonal battle-cry to rally the crowd as Vera would have it. And if the community of Upton had denied Timothy the "sharing", he himself was guilty of the secret worship of the boat, and then of reducing it to a political tool. Mrs. Purbright had always stood between him and either treacherous alternative. And perhaps when she gave him a bowl of her own, which she had described

as "companionable", in place of his broken one, which had been "proud" and "repelled familiarity", she was more than offering him a bowl — she was showing him the way to self fulfillment, which is neither a form of self-worship, nor self-annihilation disguised as self-release. However, before his ill-advised enterprise of opening up the river for rowing, Timothy had thought that it would be an elf-willed, self-fulfilling act : "Après le deluge, moi." (XXX.464) He did not realize that it really was the impersonal and self-annihilating political gesture which Vera had all the time planned for. "Après moi, le deluge."

After me, the floods -- and Vera. For it is Vera who embodies crass nature at its most seductive and most unmoral. She is all unscrupulous animal cunning and doggedness, an incarnation of the virtues of the pack. Unlike Mrs Purbright and the boat, she is not associated with a stained glass colour scheme, but with a negation of all colour : black and white. It is to her and the values she represents that Timothy sacrifices his highly-prized boat. "Sacrifice" is the word, which, unlike fulfillment, as Esther once wrote to Timothy, "means that someone has to be appeased, like Hitler; and I feel that I am not sacrificing but ennobling and even glorifying myself by resisting him". (V. 55)

Sacrifice is for Demos, the mass, and the idea, while fulfillment is essentially personal. It is the personal that makes suffering for Mrs Purbright "a mystery pregnant with beauty and redemptive value." (XI.148) It is the personal God that "is praised in a beautiful face, for how should we know it was beautiful, unless it reminded us of Him?". (VII. 89) It is the personal that makes life for her so complex, but also full of beauty : "Think of all the strands of beauty in it. Does one want to tear them out ?" (XXVIII.328) And finally it is the personal that saves Mrs Purbright from hating Vera. For she never reduces the personal in Vera's character for easier judgment. And when her husband once implies that Vera may be lax, Mrs Purbright retorts saying.

"... even if what ... you heard was true... I could not regard it as an unmixed misfortune. We must remember the advice given to Peter, not to call anyone common or unclean... I wish you could feel, as I do, that beauty and goodness can no more be separated from other qualities than the flame can be separated from the coal it springs from." (XXVIII.428)

Nor does Mrs Purbright oversimplify Timothy's character. She never loses sight of the complex living person in him. Whatever he does or says is not enough to label the man. She may even go so far as to assume a double or second self, "a sort of doppelgänger," to whom she may ascribe those outward acts of his, for which she could not account by what she divines of his essential person. Curiously, Timothy once had a similar fleeting intuition of himself. Desirée Lampard had called on him and he had promised to help her, be united to the man she loved. He was seeing her off at the gate, but then,

turning back to the house he caught sight of his shadow stretching out in front of him, long and thin. A tuck of distortion gave it a sinister twist, as of someone creeping about with no good purpose, Iago perhaps. (XIV.208)

Is Timothy an evil character? One can hardly say that. But certainly there is something unresolved about him, an ingrained intercommunal war that breeds dissension and invites allies and adversaries. Mrs Purbright once told him that

"... there was hardly a house in which there was someone who was not for him or against him, and some were divided against themselves."

"Is the Rectory divided?" asked Timothy.

"The Church is above politics, Mr. Casson ..."  
(XV. 228)

However, Timothy commits the unforgivable sin of tainting that sovereignty by unconsciously involving her in his own petty politics. For when Vera deserted him for Mrs Purbright's son Edgell, Timothy acted as if the mother were to blame, as if he wanted to hurt Edgell in the person of his mother. This brings his downfall.

Timothy has detracted from Mrs Purbright's personal integrity. Mrs Purbright, however "above politics" she has been, reacts quite differently. She deliberately involves herself in politics in order to safeguard Timothy's personal worth. She tries to persuade her husband and Colonel Harbord to accompany her on an errand of faith and goodwill. Her plan was to make Timothy feel that there were

some who, though they did not belong to his side in the conflict, still cared for him as a person. Then, "he would see, among his supporters... people like ourselves, not sympathizing with his intentions, indeed deploring them, but sympathizing with him as a man, a fellow-creature, and in spite of everything, wishing him well." (XXVIII. 434). To her husband this was sheer madness, and though Colonel Harbord liked the plan as "disarming"—militarily to him, morally to Mrs Purbright — tactics, he did not commit himself. But Mrs Purbright is not deterred and goes it alone. At the time Timothy was actually on the river, alone as well. Vera, his evil genius, had backed out of the enterprise at the last moment, knowing fully well that it was too late for him to call off the much-publicized political gesture of opening up the river rowing. However, what really worried Mrs Purbright then was the condition of the river itself, swollen and made too dangerous by the rains for the safety of Timothy. So having failed to arrive in time for the planned meeting of Timothy's supporters on the bridge in order to demonstrate her goodwill, she hurried to forestall him and warn him against the dangerous rocks of the Devil's Staircase ahead. It is then that she meets Vera, who, being asked if she has seen Timothy pass, answers that she has not. However, when it is too late to catch up with the boat, Vera brazenly admits that she has lied. Mrs Purbright is so flustered, and when she asks Vera for the key that she has used to gain access to that private part of the river and the latter refuses, a scuffle ensues and both women fall into the water. Vera dies, but Mrs Purbright manages to scramble to the bank only to die a few days later. The boat crashes on the rocks of the Devil's Staircase but Timothy is finally saved thanks to Colonel Harbord and the local constable.

However, it was Mrs Purbright who has stirred Colonel Harbord's conscience in Timothy's favour, for she could "tempt any appetite for good." (XXXIII.520) She had indeed defended Timothy in her life, and finally died to safeguard his. The people of Upton well knew "her affection for lame dogs and lost cases... they recognized her sincerity. She was a scapegoat for their unavowed virtues." (XXXI. 480) And there is evidence of these "unavowed virtues" in the community of Upton. For when Colonel Harbord discussed Mrs Purbright's suggestion with his wife, he unexpectedly found her quite in agreement with Mrs Purbright. Actually his wife's argument proved to be crucial when she simply said to him :

"... men ... always ... think that if someone holds a certain opinion, that he must be a certain kind of person."

"But doesn't it follow ?"

"Not necessarily." (XXXI.481)

Colonel Harbord is instantly converted, and as soon goes out of his way and sets out for the river to see what he can do *for* Timothy.

Colonel Harbord's eyes are suddenly opened to a vitally moral consideration which has been lost sight of by most participants in the petty war of the boat, indeed without it even the real war which was being waged at the time against Hitler, would be reduced to mass murder. The real enemy is not "a certain kind of person," but a certain kind of idea which denies personality altogether, and which *any person* may hold. And while we may condemn the idea, we must not alienate the person. And it is for this end that Mrs Purbright loses her life. It is to save Timothy from actually becoming what he mistakenly regarded as "his own kind," (XXX.466) from losing his own personal nature and causing others to lose theirs. That is precisely the real stake in all human struggle, on all scales.

Now Timothy's moral failing has always been not to "recognize the otherness of other people ... he likes people to be types of themselves," (XXXIV. 537) as Tyro puts it. He has always typified Tyro by his "conviction of the wickedness of the world", (V. 56) and Magda by her unconventional way of life. He was much dismayed when he received a letter from Tyro in which he had the courage to change his views. "Searching Tyro's' surviving letters for sentiments the reverse of those he now professed, he put examples of the two in parallel columns, with a lavish commentary of footnotes and exclamation marks," (XVII.263) as if a real person should be made answerable to scraps of paper. "He expressed himself ... violently ... it was not Tyro's views he attacked, but Tyro." (ibid.)

He was likewise dismayed by the sudden death of Magda. To him it was out of keeping with his conception of Magda's "type", the exponents of which usually play at sickness. "He remembered that in all his letters ... he had never asked after her health. He assumed that

her frequent visits to the nursing home were simply another instance of luxurious living, that she went because she was bored, and idle, and could afford to." (XXVI.413) Again he took the mere concept for the whole person.

Later letter-writing itself becomes a burden. His last letter to Esther he finds difficult to write. He could only "tell her certain facts." (XXVII.425) He had arrived by then beyond the pale of the personal, "what did the personal count for ... ?" (ibid.) — But did it not?

Mrs Purbright, living and dead, is witness that it did. Only she has the perennial saving power, the original power of the boat, "not embalmed, but still operative." (XVIII. 272) It is a power that can harmonize diverse loyalties in an intractable world which is more diversity. But loyalties must only be to men as men, individuals and groups apart, yes, but still men. Indeed any attempt to dissolve the diversity is bound to detract from the sovereignty of men as men and involves violence. If we are to survive we have to acknowledge diversity, and at best try to harmonize it. Only thus can we safeguard the best that is in men and transcend the senseless and destructive diversity of the world. Our object should be to coexist in diversity and enrich, rather than be the victim of diversity and perish. This is what being human truly entails: the risk and the glory.

The risk and the glory are ever there. For better or worse Vera Cross shall not part with Volumnia Purbright. Not even in Timothy's dream at the end of the novel can Mrs Purbright send her away.

"She won't go away," repeated the voice in a tone of despairing sadness; "you see, she's got mixed up with my thoughts." To Timothy, in his dream, this didn't sound an irremediable catastrophe. "Then I'll come round to you." "It wouldn't do any good," said Mrs Purbright, "because we're both together in your mind," and as she said this her voice changed and the new voice said, "Hullo, darling, is it true you don't want to come and see us? It isn't very kind of you, darling, we look

so nice twined together, you couldn't tell where I end or she begins." "But shan't I ever see her alone again?" "No, darling, I am afraid you'll always have to have me as a chaperone. Your girl friends are inseparable." (XXXIV. 532)

We do not know whether Timothy has reconciled himself to this new state of affairs, but he has an inducement in a combination between the beautiful Vera and the nice Mrs Purbright, the alternative to which is a war which may spare neither.

Esmat Wali