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Radclyffe Hall

Richard Dellamora

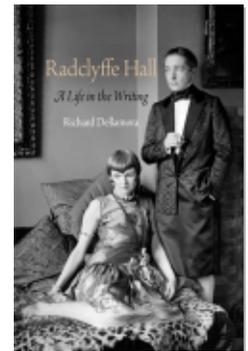
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After Economic Man

“The Rest Cure—1932”

The fates of Miss Ogilvy and other protagonists of the short stories included in Hall's 1934 collection are marked by their experience of World War I. This much is also true of Charles Duffell, the protagonist of “The Rest Cure—1932.” As someone who played the role of a leading industrialist during the war, Duffell's consciousness is very much an effect of that conflict. As with Ogilvy, Hall is interested in knowing whether he can survive the war. This question is specifically directed toward Duffell's masculine engenderment. In Hall's analysis, the coherence of Duffell's masculine bodily ego is based upon his identification with male power and authority in economic and genealogical relations that exclude the possibility of a rapprochement with women. Duffell's isolation is exacerbated by an even more striking absence of significant ties with male equals or subordinates, despite his position as the moving force within his company. Duffell has neither female lovers nor male friends.

The question with which the war leaves Duffell is rather like the question that the next war would present to Noël Coward and others of his generation. At a lunch early in 1946, Coward was asked “whether he could be said to have survived the war.” Crisply he replied, “Like Mother

Goddam, I shall always survive.”¹ At White Cliffs, a house overlooking the sea at Dover, which he had recently leased, however, Coward discovered that survival was indeed in question. During World War II, Coward had been both a leading propagandist on behalf of the British Navy and a widely traveled entertainer of members of British and Commonwealth armed services.² On January 29, he wrote in his diary:

A heavy sea, but bright sunshine. After breakfast I started thinking . . . [about an upcoming show,] but could not concentrate. After a while I began reading Roald Dahl’s short stories about flying and war experiences. Then suddenly I found out what was wrong. These stories pierced the layers of my consciousness and stirred up the very deep feelings I had during the war and have since, almost deliberately, been in danger of losing. If I forget these feelings or allow them to be obscured because they are uncomfortable, I shall be lost. . . . Something click[ed] in my mind and brought back the things I knew so clearly during the war; not all the time, but at moments in hospitals and Messes and ships. I must hang on to those moments or I shall not have survived the war. (50)

In contrast, Duffell remains unknowing of “the layers” of his “consciousness” and “the very deep feelings” stirred by the war.

Considering the state of mind of this character led Hall to the most self-conscious analysis of the ego that occurs in her fiction. Charles Duffell is a subject of suppressed cross gender. In the story, to exist in this condition is to find existence intolerable. He is also someone whose selfhood has been bound over to a highly regimented subscription to doing what is expected of him. As the date “1932” signifies, the story engages public contexts, in particular, the historical one of the consequences of the stock market crash of 1929. A conservative critique of the modern market economy structures the first major psychic movement in the story: namely, Duffell’s abandonment of his constituted self. The consequent opening to an ecstatic but pragmatically impossible sense of cross gender occurs in the story’s final movement.

Hall understands this turn in terms of the pantheistic ontology that she had expressed earlier in her poetry and in *The Well of Loneliness*. Feminist philosophy of the decade of World War I provides the intellectual and ethical ground for the representation of Duffell’s transition. In “The New Mysticism” of May Sinclair, the story finds a metaphysical basis for Hall’s

conviction that complex engenderment and the need for sexual and emotional intimacy are integral to the life of the self in the world. Sinclair's phrase refers to her eclectic synthesis of Western philosophy and Buddhist thought. Defending what she describes as the position of "pantheistic Monism,"³ Sinclair writes, "The metaphysical argument . . . supposes one infinite and absolute Spirit manifesting itself in many forms to many finite spirits. It supposes the selves of the many finite spirits to receive and to maintain their reality in and through one infinite Self as truly as their organisms received and maintained their life through Its appearance as one Life-Force" (334). As the use of the pronoun "Its" indicates, this "Self" is not anthropomorphic. It is also not synonymous with the "Life-Force." Paradoxically, however, it is a form of both conscious and unconscious existence.⁴

After October 1929, Hall remained a wealthy woman, though on a reduced scale. The suffering brought on by the ensuing economic depression did not prompt her even at this time to question the extreme inequality of the distribution of wealth and property in the United Kingdom. Politically, she remained a quietist. But the economic shock and its aftermath did remind her of the fictional character of the rational and self-interested "I" on whose existence the theory of classical political economy depends. Hall also recognized the isolating and ultimately destructive capabilities of egoistic illusions of ambition, accomplishment, wealth, and power. As a successful steel manufacturer, Duffell made a major contribution to the British effort during World War I. The economic downturn that occurred shortly after the war, however, breached his confidence in the secular trinity of nation-state, empire, and international finance. For Duffell, the postwar order entailed looming bankruptcy for his firm. Losing his bearings on a trip to New York, the world's new financial capital, he decides to take a plunge: "That delirious orgy of speculation. . . . The germs of the illness so thick in the air that only to breathe was to catch the infection—he had caught it at once, yes, and caught it badly. Looking back it appeared incredible that a staid and experienced man of affairs should have hoped thus to add vast sums to his fortune, yet so it had been, he had hoped for just that, he had hoped to pump golden blood into Duffells."⁵ The market hysteria to which Duffell succumbs accentuates his aloneness even further. It is difficult to be other-regarding in the midst of a financial bubble.

Three years later, the economy has collapsed; and Duffell's company is about to do so as well. Simultaneously, he breaks down. Like Coward in his

moment of truth, Duffell is overcome with an unbearable “anguish to know himself alive” (181). Unlike Coward, however, Duffell has exited the war with no “moments” of knowledge of alterity “in hospitals and Messes and ships”—or in factories, in Duffell’s case—to cling to. Further, given this absence, he lacks awareness even of the need to “hang on to” something other than the I. He knows only that he has in fact nothing to hang onto. To compensate, he fantasizes about the possibility of escape in stasis: “If only one need not see, need not hear, need not be conscious of movement and sound; if only a man could lie absolutely still in a universe of invulnerable stillness” (186). In this way, one might hope to escape the “anguish” of knowing oneself to be alive. Undergoing a loss of affect that he mistakenly reads as a transformation of the self that can restore him to “a conviction of power,” Duffell experiences a delusory “Godlike and omnipotent sense of detachment.” He asks:

What is Charles Duffell? The purest illusion. That’s the reason why none of this need go on, why Charles Duffell himself need not go on . . . so easy, as he never really existed! IT was born and tradition labeled IT: “Man.” IT might have been labeled anything else. IT might have been labeled: “Tree,” for instance. And he looked up, and said, “I see men as trees, walking.” Undoubtedly, very significant words. . . or IT might have been given no label at all, in which case IT could have controlled ITS own fate. Labels should never be tacked on to Life, they are in the nature of a challenge to God—God assures me that he objects to labels. (187–88)

In this passage, Duffell seems to experience an intimation of the Buddhist state of Nirvâna. In Buddhism, the assertion of ego, either in the individual human being or in the name of the species, is an act of phantasmatic projection. Duffell sums this error in the misplaced confidence of human beings in their capacity to name themselves and other things, a process inevitably of misrecognition.

In Sinclair’s account of Buddhism, the world of material objects is merely apparent; what is real is the “Life-force” that drives the process of individuation within this world of appearances. For Sinclair, the “God” from which the Life-Force emanates is singular, “One,” but not a personality. In a discussion near the end of *A Defence of Idealism* that throws light on Duffell’s dilemma, she lists a number of the metaphysical axioms that

block the experience of Nirvâna or “Extinction” (329), namely, death to attachment both to material objects and to the intellectual arrogance of metaphysical speculation. Unfortunately, despite Duffell’s will to revert from an “I” to an “IT,” he continues to act on the basis of a number of these beliefs—for one, the axiom that “I have not a self,” which he states in the third person in the passage quoted above. Until the end of the story, he persists in two others: “By myself I am conscious of myself”; and “By myself I am conscious of my not-self” (331). A number of further errors characterize Duffell’s position as well. One is his continuing attachment to a world of objects, a defect that will prove to be both enigmatic and crucial at the end of the story. Another is the careless indulgence in speculation in the passage quoted above, an exercise that in Buddhist terms needs to be corrected by meditation if one is to learn how to distinguish appearances from actualities.

Having pooh-poohed the suggestion of his doctor that he take a rest cure, Duffell unconsciously prescribes one for himself. Following an ellipsis in the text, he next appears on board a train bound for Penzance. When it stops at “a wayside station” (191), however, he abruptly gets off. After checking in at a local hotel, he embarks on a number of walks, each aimed at enabling him to overcome the pain of being alive by identifying first with horses in a pasture, second with a tree, and finally with a stone. “One thing was quite clear,” he theorizes, “the organism was solely responsible for all suffering, and the higher the organism the more nerves wherewith to apprehend and perceive, therefore better go down in the scale of creation. The lower one got the less one perceived” (196). Despite his efforts to will himself to become an animal, plant, or stone, however, Duffell never ceases to be an “I” and is therefore unable to achieve either the stasis he seeks or Nirvâna, “the utter extinction of the self as such” (Sinclair, 329).

His excursion a failure, Duffell experiences what mystics call the dark night of the soul: “‘Oh, my God!’ cried Mr. Duffell, ‘oh, Christ Jesus . . . what am I doing in this place?’ At that moment Mr. Duffell knew the meaning of hell, then the darkness descended again like a curtain” (199). “When next he spoke he did so to a stone that his fingers were tapping automatically: ‘I believe you’re the nearest thing to extinction, the farthest away from the Life-force,’ he told it, ‘in you there surely can’t be much Life—at all events not enough Life to count, and that being so you don’t see and don’t hear. You’re nerveless and quite unconscious of movement. As you’ll still be a stone in Eternity, you’ve got less to dread through being eternal. You’re naked and hard and insensitive’” (199–200).

Duffell is discomfited after a laborer reports seeing him to a policeman, who calls an ambulance. When the attendant approaches, Duffell reports that he is another of the “dead” stones lying in the field (200). But the attendant contradicts him: “Well, now, I don’t know about stones being dead. I’ve cracked open a stone and found a crystal; if that don’t show life, then I’ll eat my hat! It must take a bit of doing to form those crystals. To my way of thinking a stone’s full of life” (201). Unable to escape evidence of “life” at work, even in a stone, Duffell snaps into a psychotic rage and attacks the man. “Another attendant rushed up, and together they overpowered and bound Mr. Duffell” (201). Buddhism negates what appears to be life but isn’t; it does not negate the Life-Force nor its source as Duffell attempts to do.

Duffell’s extremity figures the failure of the soul to recognize the existence of God, a God that in Hall’s short story identifies the “Christ Jesus” of Roman Catholic faith with the “Absolute” (Sinclair, 289) that sustains all existence. The evidence of the latter exists in the contemplative practice that Duffell does *not* undertake. What connection do this ability and Duffell’s predicament have with the engenderment of the self? Hall offers a clue in the problem of naming. When Duffell experiences his first realization of the fictitious character of the ego, he associates this failure with the hubris of naming, an act that he identifies with norms of class and status. The capture of the infant Duffell by his name destines him to a life of false effort and values. “A name is a frightful thing to possess, from the first it imposes an intolerable bondage, the bondage of traditions attached to that name. I inherited the Duffell traditions. I endured with patience because I believed that I was a person called Charles Edward Duffell who was the head of a firm known as Duffell & Son, a firm of almost unique importance. Illusion again—just the purest illusion. What is personality after all but a monstrous mass-conception? And what, for that matter, is Duffell & Son but the monstrous conception of a certain George Duffell who was labeled in 1829, and who passed his chains on to his unhappy descendants?” (188). In the passage, Duffell’s problematic engenderment is presented as an effect of conscious genealogy in its insistence on the construction of his masculinity as phallogocentric. The double crisis, both his and the economy’s, with which the story opens involves a specifically psychic crisis arising from the attempt to affix gender univocally to a particular concept of self.

Just as Hall represents mystical apprehension in the mode of negation, so also do gender and sexuality impinge primarily in the negative. Cline refers to Duffell as “a particularly profound portrait within Radclyffe Hall’s

gallery of characters who inhabit an introspective, isolated world alienated from love, cut off from friendship.”⁶ At the outset, we are told, “Those years that had followed his father’s death, how calm they had been; calm, successful years during which he had decided never to marry, had decided that a wife would be in the way of a man already wedded to business” (182). Duffell is both masculinist and not very sexuate, physically and affectively deadened. Sex, if he has it, is limited to contact with prostitutes (185), a reconstitution of intimacy in terms of the cash nexus. In his crisis, signs of estrangement from nature occur. The stone he attempts to fix in his embrace at the end of the story is oddly double-gendered. His words phallicize it. But the stones on the moor are breast-like, “round, smooth stones” (199). And then there is the attempted intimacy of Duffell’s stripping himself. “The blighter’s stark naked!” (200), as the laborer tells the policeman. By the time the attendant arrives, Duffell is convinced that he has become a stone.

Both the narration and Duffell gender the inert object of desire as both masculine and feminine, as an “it” become a “you” that encases Duffell’s queer, suppressed engenderment. “‘Up there on the moor,’ says the laborer to the cop: ‘he’s all humped together, it’s awful queer, and he is kind of curled round—never saw such a thing’” (200). The energies of life vector randomly in ever-shifting fields of force that humans label masculine or feminine, male or female. But nature knows no such fixed limits. Sinclair hints at the sense of existence from which Duffell finds himself cut off:

Every generalization of physical science, and every correlation of physical laws, amounts to a plain statement that within the range of the generalization the order of things is one. The law of conservation of energy is nothing if not a confession that, as far as the physical world goes, incorrigible multiplicity and difference do not obtain. It would even seem that, ultimately, the entire physical world is definable in terms of energy. And if the ultimate constitution of matter is invisible, imponderable, impalpable to any sense (its density disappeared long ago); if all the grossness, all the heaviness and hardness, all the intractable lumpiness of matter, all its so-called material qualities are not to be found in it, but only in our consciousness of it, we need no longer juggle with terms that are so interchangeable. The realist and idealist are both agreed that there is no physical It behind those qualities. And unless we are satisfied that he is right in contending that they exist, “on

their own,” we may as well say straight out that these two worlds, anyhow, are one; and that the ultimate reality of “matter” is spiritual energy. (292)

Much better known than Sinclair’s forays into mystical experience were those of Evelyn Underhill, who popularized the topic in numerous books written in the first decades of the twentieth century. Although Underhill was not highly sexuate, her Roman Catholic spiritual adviser thought her to be primarily attracted to other women. In her best-known work, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (1911), she is preoccupied with the relationship between sexual and mystical desire. As Joy Dixon points out, through succeeding editions of this work and others, Underhill repeatedly defends the integrity of mystical experience, usually Catholic, against allegations by a Decadent such as Arthur Symons and psychologists, such as Ellis and Freud, that mystical experience could be understood as a masked or sublimated form of sexual desire, directed especially to the figure of the wounded, bleeding Christ.⁷ Sinclair too was concerned about the tendency to reduce religious feeling to sexual feeling: “Now it is quite clear that in the classics of Mysticism we are dealing not only with a peculiar kind of experience, but with a peculiar kind of genius. And, again, having made all allowance for the influence of ‘mystical ill-health,’ the lover of literature must protest against the grossness of the interpretations that have been brought to these texts. The writings of the great mystics are not *all* charged with ‘unsublimated libido’” (285). For her part, Sinclair focuses on the sublimation of libido in religious ecstasy, in which she finds an upward movement of both the species and the individual spirit. But Hall doesn’t need to sublimate sexual desire in order to find it holy. Her spirituality is highly naturalist. And, as in the case of two earlier Roman Catholic converts, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, pagan desire and Christian mix freely in Hall’s writing.⁸ “The Rest Cure—1932” glances only briefly in the direction of desire for the body of the suffering Christ, but the appeal of mystical absorption, experienced in negation by Duffell, blocked by the continuing assertion of ego, retains its force for Hall.

In this discussion I have emphasized the negativity of Duffell’s access to mystical experience, but there are suggestions in the story that he is also able to access liminally the state of “ecstasy of contemplation” (330) that Sinclair suggests may occur following the awareness of one’s nonexistence.

Duffell's embrace of nudity and his identification with both hard gemlike stone and its rounded, breast-like shapes suggest an opening, in extremis, to the dynamic polarities of gendered existence. For Duffell, such glimpses are incompatible with normal social life; nonetheless, his limited but intense grasp of them is worth the sacrifice required. In "The Rest Cure—1932," the landscape of the West Country becomes the vehicle by which Duffell embraces an alterity whose transformative effects upon psychology and social existence continue to be played out.