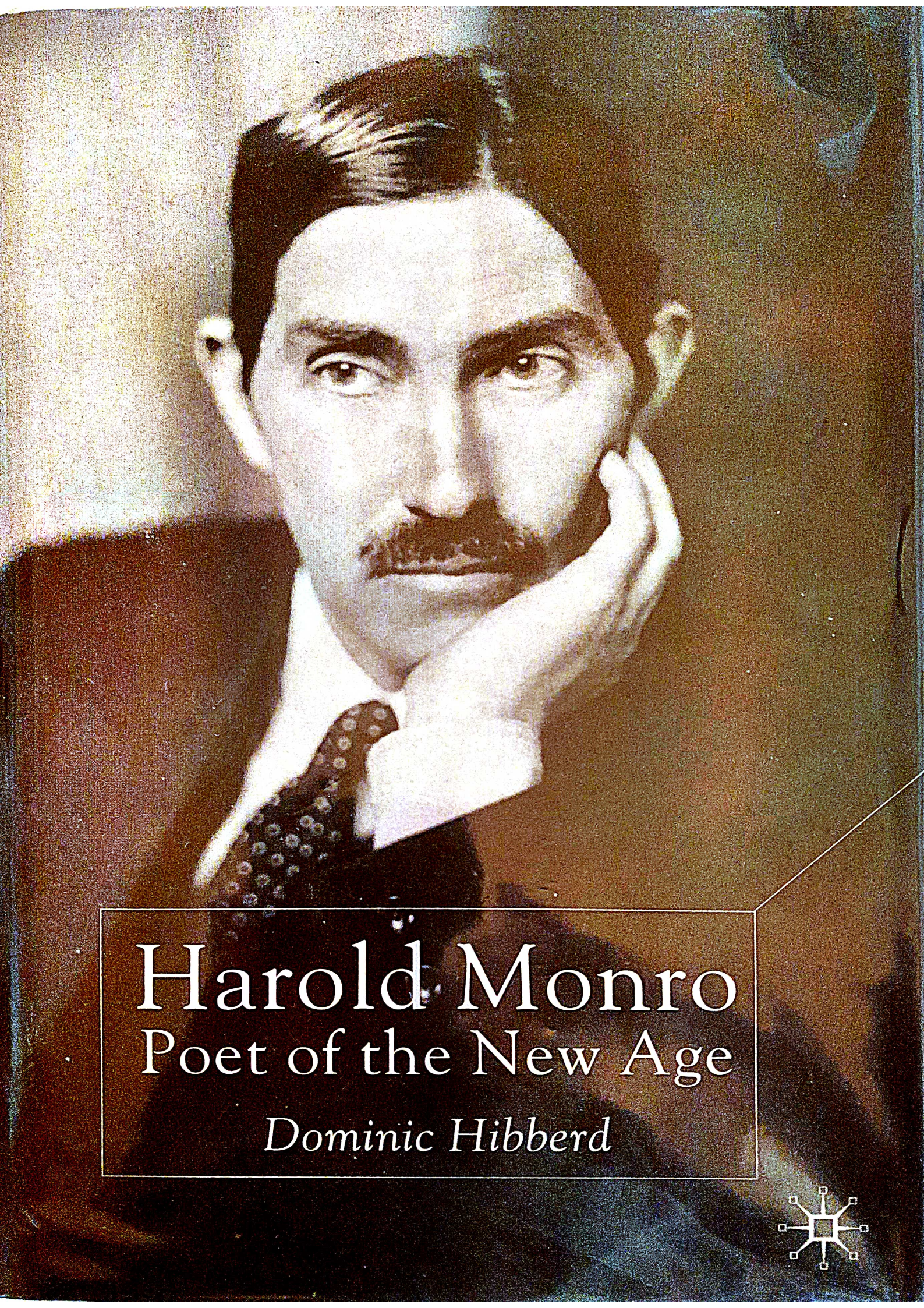


A sepia-toned portrait of a man with a mustache, wearing a suit and tie, resting his chin on his hand. The portrait is the background of the book cover.

Harold Monroe

Poet of the New Age

Dominic Hibberd



The Mountain and the Tower 1909–11

You are my chosen comrade, I am yours.
 We will erect of consecrated hours ...
 A temple to the universal soul.
 Let us depart for where the sweet airs flow
 Body and mind as one together grow
 There in the forest by the mountain stream ...
 ('Invitation')

It was appropriate, perhaps essential, to Harold's divided self that his Continental pilgrimage paused in two very different centres of freedom, one for the mind and one for the body. He discovered the mountain first, windswept and comfortless, fit for Supermen, a place of self-discipline and hard work. Then he – or rather Maurice – found the tower, a medieval one in Florence, the city of aesthetic and sensual delight. For a while he shuttled between these two homes, as though they represented the two poles of his own personality, until spirit and flesh came briefly together in the Utopian relationship he needed. There would have been no Poetry Bookshop without this double experience in Ticino and Tuscany.

The significance of the Lake Maggiore area for an idealist lay not in Locarno but in the mountain foothills above the nearby fishing village of Ascona. The Swiss canton of Ticino was a symbolic borderland between northern intellect and southern passion, free from both Teutonic over-regulation and Latin anarchy. Wells had made it the gateway to his Utopia, and many free-thinkers had been drawn there, including a Belgian, Henri Oedenkoven, who had arrived in 1900 and bought a hilltop behind Ascona, naming it Monte Verita, the Mountain of Truth. It was Monte Verita and its associated colony that had made Ascona famous, especially among the sort of people who frequented places like La Lignière and Waidberg.

Oedenkoven ran his magic mountain as a hotel where guests could undergo cures while living in harmony with the elements. He built simple 'light and air huts', sun baths, and small houses for longer-term residents, and named parts of the estate – Parsifal Meadow, Valkyrie Cliffs – in homage to Wagner, who, with Nietzsche, was the inspiration for much of the new age's thinking. Food was vegetarian, raw wherever possible, and clothes were minimal or dispensed with altogether. Photographs show guests dancing in the woods and working in the vegetable garden (Plates 11, 12).

Harold must have visited Monte Verita soon after arriving at his Locarno chalet. Most of what he saw would have been familiar to him from Waidberg, but there was a more extreme colony in the woods beyond the compound. Some of Oedenkoven's original companions had deplored his commercialism and withdrawn to live as children of nature, obeying only one law, to be true to oneself and the earth. Nowhere else in Europe, perhaps, was there so much of that 'simplification of life' which Harold had lectured about to the Haslemere socialists just before starting his long walk.¹

Visitors to Ascona ranged from city-dwellers taking brief health-cures to long-haired mystics and anarchists, drifting in from all over Europe in search of freedom. Not everyone was impressed. An Austrian aristocrat in about 1907 was revolted at the sight of ill-washed, naked figures capering in the moonlight, scrawny from their diet of cabbage-water and raw turnips; having expected to find rampant sexuality, he decided the commune had in fact developed an unhealthy apathy towards sex, and he was glad to get back to the world of beefsteaks and long skirts.² Other guests were less sceptical, especially Germans at odds with the militaristic culture of their homeland (the language of the mountain was predominantly German, which was no barrier to Harold). The local villagers, all Italian-speaking, were suspicious, and their descendants still remember the colonists as *matti*, mad ones; but Switzerland was a uniquely tolerant society.

The colonists believed their attitude to sex was healthy and natural, free from 'civilised' titillation. From 1905 the Munich psychoanalyst Otto Gross became a dominant influence, preaching his gospel of erotic liberation; regarded as dangerous by both the police and orthodox practitioners, he maintained that analysis was a means to inner and outer revolution, overthrowing the ego by releasing deeper forces to reshape the mind. He had been treated by Jung in Zurich earlier in 1908, a crucial year in the history of analysis; Harold may have heard of him there, and perhaps went to Ascona to learn more. During the next few years, there were rumours of Asconan orgies in which Gross encouraged people to act out their fantasies. His name is not well known to British readers, but some of his ideas are: in 1907 he had a passionate affair with Frieda Weekley, the German wife of an English professor (Gross told her she was 'the woman of the future'), and when she left her husband in 1912 for

D. H. Lawrence, Gross's sexual theories began to find their way into English fiction.

Harold was one of the first British writers to be influenced by the new ideas. He was already on the right wavelength, with his hostility to orthodox religion and marriage. He had written in his 1906 diary that he hoped for a return of paganism, and the imagery of a poem such as 'Two Visions' suggests that he was attracted by current German attempts to revive ancient sun-worship, a cult that was certainly practised at Ascona. Two of the poems he wrote at the chalet in November 1909 are clearly a response to Asconan sexual doctrine, possibly even to conversations with Gross. 'Don Juan in Hell' portrays Juan rejoicing in the memory of his loves, and 'To Tolstoi' (written in half an hour on 23 November) rejects the Tolstoyan creed of chastity which Harold had for years been 'carving with my will / Into my flesh':

Praised be the fate that under southern skies
Hath led me forth from thy grim northern ways!

The sex drive, 'the Spring that shall eternally renew', is recognised as a necessity which cannot and should not be resisted.

Harold had not written about sexuality before, but the subject preoccupied him at Ascona, both because he found it difficult and because he came to see it as central to his vision of the future. The springtide, representing the force which generates all terrestrial life, became a leading image in his poetry. He was still looking for the ideal society, but with a difference: the Samurai way of life was now to include sexual fulfilment, not chastity. He had a good deal in common with Lawrence, another Utopian, whom he met several times in later years and greatly admired. Lawrence's novels would be always available at the Bookshop, although the danger of police raids sometimes meant that they had to be put out of sight.

Among the many other writers influenced by Monte Verita, one in particular seems remarkably similar to Harold. Hermann Hesse, the German novelist who was to become a reluctant hero of the hippy movement half a century later, was in many ways typical of the people who came to the Mountain of Truth. Like Harold, he was prone to disappearing for long walks and was always a pilgrim, needing a base yet never settling in it and believing he should never have married. Like Harold, too, he wanted to spread ideas, yet refused to identify himself with any movement or party. Both men were hypochondriacs with a weakness for heavy drinking. Both were treated by Dr Bircher-Benner, as well as at Monte Verita. It was in search of a cure for drinking that Hesse went to Ascona in 1907; he slept on the ground in one of the huts and roamed the hills naked, getting scorched by the sun and gashed by thorns.³ While there is no evidence the two writers ever met, it is a fitting coincidence that the mill house

Harold eventually bought near Monte Verita was later to be occupied by Hesse's son, Heiner, who was born in the year Harold arrived in the Ticino.

Harold's tenancy of the chalet at Locarno was short-lived. The house was far too small and too remote, being a mile or more beyond the hamlets above the town and a long way from Ascona. Having never had to keep house for himself before, he sheepishly hired a manservant. Then, after a few productive weeks, he was obliged to leave in a hurry for the Riviera, where Dorothy was begging for his protection. She had returned to Menton for the winter season, only to find that 'all the females in the place' had 'started trying to claw her to pieces' when they saw she had no husband with her.

He had to spend the whole of December at Menton, discussing arrangements with her and Phillips, all three showing such candour and sincerity that he thought they 'might almost be in Utopia or in Wells's "In the Days of the Comet"'. He tried to think of himself as a Wells character, dealing with sexual relationships in the modern progressive way; it seemed right to release her to her lover rather than force her to be unhappy, but he felt they were cheating him. It was all miserably painful. Sometimes she still seemed the perfect comrade, talking about poetry - she was enthusiastic about his new work - or the future, but then she would become an empty-headed socialite again and hurry off to a party. Mrs Phillips, who was refusing a divorce, waylaid him several times, lecturing him in the street. Half-wishing he could go mad, he drafted and redrafted a poem about dragging his rival from lovemaking and strangling him very slowly.

Perhaps because he had agreed to be responsible for Nigel for part of each year, he returned briefly to Locarno, where he moved his books and servant to a less inaccessible chalet on the Monte Verita estate. His journey back to Menton in January 1910 was partly on foot, a tough winter walk along the coast from Genoa; one day he covered 35 miles between Albenga and San Remo, 'the longest walk I've ever done'. As he went he planned a prose work or perhaps a prose-poem, to be called 'The Springtide'.

For the next two months at Menton he tried to keep himself sane by labouring on his new scheme. Essentially - though by no means explicitly - 'The Springtide' was to be about the sexual urge and the way in which 'civilization' cannot cope with it, an Asconan subject still largely taboo for British poets. There were to be twelve books, one for each month, the early ones dealing with the birth of the spring force and with questions of morality and fecundity. July would be a vision of 'The City of the Future' (he left this page blank in his notebook). August was to be

the month of grief and mourning in which one has to recognise the mortality of the earth having been defiled. Now the human essence is almost shorn

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the month of grief and mourning in which one has to recognise the meaning of the earth having been defiled. Now the human spawn is abroad showing

spring of 1910–11. Arundel records that in December 1910 Harold took him to Ascona, where Marie and Nigel joined them for Christmas.

According to Alida Monro, it was in April 1911 that Harold was finally persuaded that he would have to return to England. He met the Italophile novelist and poet Maurice Hewlett, who took to him at once though nearly 20 years his senior. They tramped the Tuscan hills together, deep in literary talk, until Harold grew eloquent on the deplorable state of English poetry, prompting Hewlett to exclaim, 'If you feel like that, for God's sake go back to England and do something'. Alida may well have been right that Harold made up his mind at this moment. He explained his hopes to Craig, who at first thought him 'a man utterly weak yet determined to do or die'.¹¹

Harold was achieving nothing in Florence and was probably only staying there to be with Arundel, who was due to leave school in the summer; after that, if Arundel would join him, their summers would be in Ascona and their winters in London, where there was great work to do. As a first step Harold wrote to Edward Thomas, asking what chance a young friend might have of making a journalistic career in England, adding that he himself was thinking of finding a home in Hampshire. Thomas was pessimistic about literary journalism, but pleased to hear that Harold might become a neighbour.¹²

Harold's own chances partly depended on getting a more substantial reputation than his early poems and *Judas* could ever bring him. Sabin had been labouring on the new poems for months, getting up at six every morning to set them up in type on his own press before leaving for his job at the Victoria and Albert Museum; and Straus had been vainly hawking the sheets round publishers' offices. Help now came from a more influential ally: Hewlett wrote from London in mid-May, grumbling at the mood of the town, where the flags were going up for the coronation of George V, and reporting that he had taken the poems to his own publisher, Constable. *Before Dawn* was accepted for publication in mid-July.

Sabin says Harold was in London in June or July 1911.¹³ They walked miles along the river and through the parks, considering possibilities. Harold's main idea was for a poetry journal, although Sabin also argued for 'a centre with a library, a hall for lectures and readings, and cloisters where the student could dream, study and write'. Harold proposed a crusade in which missionaries would 'spout poetry at street corners, in public houses, and even in private houses'. Sometimes they called on Romney Green, who listened patiently to their incessant discussion.

In the absence of Maurice Browne, Sabin had become Harold's principal adviser and confidant; steady, dependable, generous to a fault with his time and skill, he was in some ways an ideal helper, though hardly a poet of the

future. He remembered that Harold took him out to lunch at Harrods, where a new 'Georgian Restaurant' had just opened.

'It ought to be called the *Gorgeon* restaurant,' said Harold, with one of his rare touches of slightly sardonic humour. . . . 'This is the first time since my return that I have been reminded we are living in a new Georgian era – and, by Jove, Arthur, we are the new Georgian poets!' Neither of us realised the momentous nature of this spontaneous exclamation – the term *Georgian Poets* had sprung alive from the lips of its parent.

Sabin seems to be right that this was the first time anyone had referred to the poets of the new age as Georgian. Edward Marsh believed the term to be his own when he chose it for his anthology a year or so later, but perhaps he had actually picked it up in conversation with Harold.

Maurice thought the poems in *Before Dawn* were the most important collection since Swinburne's *Songs Before Sunrise*. His sister went even further: according to Sabin, Dorothy believed the new book was the twentieth century's equivalent of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. Harold was pessimistic: 'I am six years too old', he wrote to Maurice.

The book might be promising at 26. At present all the fire has quite died down in me. Florence has partly quenched it, and partly I know too much to go on writing the old sort of stuff and too little to write any new.

He added that apart from Hewlett, Maurice and, to his surprise, May Gooch, no one seemed to like the book. 'Wells writes most unfavourably'. Thomas had been unable to discover 'the unity of word and spirit' he always looked for in poetry; he suggested that prose might have been a better medium, a point echoed by several reviewers. Harold was puzzled by this, although he could see that the poems preached too much. His best work was in fact always to be near the border between poetry and prose, but in 1911 the blunt sincerity of his ideas and style, a poetry for the Samurai, struck his readers as new and unorthodox. The style seems less daring now, with many traces of 'the old sort of stuff' showing through the simplified language he had learned from Gibson. The newness of his work lay in his ideas, freshly imported from Ascona and Florence.

Before Dawn (*Poems and Impressions*), the product of three years 'under southern skies', is an extraordinary book, perhaps the first collection of genuinely modern English poetry. It is dedicated to 'those who, with me, are gazing in delight towards where on the horizon there shall be dawn'. The opening poem is 'Two Visions', with its image of ideal youth facing the sunrise:

Beautiful human body cool and strong,
In the full consciousness of human pride,
With the slow rhythm of a perfect song...

In 'The Moon-Worshippers' and 'The Swamp' the dying people of the past are shown trapped in superstition, worldliness and fear of sin. Images familiar from the Decadence – ennui, night, pallor – are cast aside to make way for sunlight, fresh air and unashamed sexuality. Two poems describe the return of Christ, one describes the return of King Arthur, who rallies 'the Nobility to come', and in another Don Juan prophesies his own return and the earthly paradise of the Superman:

O crowd funereal,
Lifting your anxious brows because of sin,
There is no Heaven such as you would win,
Nor any other Paradise at all,
Save in fulfilling some superb desire
With all the spirit's fire.

'The Virgin' and 'To Tolstoi' reiterate the value of sexual fulfilment. 'Paradise' condemns formal marriage, perhaps with a memory of a year's engagement to Dorothy; in a Carpenterian image that Harold was to use again, a sexual relationship is given the same natural sanctity as a tree:

Belovèd, I had given you my soul,
(Which is my body): you and I had dwelt
One year in paradise – when God appeared...

The tread of God is murder: if he comes
Pursuing us with vengeance, let us stand
Together, silent still, against some tree,
Whose sacred life we shall be conscious of
Within trunk, boughs and leaves. Thus let us pass,
If need be underneath the foot of God,
Back to the everlasting...

In poem after poem, God is seen as the giver of law and death, and now he is himself dying, as the speaker in 'The Last Abbot' confesses. Immortality is in the human mind and in the continuity of time:

All that a man may do or say
Is eternal: my soul shall last

Knit into everlasting day,
Linked to the Future out of the past.

A separate section at the end contains thirty of the short 'Impressions' begun in Florence in 1908; most of them are satirical portraits, outlining the ills of modern society – greed, unhealthy eating, idleness, snobbery, elaborate clothes, heartlessness – which the future must discard.

The first readers of this insistently optimistic book would have been astonished at the poet's state of mind soon after publication. He had returned to Florence, where the city's corrupting influence had attacked him again, as he told Maurice:

At 32 one must either die or be new born. I was thinking something about the latter, but it keeps slipping my memory, and the former never seems attractive for a long enough period together. . . . I am still often amazingly fond of my senses, and should always want to kill myself very slowly – about 3 years. Hang all one's senses out first like dry herrings on a string, and when they were quite putrid, one would turn over with something between a groan and a laugh and close one's eyes. I began for quite a short time in Florence, and the amazing thing is that it was not boredom that stopped me, but beauty.

Harold decided to leave Florence for good. He went to Ascona, ended his tenancy of Casa Sasso and bought a tiny house in the forest, an ideal home for himself and his young friend. Returning to the tower for the last time he started rewriting 'The Springtide' as a long 'Invitation (to A. d. R.)':

Come Love let us build the Future of our dreams
High in the solemn woodland, where the streams
Shall feed our souls with their eternal song . . .

You are my chosen comrade, I am yours.

They would grow their own food, worship the sun and build a 'temple' of thought, a first structure for the City of the Future. Out of their bond would grow an 'infant of the soul, not of the flesh'.

At last, at last a manhood shall have birth
That shall be worthy to possess the earth
Gazing no more with penitential eyes
To some imagined Heaven in the skies.
Fawning no more on the uplifted rod
Of some imagined and revengeful God.

Fired by this vision of the beautiful future, Harold went to Waidberg to strengthen himself for life in the wild. As soon as term ended Arundel joined him at Meiringen for a strenuous hike over the Rhone glacier to Ascona.

The new home in the solemn woodland was an abandoned mill house hidden among the trees, just below the road – then a mere path – which runs from Monte Verita to the hill village of Ronco. It had two simple rooms one above the other, connected by a ladder and trapdoor. A small, swift stream rushed almost to the eaves, then dropped sheer to the disused mill wheel, flowed across a little garden and fell in a cascade among the rocks on its way to the lake far below. The waterfall was the only available shower for those of the forest colonists who cared to wash, so groups of them were sometimes to be seen splashing in its pool (Plate 13). Except for these naked visitors the place was deeply secluded; Arundel remembered it as 'a wonderful spot, an island of greenery among the trees, suspended as it were between earth and sky'.¹⁴

When Harold advertised the mill for sale years later, Hewlett enquired where the servant slept if not in the owner's arms. But there was no servant except Arundel, who acted as cook and housekeeper, doing the washing-up in the stream and sometimes hurrying down to the pool to retrieve lost cutlery. Harold fetched and carried, bringing provisions, mostly vegetables, up the mountain paths from Ascona. At night the water thundered close to the wall, its 'eternal song' making sleep difficult at first, and in the morning Arundel bathed in its cold torrent. Sitting on the primitive verandah at dusk, Harold expounded his vision of their future: they would spend half of each year in England, working for poetry and progressive ideas, and every summer they would be at Ascona, living at one with nature as Supermen 'true to the earth'. For a few weeks, he was happier than he had ever been or would ever be again.

His 'Invitation (to A. d. R.)' looks forward to a union that will be physical as well as spiritual:

Let us belong to the unrighteous few...

Already we are one: my soul with thine
Begins in flowing thought to intertwine
Our passions and our fancies when we hold
Each other, when our spirits interfold
And when our hands and lips together press
Lean outward to the future we confess
The lovely earth, nor curse nor even blame
The body, we are joined and without shame...

Another fragment in the same notebook suggests that Arundel was less passionate:

Your hand once touched me and it turned me cold
To think how little tortured you could be
When I was on the leash not to enfold
And crush your little body into me . . .

In later life Arundel said he had left Florence in 1911 because he had been turned down by a girlfriend, and he gave no hint that Harold had ever been in love with him. The two men may have slept together at the mill house, but they were not there for long.

Arundel was not keen on Asconan isolation, although he liked the idea of London. He sought company, scrambling down through the woods to a romantic house by the lake where he was made welcome by the German writer Emil Ludwig and Ludwig's beautiful wife, with whom the young visitor fell desperately in love. She invited him to Berlin. Harold was furious at this suggestion, calling it babysnatching, and he faced Arundel with a stark choice between Germany and England. Arundel was angry in return, but as he had no money and spoke no German the Ludwigs left without him.

For this and other reasons the rural idyll turned sour. As Harold told Maurice on 12 September,

It seemed as though I had reached the summit of my life – the moment that was really to count, and glorify everything that came after it; but Love beat my body till it bled all over at the very moment he was whispering his message from Heaven in my ears.

Then the idyll ended altogether. After a blazing summer the Asconan rain returned and the stream burst its culvert, pouring in through the roof of the cottage. The two inhabitants took refuge at Monte Verita, where neither wished to linger, and Arundel made up his mind. 'I was very much down in the dumps. The news from home wasn't particularly encouraging. Monroe said: Well, come on. So I said: All right. So we went off to England.'¹⁵

Monro

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