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Gladys Brown Ficke and *The Final Beauty*

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In 1936, two years after John Cowper Powys and Phyllis Playter departed America and Phudd Bottom for Dorset and then Wales, their friend and neighbour, the poet Arthur Davison Ficke revealed that his wife, Gladys Brown Ficke, had written a novel with two of the main characters based on John and Phyllis. In a letter to Lloyd Emerson Siberell he wrote

I have spent most of the last 48 hours reading a remarkable novel, written by my wife. She has worked on it for two years, and I have not seen it before. Jack is the central figure—and it is by far the best portrait of him that has yet been put down on paper. If it ever gets into print, you will howl with delight—you will simply howl! And so will Jack. But the chances of a publisher wanting it are not very good. It is much too fine a piece of work to have a large sale. Still, one always hopes. She hasn't tried it on anyone yet; in fact, there is a good deal of work she still has to do in revision. Do you think that the title, "THE BIRD IN THE ICE-BOX" sounds cheap? I can't make up my mind. (The BIRD is of course not Jack—but his girlfriend. It's an extraordinary novel.)¹

In 1927 John visited the Fickes in Santa Fe. Arthur was now married to his second wife, Gladys Brown, and was recuperating from a bout with pulmonary tuberculosis. In a letter to Phyllis, John reported the Fickes' plan to return east in the spring and their purchase of Upstate New York property (which they would later name Hardhack), a decision which would later influence John and Phyllis's own move to Phudd Bottom in 1930.

They have bought to live on when he's cured a farm of 300 acres ext where Edna St Vincent and Mr Boissevain live about 30 miles from Albany in our very favourite country—Ficke is a bit nervous as to whether he'll like the complete isolation & long snow-covered winters—but his wife is fixed & resolute to do it.... He and his horse-taming Gladys seem so serenely happy together after five years of association that its pleasing to see. ...²

The eventual discovery of Phudd Bottom by John and Phyllis was due largely to the Fickes living nearby. John's diary records that 'It was in Arthur's car that with the T.T. [Phyllis, the Tiny Thin, The Tao] I saw first our little house at Hillsdale.'³ And the financial arrangements which made the purchase possible were brokered by Ficke by means of a loan repaid by the sale of a manuscript. In a letter to Lloyd Emerson Siberell, Arthur whimsically wrote:

I do not remember which book it was [*Wolf Solent*], or what price was paid: all I recall is that some such thing as you recount did actually happen, in the early days of J. C. Powys' Columbia County reign. As I remember, he mentioned to me that somebody would like to

buy the m.s. of some one of his books; and he wanted to know if he could ask \$100.00 for it — and I proceeded to perform an Indian dance of fury, and told him he was a Goddamfool and needed a guardian, and that our price was \$2,000.00, and that I would handle the matter for him. Which I did, and got him some very large sum. Since which day, John has always regarded me with eyes in which a kind of solemn terror and awe were visible — as if he thought I were allied with the Devil and could produce rabbits from goldfish-bowls. This episode, and the fact that I could drive an automobile, are probably the whole basis of the great respect which John has always had for me! ⁴

The use of the dismissive 'his girl-friend' in Arthur's letter to Siberell about Gladys's novel (The BIRD is of course not Jack—but his girl-friend.) was characteristic of the relationship of Arthur and Gladys Ficke with Phyllis Playter. John's diaries of the Upstate years (1930-34) record Phyllis's continuing distresses whenever she was in personal contact with the Fickes. In a series of entries in 1930 John wrote:

They are simple where the T.T. is very subtle and they have no more idea of what she is like than they have of the Holy Ghost.⁵

I know that they do not set themselves to find out what she is really like. She speaks and no one listens.⁶

Then she was taken by Gladys for a drive which to her was like the Inquisition.⁷

Arthur drove back at midnight. He spoke benevolently to me but in some subtle way and with a kind of metallic hardness they made the T.T. feel a wicked 'draught'. When we got home and she had changed her dress to do her packing I found her crying (out by the tree on the road) and it was because of their hard egoism directed towards the child Hilary [Masters] and Warwick [Powys] and towards herself but making a pet of me. I do not like such behaviour and I cannot allow it for the T.T. is a twig in my soul and Warwick is of my clan ...⁸

She spoke of how strange it was that Gladys and Arthur completely disregard her personality.⁹

[And he records over a year later] But the presence of Gladys troubled and agitated her—as it always does—The T.T. suffers in her soul from Arthur & Gladys.¹⁰

John also recorded in his diary his brother Llewelyn's opinion of the Fickes:

Lulu finds Arthur benevolent but rather hard to illuminate and exhausting to talk to. He thinks Gladys is ... but I care not to report his rather harsh and hasty verdict. He does not at all get Gladys's better qualities — her garden — her horse — her quietness. He does not like her.¹¹

The Fickes were considered good friends by John and as neighbors they lived within walking distance of Phudd Bottom. They were generous in chauffeuring John and Phyllis on various errands and visits. But even John felt a certain sense of 'forelock tugging' in reference to

the occupants of Hardhack which he sometimes equated with Montacute House and the remembered relationship of vicarage to manor house:

Gladys came. She is to take us up to Montacute House to see the Squire this afternoon. My feelings are exactly of that same sort — but I am older foxier & very much fiercer & craftier than I was in those days.¹²

And some disagreement was inevitable due to Arthur and Gladys' continuing and undoubtedly well-meaning attempts to act on behalf of John and Phyllis.

[The] most agitating clash has occurred between Arthur and us over the question of Mr. Keedick [John's lecture agent]. To cool my mind I have just walked to the Iron Bridge. The night is cool and wild and blowing. He thinks I am a fool. He wants to be my Ambassador Plenipotentiary. What does he know? How can he know?¹³ [And later.] Arthur and Gladys came to discuss the Keedick affair and as I dodged and dived and squirmed and coiled and slithered ... — and Arthur and Gladys *laid down the Law* what did the T.T. do but burst out. Arthur really began, he got angry himself with her as well as irritated with me and was unparadoxably sarcastic and then the T.T. got really angry and even said Yes I am angry!¹⁴

The ongoing currents of discord and slight domestic dramas between the two households were obvious material for discussion and fertile ground for storytelling and fictionalization.

And also in addition to the Kitchen Stove having gone out, Gladys came and began teaching her how to manage the little Black and how to 'rub his nose in the stuff'. Lo and Behold, the T.T. did stand up to Gladys and actually told her not to come into her house and to interfere. It was nearly a scene... but not exactly a scene for the T.T. became disarmingly frank about her manias and weaknesses. Gladys laughed, but laughed very awkwardly while her fingers tapped her skin. 'It is funny,' she said. But she will never interfere again; in my opinion!¹⁵

And adding richness to the personal observations and experiences of Gladys, the publication of *Autobiography* in 1934 provided primary documentation of John's fetishes and ritualized behaviour.

THE NOVEL

Gladys Brown's unpublished novel, titled *The Final Beauty* (the earlier title *The Bird in the Ice-box* having been discarded) is part of the Arthur Davison Ficke Papers at Yale University in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The title page bears the name of a literary agency suggesting that there was at least some attempt at publication and the manuscript shows evidence of re-writing and re-working. Some recognizable events and characterizations in the work are based on occurrences and personalities known to Gladys, woven together in fanciful ways in a story about innocence, love, renunciation, and the good of the common man. The novel is set in three different locales: rural Pennsylvania, New York City, and rural Connecticut.

The major characters of the novel are Nathalia Bradford (based on Phyllis Playter), Daxton

Sillis (based on John Cowper Powys), and Edward Lucas (whose character seems suggested by Evans Rodgers). Evans Rodgers is mentioned in John Cowper Powys's diaries as a newspaper writer (and hopeful novel writer) who was a visitor to Phudd Bottom in 1931 and 1933. Rodgers was an admirer of John's writings and wrote an article based on his visits to Phudd Bottom which was to be published in the June 1934 issue of the Cincinnati publication, *The Outrider: A Journal for the Civilized Minority*. The publication ceased with the May 1934 issue. Later he revised the article, calling it 'The Cult of Powys' and added a 'Second Movement' where he expounded on what he understood Powys's message or philosophy of life to be. The revised article (submitted from New Orleans, where he was then working at the *New Orleans Item*) was to be published in Lloyd Emerson Siberell's *Imprimatur* but it too ceased before publication. Phyllis Playter does not, of course, appear in the Rodgers article in much the same way that she is absent from the pages of John's *Autobiography*. A copy of the unpublished article is in the Siberell Papers at OSUL. Nothing additional is known of Rodgers.

The early portions of the novel contain some informed impressions of Phyllis Playter's early life. Very little is recorded about Phyllis's life before she met John and what there is describes a lonely existence. In conversation she talked of life as a solitary child, a private education in Boston until she was eighteen when she moved to join her parents in Kansas City, her depression and melancholy when she attempted to write, and her secretarial work in Kansas City.¹⁶ She also loved music and art, dancing and the theatre.¹⁷ Perhaps some of Gladys's impressions were gained from Phyllis herself and from friends of hers who visited both Phudd Bottom and Hardhack. The name of the character based on Phyllis is Nathalia — and was perhaps suggested by the visit of her close friend, Nataly Ort, in 1931. John refers to 'Mrs. O.' as Natalia in several diary entries and she and Phyllis did visit Gladys. Discussing their visit the

conversation veered at last to the difficulty which the T.T. has in coping with Gladys and also her double personality, so that, as she says, she is always the *opposite of everything she is!* It touched me to remark Natalia's devotion to the T.T. & her blind admiration & puzzled respect for her — without really comprehending her ... but being sincere in her respect.¹⁸

Gladys was familiar with the bohemian New York — Greenwich Village ambience and the milieu of Ficke, Millay, and the circle of Powys friends and family, including Dreiser, Rex Hunter, and the artist, Reginald Marsh. Some of the settings in the New York City portion of her novel reflect this. Romany Marie's restaurant complete with artwork from struggling artists plays a prominent part and some drunken parties and partygoers in other scenes are undoubtedly modelled from observation. But the final section of the novel, which is set in rural Connecticut, offers the most intriguing characterizations of people and events.

The novel opens with 18-year-old Nathalia Bradford and her stern all important father who has renounced his dream of returning in financial triumph to England to reclaim the ancestral Bradford Manor in Dorset. He has purchased an 80-acre estate in Pennsylvania where 'the elms are quite as fine as those in

Dorset'. Nathalia is described as

undersized, pale faced, stoop shouldered, and her head, loaded at the back with a great knot of hair in an outmoded fashion, seemed too heavy for her long neck. Her eyes were very large and beautiful, almost Oriental in the long sweep of dark brow, her nose was small and

slightly aquiline.... Everything about her suggested fragility: her voice low pitched and without resonance, her way of moving with sudden hesitations, hands lifted in doubt, her gentle manners — her restraint might have been nothing but timidity. She lacked the animation and assurance so much affected and admired by Americans.

Nathalia's American mother had died soon after her birth and she had led a rather protected, friendless, and aloof existence, studying music, educated by English tutors and subjected to their 'carping discipline and dictatorial arrogance'. It was Mr. Bradford's aim to preserve 'a strictly English atmosphere in his home' so that he and his daughter would be prepared for their eventual remove to Dorset.

The family settles in the somewhat battered Dutch mansion of Richmond Bide, watched over by seven great elms and sans running water and indoor bathrooms. But Nathalia soon discovers the joy of being allowed to walk alone in the fields and woodlands and adopts her special place, 'the spinney' where a grove of birch trees offers refuge from the ancient elms. She reflects on her solitary life as a child, insulated from friendship with 'vulgar, dirty, ignorant, profane and American' children and forced to invent a melancholy imaginary world.

All her life she had had one-sided half sorrowful friendships with imaginary people. Cracks in the walls of the old Trenton house, steps in the stairs, pieces of furniture, articles of clothing—all were people whose needs and desires, jealousies and joys she understood. She had acquired what was forbidden; companionship with kindred spirits. They consoled her for her isolation from the street-urchins.

Soon there is a momentous occurrence in Nathalia's life with the introduction of a new tutor, beautiful and young Cornelia Willan, who has been engaged to instruct her in the English Classics. Nathalia is enthralled with Miss Willan and her revelation that one's emotional nature can be cultivated through the study of poetry. In a voice 'as soft as love itself, and her *eyes* were suddenly soft and gentle', Miss Willan's words mesmerize her

If you love something—or someone — no matter how much, if you can't express it it's a hidden thing. It's gold in the ground. Let the great poets teach you how to mine it. Speak out your love.

The lessons in poetry soon develop into attempts to free Nathalia's spirit with a change to 'duck skirts, silk shirts and white pumps' and a trip to the hairdressers and bobbed hair. Slight embraces and kisses from Cornelia (who is now 'Nell') encourage Nathalia's emotional attachment to her. Mr. Bradford is not enthralled by the changes and scornfully pronounces 'You look masculine. I am no feminist and never have been.'

The next tutoring session finds the two girls in the 'glazed and glittering heat' of the spinney where they are soon lying naked as Nell reads from Shakespeare's Sonnets and divulges the secret that

His lover was a boy ... Yes, it's one of those darling secrets — when boys are lovers, and when girls are lovers. Do you know, I think it's nicer to love a girl than a boy

The seduction scene is interrupted by the imminent arrival of Mr. Bradford who has

become suspicious of the 'peculiar' relationship of student and teacher. Clothes are rapidly retrieved in some disarray and *Paradise Lost* again becomes the subject of attention although Nell whispers, 'It was regained.'

The only suggestion of any kind of lesbian experience for Phyllis resides in some elliptical entries in the diaries. John makes an intriguing entry:

The T.T. had a complicated Bad Dream including a grown up Dorothy Reed the little girl she used to play those Corinthian Games with in Boston; Games that stimulate my fancy—it is Petrushka's Temptation to think of them!¹⁹

It's not known what John meant by 'Corinthian Games' although there is a sexual connotation in some meanings of Corinthian — as in being licentious — and a tangential suggestion of homosexuality. In an earlier entry he tantalizingly records that

Helen Morgan came to tea—& gave the T.T. a wrist-watch so prettily. I got a thrill from watching her caress the T.T.'s hand & white arm sheathed like an Arum Lily stalk by her new sleeves — calyx-like. I was enchanted by hearing these refined & aristocratic young girls play and rally and tease and float on the waves of their nervous interest in each other.²⁰

In the novel Nell leaves to teach at a girls' school in Connecticut. Nathalia is left with her desire for a college education thwarted by her father's lack of money and settles for the compromise of learning to type as a means of accomplishing something practical. She soon forms a friendship with Ed Lucas, whom she had first noticed from the shelter of the spinney; 'a young man with bright taffy-colored hair' who is 'a big strapping fellow in a faded blue shirt and overalls'. He is planning to leave his family's farm for New York to follow his dream of writing for a newspaper. He is suspicious of Nathalia's acquaintance with Nell Willan but they reach an agreement that 'It's natural for fellows and girls to like each other.' Nathalia is afraid to run away to the city but the idealistic Ed encourages her.

If everybody don't make the best they can of themselves they're wasting their talents. They're wasting life force. I read once how life can evolve to a great perfection. I believe that. But if you don't work for it you're working against it. It can't come by itself. Every last one of us has got to cultivate our own gardens — I mean ourselves - and if we don't, why then we're really holding up the — the final beauty.

Nathalia does leave with Ed for New York City and her upset father agrees to pay for her room at the Y.W.C.A. Ed introduces her to Greenwich Village and Faustina's Bohemia, a basement restaurant (based on Romany Marie's). The Great Depression makes employment difficult for Ed but Faustina introduces him to Dick Waterbury who works at *The Postal* [New York Post?]. Through this contact he is introduced to some of Waterbury's amoral friends.

Nathalia visits Nell in the apartment she shares with an intimate friend and is referred to a stenographer's bureau run by one of her lesbian friends. Nell also explains to the innocent Nathalia the 'ABC of sex education' by means of a book with diagrams.

Nevertheless as Nathalia looked at them she was afflicted with appalling sensations; and her wonder deepened into horror. ...She at last knew the unknown something that had

always eluded her.... this tremendous ... incredible ... Monstrosity!

Enter Daxton Sillis.

Troubled by her perceptions of other human beings and their sexuality, Nathalia begins to 'think New York is horrible. Everybody gets unnatural here.' Yet 'despite her disgust... her *eyes* kept noticing men and her brain kept flinging up reminders of a certain part that she had never seen except in diagram. Awful to think of.' But as she goes to attend a concert of Efrem Khalov, a conductor whom she had long idolized, she makes a chance acquaintance. Told there is standing room only, she is befriended by a man who offers to show her a place where she can sit in the Family Circle.

He was tall and gaunt, forty-five years old or more, quite elderly, and his shoulders stooped. He had a grizzled mop of hair and heavy overhanging brows that made his eyes look sunken, though they were not sunken and his cheeks had a healthy weather-beaten glow. His nose was an eagle's beak and his mouth, wide as a clown's, curved up at the corners

And his accent is that of an Englishman.

Driven to tears by the final selection on the programme which gives her an intimation of 'having heard a faint echo of what would be God's omniscient song. That would be the final beauty, what life intends... .' Nathalia is comforted with a Powysian response.

You have felt the only kind of ecstasy that is worthy of respect. I had supposed that the female organism was incapable of it — or, I should say, an unlikely resort for it. But I have seen it lodge in you and tear at your vitals!' He pronounced these words with a kind of demonic fervor as if he rejoiced in the bloody havoc he imagined.

He tells Nathalia that he is terrified of women and their 'redoubtable, unassailable composure' and that his 'male audacity is undone by their superior knowingness'. But she is different in her wistful timidity and when she was

pierced to the very bowels by the lance of beauty I was captivated! The magnificent Bach Passacaglia shattered you and I soared up to the peaks of daring courage on its wings: I took charge of you! Now, little Missy, I have returned you to your nest, safe and sound from the flight in high regions. May you be forever delicate and timid as a bird.

Nathalia agrees to attend a gallery opening in the Village on Saturday night 'and after asking her name and giving his, Daxton Sillis, he went away flourishing his hat and grinning like a clown.'

The descriptions of Daxton at the gallery opening in conversation seem particularly apt:

Gaunt, angular and electric [he] was standing bent over with his hands grasping his knees while he talked vehemently. He had a beaked nose and a big mouth; his shabby tweed coat bulged at the pockets and his unpressed trousers were worn pale at the knees. He was so wrapped up in what he said that one was persuaded of his integrity.

Daxton Sillis, although an American of New England background, was sent to England as a small boy to be educated by his missionary parents who were serving in India. He has the quintessential accent of the cultured Englishman and also has ties to Dorset. He is engaged in writing about music and the graphic arts in his belief that in their sublimity they are the antithesis of the 'utter loathsomeness of the human race.'

After a somewhat shocking party at a painter's home with others of the Village bohemian set, Daxton apologetically escorts Nathalia home. In the taxi he holds her hands, kisses both them and his own and

she felt a kind of mystical, unbodily marriage celebrated. And it was marriage enough for two who eschewed the gross, corporeal being; but Nathalia knew not yet the meaning of her own elemental happiness.

Daxton confides his fondness of 'lovely thin hands and knees' which give him 'a delicious pleasure'. He is rewarded by Nathalia pulling up her skirt

to display her knees, thin, showing the bones and sleek in silk stockings. 'Oh —' he sighed and laid his hand across them. 'Oh, my dear — what a delight — what a rapture! I am infinitely consoled for every mortal iniquity.'

But on the way to his hotel, Daxton deplores his behaviour:

enamored of a little girl, a child with the knees of a greyhound. Old enough to be her father, great beast! great monstrous slathering ape! filled with rapture and a lust to touch her knees. How long would it take the greyhound to become a bitch? Aye, that would fix you, old demon! When woman breasts and rumps come you'd scuttle for your very life.

Ed Lucas had attended the same gallery opening as Nathalia and in a later scene at the Y.W.C.A. they argue about her new friends and he grabs her roughly in a passionate kiss. This is interrupted by the matron and leaves a shamed Nathalia thinking of 'Ed's hot and sinister kisses. But can the marriage ceremony make less distasteful the acts of marriage? ... Can one never get away from this thing?'

At the end of a traumatic visit to an artists' ball, Nathalia finally meets Daxton again. She confides to him that she wishes to help him, be like him and live in his way.

Will you take me, Daxton? Let me be with you. Let me help you, surely I can. I am a good typist now, I can work for you, and I can help you in many ways.

Daxton confesses some of his 'manias!' (underlined in true JCP fashion) and they spend the night together with only the caressing and kissing of Nathalia's knees as the physical expression of their love. At Daxton's urging, they decide to

go at once courageously into the green hills and valleys and find our home....A little cottage with vines and the shadow of a hill and the murmur of a brook's voice, with all the stirring life that these things unfold —

Nathalia and Daxton, with his walking stick, discover in the rolling hills of Connecticut, near the village of Merrilton, the cottage they are seeking.

Like a Don Quixote in flapping tweed he charged forward, sword in hand, and she, the doubting Sancho, trailed along seeing no castle in the air. He knocked at the door. When it opened he was standing with hat, stick and bundle of rubbers clasped against his stomach and somehow he managed to bow.

She was wholly reconciled to escape with Daxton; and now in retrospect the little cottage snuggled in the hills seemed truly the refuge for a pair of idealists.

Prior to moving to Connecticut, Daxton and Nathalia have an interview with her father. Mr. Bradford is intrigued and intimidated by Daxton's English manner and assents to their living together. Nathalia explains

that we don't want to marry as most people do; we want to live together and share whatever fortunes or misfortunes may come to us, but we aren't-----we aren't lovers in the usual sense of the word.

In the village of Merrilton, they are known as Mr. And Mrs. Sillis, and neither of them corrects the mistake.

I am very glad, my dear, [Daxton says] that you've not corrected the natives when they address you as Mrs. Sillis; for these people, I fear, are quite as primitive as persons of a similar class in England; and they might — I don't say they would — but they might exhibit signs of moral outrage did they know the true state of affairs.

The portrayal of their neighbours is unflattering and bleak. The Chipworths and the Chidleys are somewhat mean and grasping and Harry Chipworth remains a constant sexual threat to Nathalia. If the novel had achieved publication, one wonders how actual neighbors, the Kricks and the Steitz, and Miss McNeill who came in to cook and clean, would have reacted.

Mrs. Chipworth scrubbed for the indecent pair and salved her conscience by putting aside for Christmas the very high pay she received.... It was understood far and wide that Mr. Sillis was a fool, he'd pay anything asked, always providing his 'little whore' — the men whispered this and guffawed — was not at hand to correct him. With excellent wit they spoke of him as 'Mr. Silly.

The use of Mr. Silly falls into John's tradition of calling himself a zany, a ninny, and of his Sherborne nickname 'Moony', or his references to 'John Loony'.

During Evans Rodgers first visit in 1931, he stayed at the Steitz home and also visited with the Fickes. An undercurrent of local suspicion was indicated in John's diary.

I found Mr Rodgers just arrived for tea. He told us that Mrs Steitz had displayed curiosity about us.²¹ [And later] We were all at breakfast at noon when Gladys came back from Hudson. She came in saying 'Let us talk Dirt' & we discussed what Mr Rodgers had said

about the Suspicions of Mrs Steitz with regard to our Relations....²²

In the novel Gladys captures many of the daily domestic routines and concerns at Phudd Bottom which are familiar to readers of John's published diaries. Preparing high tea at 5 o'clock and the difficulties of a bland vegetarian diet as adequate sustenance for Nathalia (Phyllis) are represented. 'She grew more wan and pale as the months passed.' In the diaries, John records this same difficulty:

The T.T. I found very upset for she felt so exhausted & hungry for she cannot cook enough for herself alone. It is very serious. Ailino! Ailino! She wished we were both dead....²³

Nathalia's (Phyllis) love of gardening is also described in the novel.

She flew about, happily doing things: digging garden plots in front of the house, planting seeds in flower-pots, old saucepans, broken glasses, tomato cans, anything that would hold soil; and these cluttered every sunny window-sill in the house.

Later in some wintry scenes — Daxton (John) is seen in his sheepskin coat going for eggs, milk and the post. There is also an amusing sequence of Daxton attempting to take out the ashes and trying to light fires — much as constantly recorded in the diaries.

Scenes of physical intimacy in the cottage consist of the moments of saying goodnight when Daxton would 'caress her, kiss her cheeks and neck, her hands and at last her knees'. Or as Nathalia later refers to it 'the moment for love-making'. She then retires to her bedroom and Daxton to his nightly ritual in a scene reminiscent of *Autobiography*:

He approached it with failing confidence for he was not always successful. Sometimes, especially if the sky were bright, the fold of hills out at which he looked would refuse to merge and melt into the familiar lane that seemed to hold the alchemy of magic. Terrible, vile, obscene thoughts paraded across his vision. It was not a new experience, for these filthy images had hovered around him throughout his life; and his ritual had not always driven them away. Now they were more powerful and more alluring. His imagination was excited by the nearness of his girl. He knew that his pulses throbbed with excitement; the forbidden pleasure held him spellbound as surely as the divine joy of infinitude had ever held him in bodiless trance. Instead of feeling the beauty of life he thought of its wickedness and thought of it with cringing pleasure. Of every dirty thing he had ever heard and every bawdy book he had ever read and every lewd picture he had ever seen—with pleasure! With pulsating joy and lust! He would be consumed with a grotesque and horrible delight.

The imagery of the bird begins to appear more and more in the novel. Daxton now refers to Nathalia as 'my little greybird' instead of the previous greyhound. And he gives a pure white cat to Nathalia. They name 'him' Samson (perhaps a joke regarding their sexual innocence) although they soon discover that Samson is very female and soon begins to add her/his progeny to the household.

Daxton tells of his early years in an Anglo-Catholic school in England, which he attended from the age of eight. Gladys includes a convincing scene in this section where Daxton is bullied

by some of the other boys. They give him a sandwich of 'goat's milk cheese' which is really chopped suet and then reveal to him that it is Tat! Fat! Fat' — and he is revolted by it and runs out vomiting as he runs to the privy. It resonates with scenes of bullying in *Autobiography*. There is a scene of homosexual seduction by a father confessor figure, Father Eaton, although it seems improbable that it was suggested by any occurrence in John's background. [It could be right out of the current files of the Catholic church scandals in America and other countries.] But it is given as Daxton's reason for renouncing 'both Christianity and lust'.

A sense of the close companionship and working relationship of John and Phyllis is seen in various scenes of the novel.

Ah, they were happy, these two, fated for each other. Daxton kept telling her so in words and in action. She never entered the room without his looking up with eyes that focused slowly away from his work to smile at her... a formidable sense of his goodness and love. With all her heart she returned the love and tried to emulate his nature.

At night they wooed and parted unwed like the first two mortals. In the fall the long worked-over manuscript was at last finished.

Nathalia's work diligently typing Daxton's manuscript is similarly detailed in the diaries. 'The typing paper has come to an end so that the T.T. can have a holiday.' And 'she also started Typing again which I was opposed to but she did it in the morning...'²⁴

Daxton's book, *Therapy of Art*, is released in February and sells well even though it is in the midst of the Great Depression — astute businessmen who are purchasing contemporary landscapes — thinking that the book will lead people to nature and to nature painting, are promoting it.

It was his belief that man could find repose for his spirit only in the negation of worldly, competitive ambitions, which, as products of a half civilized civilization, he judged to have been developed partly through accident and partly through man's misunderstanding of his own nature and needs. ... The most malleable material: the highest type of cultivated and sensitized persons: and the simplest of the peasantry who had not yet developed the refinement of cruelty known in the great centres of business and industry. ... The artists, he believed, were the ones who had reached the heights, cold there, and lonely, and his directions were primarily to guide them down into the true garden of Eden. ... His system, his Secret he called it — It was to discover the sound and color and form of beauty and to allow this God-created magnificence to be the source of happiness.

Nathalia reads an article by Ed Lucas in *The Postal* and she responds with a letter concerning the value of 'solitude'. At his response 'her heart rejoiced for a second and then sank leaden like a shot bird'.

Daxton continually visits his sacred shrine, a mountain laurel, bringing small offerings of mould and moss, spraying his urine at its base, invoking its protection to 'recast decay, transmute despair.'

In dark brown corduroy he was the color of dead and rain-soaked leaves, soon to be earth; out of blue cuffs, too long and protruding beyond his coat sleeves, his thin, white wrists and blue-veined hands came like the buds of an exotic lily; woolen stockings hung rumpled

below his knickerbockers, making his legs like the shapeless stems of trees; and the green bandana handkerchief that hung from one pocket could have been a cluster of living leaves. He was camouflaged for the forest. ... He dreamed his own rhapsodic dream.

Daxton worries that 'this life is unnatural' for Nathalia and that she should 'be transplanted to a happier soil'. And as in the diary, they discuss whether they should have a child: 'It is possible that my way is not that of any woman. Nathalia, do you long to have a child?' which terrifies Daxton 'of the thing that might be asked of him ...'.

The original title of the novel, *The Bird in the Ice-Box*, comes from the following scene in the novel. A phoebe bird is brought to the steps of the cottage by Samson — and preserved in the icebox:

She put it in the icebox, the splendid white sepulcher lately acquired and shut it in. But before going to bed that night Nathalia, driven by nervous incredulity, opened the gates again and inspected the symbol of herself. Alas, it had not revived.

The bird is sent to the taxidermist and Nathalia muses, 'Greybird, he calls me. I'm the bird in the icebox.'

The diaries record a similar incident at Phudd Bottom:

The Mees has been killing a lot of birds of late. One the T.T. has sent to be stuffed but she cannot resist anger & even hate towards the Mees. She tries to shut her up thus struggling against Nature. What can be done?²⁵ [and later] Mr. Johnson brought the Mail — our Stuffed Bird after 3 months — from Rowland's the taxidermist.²⁶

In the final scenes of the novel, Ed Lucas arranges for a visit to the cottage with the excuse of interviewing and writing an article on Daxton for *The Postal*. He tells his editor of his personal relationship with Sillis and 'Mrs. Sillis'. 'I swear I can get you a story nobody else can.' He also remembers the 'girl who once had slipped like an affectionate wood nymph into his embrace'. Ed had experienced some difficult times in New York but had re-dedicated himself to his idealistic pursuit of the 'Final Beauty'.

To have doubted one's own first principles is the mark of a civilized man. Well, he had doubted his first principles but now he was returning to them. Unless one worked for it—the Final Beauty—one worked against it...Every beauty that he could imagine of art and science and industry, of nature in its wild and cultivated phases, the life of creatures, sport, love and the raising of lovely, healthy children was a part of the Final Beauty. He imagined men somehow getting together to produce out of the endless wealth of the world enough and more than enough for their physical needs so that their aesthetic and spiritual necessities could at last be attended to.

Anticipating his visit, Nathalia thinks again of

the bird in the icebox. She would come out and sit on a dead twig and look alive. Her dear old friend would think she was alive. He would come and talk politely and

make foolish notes about Daxton and then he would go away again and everything would be the same as before.

Ed is met at the train by Harry Chipworth —

A country man approached him and showing two rows of strong green teeth said: 'Friend of Miss. Bradford's?'

[On the way] Their eyes met for a quick mutual examination. 'Mrs. Sillis,' said Edward, 'is an old friend of mine.'

'She told me,' said the man grinning.

'I used to know her when she was Miss. Bradford.'

Again their eyes met. The countryman said nothing; and Edward Lucas felt sure that he had won in a little contest of insinuation.

In the interactions of Daxton with his guest, Gladys captures some of the qualities which must have made John Cowper Powys the remarkable platform performer that he was reputed to be. As *Autobiography* states, he had an

inveterate tendency *to be ... a philosophic actor*. ... I have always been an actor in ideas — a charlatan if you will and I am prepared to justify it; for is not Nature herself the nursing mother of all Mimes and Mummers, of all Pierrots, Petrushkas, and Punchinellos?²⁷

And perhaps Gladys had also experienced a Powys lecture!

Hilariously poking fun at himself, like a clown, he told the story of the goat's milk cheese ... and with every manner of exaggeration made the young man shout with laughter. Ah, he could be a buffoon.

Nathalia listened — observing to herself coolly 'Daxton was the eloquent one.'

With his agile fingers pressed ten in a row against the table's edge he glared his fierce endearing earnestness....

Daxton, the genial host, the sophisticate in raveled tweeds, the sage or clown or court entertainer, whatever he chose to be if he wished to choose, shuffled his wits for a new play. Seduce, allure, bewitch, wheedle, cajole, call upon the Muses, the Mystics, and the Myomancers but never the cohorts of controversy

He then brings up the subject of *King Lear*:

Daxton began to act, literally to act King Lear. He was the vain, misguided King, contemptible, pitiful and mad; and with a twist of his face he was sly Regan; and his rugged brow smoothed and he was true Cordelia. 'Let it be so; thy truth then be thy dower.' He was knight and courtier and servant; and supremely he was the Fool whose lines he chanted and sang, though he had no singing voice, and sometimes squawked like a parrot. ...

The little hill-house became a castle, a mountain crag, a storm-tossed forest where a mad-man talked to a wisely raving fool. ...

Daxton was neither fool nor madman though he raved; and the two listeners were caught in the magical spell of *King Lear*, probably never before delivered with such sound and fury. Not all of it by any means; and yet, leaping from one chosen place to another he played the play. At last he was the beaten, cheerless, lonely King....

Edward sat speechless, staring at the man who had worked a magic before his *eyes*; and Daxton turned away with a sigh.

'Everywhere there is beastliness and filth,' he muttered, 'but every man can delight in the beauty that lies at the edge of the cesspool, aye, is in it if he have vision to see.'

But Ed Lucas is aware of the figure of Nathalia

so meekly positive, he thought, a useful zero - standing beside her man's figure, making it larger. Once she had a denomination of her own — small or large, who could say? — but plus something. Where was her music and her brave resolution to advance whatever gifts she had? [He was also] conscious at the same time of the almost hungry look on her saddened face, and of the unadorning curve of hair over her blue-veined temples, and of the dress that hung too long, too straight, too flat, the dress certainly of an old maid. The starved spinster of Daxton Sillis, he thought; and hatred for this philosophy of retirement into the good and beautiful — a cowardly retreat with lies and deception and frauds and deliberate blindness to the common fate of man for golden rule — stifled him with heavy indignation.

In the novel's denouement, Nathalia revolts against the cerebral 'love-making' of Daxton and thinks of Ed Lucas lying in the spare room. As she returns downstairs, Ed comes out of his room, they embrace and Nathalia admits she loves him. But she is firm in her commitment to Daxton and her renunciation of life. 'I shall have to stay here until I'm dead all the way through.' Ed is determined that she must 'choose life!' And it is then that Daxton comes downstairs.

'I heard your whispers, not what you said. But I knew - aye, I knew. This afternoon I felt in my bones that Edward was my enemy ...'

'Listen to me!' He turned swiftly and hurled his fiercest glare at them. 'No one can be my enemy! Do you understand? No one can be my enemy!'

He leaned over Nathalia's cowering figure, touched her shoulder with his sensitive fingers. 'Little greybird — flyaway — fly away —'

She covered her tear-stained face; with that gesture she gave him up; and he turned back to the moon-flooded doorway.

His chin lifted, he said: 'Do you think I would cage a bird?' His wide open eyes stared into the shadowed distance. The heavy carving of his face was like stone in the pale blue sheen of light.

Now his spirit fled out into the quiet woods. Like a wounded animal he wanted to be alone and crouched close to the ground; he sniffed the odor of it on the faint breeze and dreamed of a timeless content that lay under the shelter of his altar, deep, deep, in the earth.

THE END

Arthur Davison Ficke died 30 November 1945 and Gladys Brown Ficke 14 May 1973. In 1950 his papers were given to Yale University by Gladys Brown Ficke. The collection also includes Gladys's papers and along with *The Final Beauty* is her manuscript of *Arthur Davison Ficke: A Biography*. The finding aid to the Ficke collection can be found in the Yale University Library, Finding Aid Database at

<http://webtext.library.yale.edu/finddocs/fadsear.htm>.

AFTERWORD

The sexual aspect of Daxton and Nathalia's relationship in the novel is quite likely based on Gladys's perceptions and knowledge of Arthur's conversations with John. Discussions of John's sexual predilections are coloured by his enigmatic statements of being 'happy in my way' as compared to 'Lulu's way' with references to Tantric or Tibetan practices:

not in Lulu's manner but in my own Tibetan manner I made love to the T.T.²⁸ [or] I was so thrilled to see her that my pleasure passed the limit practiced by the Late Dalai Lama ... & attained the level always spoken of by Lulu — when he writes T was Happy'.²⁹

An extraordinary exchange of letters offers some information on the topic but ultimately it comes down to the question of who was telling the 'truth' and whose 'truth' was it? Arthur, in a letter to the 'Most Incredible of all Possible Jacks' asked John directly about his sexual practices:

And speaking of perversions — I want to ask you something which you are by no means obliged to answer. You remember that once, when you were posing for a portrait, I was trying to keep you awake by talking to you. And in the course of our talk, you hinted something so incredible that I asked you if I had your permission to ask you a direct question about the matter. You readily said that I might. So I said in the most scientific and unequivocal words I could think of: "Do you really mean to try to convey to me the idea that you have never in your whole life had a normal orgasm inside the body of a woman?" "Never in my whole life", you replied, with fiendish glee as you saw me completely flabbergasted. Well, I am still flabbergasted — so much so that I now repeat the identical question I asked you then. And do you dare give me the same answer now? Do you not repent of attempting so to deceive me? What do you say, old Monster of Phudd? Do you wish me to go to my grave still wondering what possible motive you could have had for lying to me on that occasion?³⁰

John's reply to 'Arthur Darling' answered the question in his own rhetorically gilded circumlocutious manner:

Let me rush to answer as Categorically Laconically and with the nearest Approach to truth possible in a world wherein truth is NOT one of the elements discoverable by Science your most exciting question — I wd be prepared to swear before Minos, Rhadamanthus and perhaps even Hitler, that the only time I have ever committed fornication in my whole life — with or without the Licence of God and Holy Church — was on the occasion when with a sublime Deviation from my normal ways I begat my dear son Littleton Alfred just 33 years older [*sic*] than I am as I am 33 years younger than my Father on the 30th of August 190-.... I can't do THAT piece of mathematics but 'twas 19 and something 1906 would make him 30 so wd it be 1903 but that looks an odd, uneven, UNNATURAL date for him to have been born on! ...

But it is as far as I can tell CERTAIN AND SURE that save for that one single serious and consequential and gravely responsible Lapse from my Natural Normal and Incurable

ways tastes inclinations preferences and prejudices — I have never, so Help me God and my dear redeemer, ever committed the Notorious and often referred-to, ORTHODOX ACT OF COPULATION upon which the hinges of so many complications turn and must turn, and should turn; and only now and then — by the Grace of God — ARE DODGED!

...

Your old "John 'Once-and-No-more!" IN ALL AFFECTION; WHATEVER HAPPENS TO EITHER OF US.³¹ Ì

WORKS CITED

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the manuscript of *The Final Beauty* by Gladys Brown Ficke, the Arthur Davison Ficke Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Permission was granted by the Yale Committee on Literary Property on behalf of Yale University, the owner of literary rights.

The quotations from John Cowper Powys's Diaries (JCP Diary) by date are from the following sources:

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Items listed as OSUL are from the Lloyd Emerson Siberell papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, The Ohio State University Libraries.

NOTES

¹ A. D. Ficke, letter to L. E. Siberell, 8 November, 1936. (OSUL)

² J. C. Powys, letter to P Playter, 1 August, 1927. (courtesy M. Krissdóttir)

³ JCP Diary, 12 February, 1930.

⁴ A. D. Ficke, letter to L. E. Siberell, 27 December, 1943. (OSUL)

⁵ JCP Diary, 15 June, 1930.

⁶ JCP Diary, 16 June, 1930.

⁷ JCP Diary, 3 August, 1930.

⁸ JCP Diary, 4 August, 1930.

⁹ JCP Diary, 29 November, 1930.

¹⁰ JCP Diary, 10 October, 1931.

¹¹ JCP Diary, 21 August, 1930.

¹² JCP Diary, 11 May, 1931.

¹³ JCP Diary, 13 September, 1930.

¹⁴ JCP Diary, 14 September, 1930.

¹⁵ JCP Diary, 14 December, 1930.

¹⁶ Humphrey, Belinda, ed., *Recollections of the Powys Brothers* (London: Peter Owen, 1980), 31, and Graves, Richard Perceval, *The Brothers Powys* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 150-151.

¹⁷ Krissdóttir, Morine. 'Phyllis through John's Diary', *The Powys Journal* 3 (1993). 32.

¹⁸ JCP Diary, 2 August, 1931.

¹⁹ JCP Diary, 2 May, 1931.

²⁰ JCP Diary, 12 March, 1931.

²¹ JCP Diary, 9 August, 1931.

²² JCP Diary, 11 August, 1931.

²³ JCP Diary, 9 July, 1932.

²⁴ JCP Diary, 26 January, 1931 and 20 April, 1931.

²⁵ JCP Diary, 5 October, 1933.

²⁶ JCP Diary, 6 December, 1933.

²⁷ Powys, John Cowper, *Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934), **124**.

²⁸ JCP Diary, 16 April, 1934.

²⁹ JCP Diary, 20 December, 1933.

³⁰ A. D. Ficke, letter to J. C. Powys, 21 April, 1936. (OSUL) ³¹ J. C. Powys, letter to A. D. Ficke, 3 May, 1936. (OSUL)