

'THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE': THE LIFE AND WORK OF MARY WEBB

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Abstract

Erika Duncan has commented that ‘because of the intangible sentimental quality of Mary Webb’s special genius, there has been a general reluctance to acknowledge her as a major writer.’¹ This thesis argues against such dismissive approaches to Webb and makes a case for a re-evaluation of Webb as an unusual writer of pantheist spirituality and nature mysticism and one who can now be appreciated for the ecopoetics of her work. Within this framework the study charts the stylistic qualities of her writing and its mutative shifts through a chronological examination of her work which also includes a biographical account of her life and the major influences which shaped her ideas and writing. Aspects of inter-textuality with other writers will be considered throughout and will underscore the value of Webb’s work whilst emphasising the unique and beautiful quality of her voice. The first chapter, ‘Early Responses’, considers her formative experiences and her earliest essays and poems. ‘Mythological Motifs’ then reviews the mythopoeic nature of Webb’s first two novels and her use of myth in furthering her themes. The ensuing chapter, ‘Preceptive Perception’, evaluates both the didacticism in authorial style and the pertinence of Webb’s vision which are features of her third book. Chapter Four discusses her final two completed volumes as ‘A Dyad’ for they represent, respectively, her weakest and her finest writing. The final chapter, ‘A Medieval Message’, focuses on Webb’s last, incomplete, work, analysing its experimental qualities and its potential to reveal Webb’s last efforts to leave a parting missive for her readers before her death. Central critical concepts are that: in the development of Webb’s religious views from conventional Christianity to pantheism she anticipated modern feminist spirituality; and, in her insistence upon the supreme value of nature and its continual risk from human exploitation in connection with the oppression of women and their need for spiritual freedom, Webb is an unrecognised ecofeminist who was reflecting early twentieth-century issues. In addition, I attempt to discover reasons for Webb’s neglect and positively propose a place for her in literary studies. A Conclusion will summarise the main arguments and indicate possible further avenues of research.

¹ Erika Duncan, ‘Rediscovering Mary Webb’, *Book Forum*, 4 (1978), 326-328, (p. 327).

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed Date03.03.18.....

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Abbreviations

AWHT - Armour Wherein He Trusted: A Novel and Some Stories

51 – Fifty One Poems: Hitherto unpublished in Book Form

GA – The Golden Arrow

GE – Gone to Earth

HDF – The House in Dormer Forest

CPP – Mary Webb: Collected Prose and Poems

PB – Precious Bane

SFS – Seven for a Secret

EMW – The Essential Mary Webb

SJ: Healing – The Spring of Joy: A Little Book of Healing

SJ: Poems – The Spring of Joy: Poems

Introduction

In a genial after-dinner address to an audience of archbishops, ambassadors and the literati of the day, Stanley Baldwin may have surprised his celebrated listeners by speaking enthusiastically about a little-known author. The Prime Minister spoke ardently of the ‘absolutely first-class quality’ of this writer, of her works as ‘the creation of a beautiful and almost inspired mind’ and identified her as ‘one of about the three best writers of English today’.¹ Baldwin was addressing the Royal Literary Fund on April 25th 1928 but Mary Webb, the author he championed, had, in fact, already been dead for six months, a little-documented fact of which even Baldwin was unaware until the evening before.

This accolade prompted some posthumous success for Webb but her work was to sink once more into obscurity until fifty years later a further clarion call sought to re-establish her worth with the publication of *The Flower of Light* (1978), the first really comprehensive biography of her life. Its author, Gladys Mary Coles, optimistically concluded her account with the remark that ‘the time is right for Mary Webb “to be looked at with fresher eyes”, for the long overdue reevaluation of her work and her place in English Literature’.² This is a poignant point, since Webb herself was aiming for a fresh approach to the relationship between environment and humanity. This approach is centred upon nature’s capacity to refresh, its power to regenerate the self and the spirit, and it is her articulation of this which makes her work of ongoing value:

As a novelist of country life, Mary Webb holds a special place, uniquely combining mystical and regional elements [...] her central concerns – the individual’s search for self, inner awakening and growth to re-birth, to wholeness, the importance and influence of the unconscious, the herd instinct and pressure of society on the individual, the spiritual nature of love – are of immediate contemporary relevance.³

¹ Reported in ‘Royal Literary Fund 138th Anniversary Dinner. Mr Baldwin’s Speech’, *The Times*, 26 April 1928, p. 18.

² Gladys Mary Coles, *The Flower of Light: A Biography of Mary Webb* (London: Duckworth, 1978), p. 330.

³ *ibid.*, p. 329.

Webb's work was of 'contemporary relevance' to the early twentieth-century age in which she was writing, but also to the later twentieth-century era to which Coles refers, and is still of on-going and important significance to our twenty-first-century world. And in order to establish the context of Webb's work, this study will consider the ways in which Webb engages with cultural, ethical, philosophical and mystical thought during her own lifetime. This period (1881-1927) was one of great historical and social change, encompassing the growth of technological innovation, the establishment of the Independent Labour Party, the end of the settled Victorian period, the Arts and Crafts Movement, the campaign for women's suffrage, the First World War, the Russian Revolution and the General Strike. The Industrial Revolution had already depopulated the countryside and a great age of invention had ushered in a technological revolution bringing photography, the 1840s railway boom, telephones, trams and wireless radios. The Wright brothers first took flight in 1903, whilst 1912 brought the production of the first cheap motor car so within a short space of time the world had changed dramatically. The period between the 1870s and the 1920s has been described as 'an age of demand, economy of abundance, democratization of luxury, retail revolution, consumer capitalism'⁴ and Webb was responding to this more materialistic society.

In Jonathan Bate's seminal work, *The Song of the Earth* (2000), he comments that the Victorians were proud of their progress but 'they also worried profoundly about their loss of "place."⁵ It is worth noting that The National Trust was founded in 1895, illustrating that conservation of the landscape was already a developing concern. Seeking to explore 'modern Western man's alienation from nature' and 'the capacity of the writer to restore us to the earth which is our home,'⁶ Bate examines the work of writers such as Thomas Hardy, William Wordsworth and John Clare and their responses to their changing worlds as urbanisation and technological innovation increasingly alienated people from nature. Although these authors are also of important relevance to the study of Webb, it is, perhaps, more significant to consider her work in relation to other

⁴ David Trotter, *The English Novel in History: 1895-1920* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 11.

⁵ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 13.

⁶ *ibid.*, Preface.

women writers of the interwar period, such as Elizabeth Von Armin, Winifred Holtby, Vera Brittain, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend-Warner, Daphne du Maurier, and Elizabeth Bowen. These female authors all represent and explore the society of their day and the constraints upon women's lives within that society. They were all born either in the latter years of the nineteenth century or the very early years of the twentieth, so their work reflects the historical context of women of this era, a world in which 'daughters are brought up by their mothers to fit into their particular society's understanding of womanhood.'⁷ This 'understanding' meant that education for girls and young women was often limited, that marriage, children and domesticity were the feminine domain, and that careers and politics were fields intended for men.

Some of the women authors mentioned in this study, however, did study at university, such as Woolf, Brittain and Holtby; some, such as Holtby and Rebecca West had paid jobs as successful journalists, although, of course, they all wrote; some were openly political, writing and campaigning about social inequalities and the effects of the war. Mark Bostridge, in his introduction to Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933), refers to Woolf's reaction to the memoir and her 'interest in the connections that Brittain had "lit up" for her between feminism and pacifism'.⁸ After the war Brittain was actively involved in campaigning for equal rights and feminist ideals and Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is an enduring work of feminist criticism. So, how can we compare Webb to these authors, when her work at first sight appears to side-step the Women's Movement of her era, make no direct comment upon the war, and to be traditional in form and outlook? Alison Light comments that:

novels not only speak from the cultural moment but take issue with it, imagining new versions of its problems, exposing, albeit by accident as well as by design, its confusions, conflicts, and irrepressible ideas, the

⁷ Heather Ingman, *Women's Fiction Between the Wars: Mothers, Daughters and Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 1.

⁸ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, Introduction by Mark Bostridge (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2009), p. ii.

study of fiction is an especially inviting and demanding way into the past.⁹

Hence, a thorough study of Webb recognises that she does seek to engage with central topics of her day, that she is 'tak[ing] issue' with social and cultural matters. Heather Ingman provides a useful summary, in the opening chapter of *Women's Fiction Between the Wars*, of some of the important legislation which affected women's lives in the inter war period. Some of these are: the Fisher Education Act of 1918, which made schooling up to the age of fourteen compulsory; the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 which gave women access to hitherto male-only professions; the 1922 Married Women (Maintenance) Act which enabled women to claim maintenance costs for themselves and their children; the 1925 Criminal Justice Act which made married women legally responsible for their own crimes; and the 1935 Law Reform Act which increased married women's rights to own property. These changes indicate a sharp focus on women's lives and their roles in society during this period and women writers of the time were helping to debate and to reshape these too. Webb can be recognised for her own contribution to social comment, for she is not just a traditionalist - she is concerned with women's status within the dominance of patriarchy, the horrifying consequences of war and its brutalizing employment of advancing technology, as well as having a deep concern with nature. Webb, like so many others, was responding to enormous changes and seeking to redefine the parameters of her world.

The field of literature was also seeing great change, following on from the imaginative explorations of the Romantics and the impact of Victorian writers. After the continuity of Victorian life abruptly ended, the Edwardian Era swiftly passed, and the chaos of the First World War descended, many writers felt that the certainties of their world were no longer to be depended upon. Thus they re-considered the notion that there were certain conventions to be adhered to so it was a period which nurtured a great range and breadth in intellectual thought. Some writers became more experimental, abandoning traditional styles and forms of writing, and it may be that the foundations for this shift were actually

⁹ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2001), p. 2.

laid by late Victorian writers, such as Hardy. In any case, the Modernist Movement was born and popularized by key figures such as Virginia Woolf, T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound, all of whom were stylistically experimental in their work and in their ideas, for instance, regarding gender and identity, but also in their responses to a post-war society. Modernism is therefore understood in literary terms to be a movement which discarded existing conventions and re-thought how novels, poetry and drama could be written. There are some commonalities between Webb and modernist writers in that she was also responding to the world around her. But Webb cannot be said to be stylistically innovative in the ways writers such as Woolf or Eliot are, so many readers and critics may rebut any suggestion of Webb as a modernist. But this thesis argues that even if Webb is not a modernist there is much of *modernity* in her work. Webb was and is modern because she is frank about women's lives in the early twentieth-century: their sexuality, their frustrations within a patriarchy and their desire for a true spiritual experience beyond the conventions of the Christian church. Whilst modernism can be anti-pastoral, 'nature no longer offer[ing] the potential it did for the Romantics',¹⁰ Webb's modernity is evident in her concern with the defence of nature in an increasingly technological, consumerist society so we can read her from an environmental perspective which is now even more relevant to our own modern times. In a recent unpublished conference paper Ellen Turner points out that 'within the discipline of modernist studies there still tends to be a focus on the urban, with ecological concerns being deliberated from a perspective which sees them as a product and reflection of the traditional city locale.'¹¹ Turner focuses on Sylvia Townsend Warner and Mary Webb, arguing that they are marginalised alternative modernist writers whose concern with the rural and women as witches repays the study of their work within an ecological framework. Andrew Radford's 2007 *The Lost Girls: Demeter-Persephone and the Literary Imagination* also studies the significance of Webb's work. And Rebecca Beattie devotes a chapter in her recent book,

¹⁰ Randall Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (Harlow: Pearson, 1998), p. 84.

¹¹ Ellen Turner, 'Women, Witches and their Familiars: Exploring the Concept of Rural Modernism in Sylvia Townsend Warner and Mary Webb' (2013), <<http://lup.lub.lu.se/search/publication/ee298591-addf-4451-903d-b7adb4be173c>> [accessed 4 October 2017].

Pagan Portals – Nature Mystics: The Literary Gateway to Modern Paganism (2015) to Mary Webb, commenting that, ‘For a woman of her time, Webb expressed some quite extraordinary ideas.’¹² These writings suggest the emergence of a wider recognition of Webb’s value and relevance. Yet even these most recent studies agree that Webb continues to be unjustly neglected. One reason for her neglect is that she has tended to remain on the periphery of the literary world. Her isolation in Shropshire and even when living in London kept ‘her from the mainstream of human existence’¹³ and she did not fit in with fashionable society. An image of Webb on the periphery is a trope for her situation - living deep in rural Shropshire between England and Wales, where her illness, isolation and ‘otherness’ placed her in a literal and metaphorical borderland. And the idea of the borderland beyond the orbit of the realistic also, and importantly, represents the threshold to mystic experience.

In my own endeavour to re-evaluate Webb’s work I use a number of terms, referring in this thesis to Webb as: a mystic, a feminist, an advocate of feminist spirituality, and a prescient eco-feminist because of the eco-poetics of her work. Firstly, I describe Webb as a mystic because her work clearly delineates, through her characters and through descriptive passages, the experience, through contemplation, of a spiritual apprehension of truths beyond understanding and a sense of union with the divine. For some this is a oneness with God or a deity but in Webb’s writing this union with the divine is found through a grasp of the numinous in the natural world and, therefore, Webb’s work specifically combines a ‘fusion of [...] inborn connectedness with nature with her growing mystical philosophy.’¹⁴ Comparisons with other writers who describe mysticism, both nature mystics and Christian mystics, are made to draw out the singular qualities of mystic experience. John Edward Mercer, for example, defined and described mysticism, in *Nature Mysticism* (1913), as an ‘actual living communion with the Real.’¹⁵ And this is what Webb expresses

¹² Rebecca Beattie, *Pagan Portals – Nature Mystics: The Literary Gateway to Modern Paganism* (Alresford, Hants.: Moon Books, 2015), ‘Mary Webb’, pp. 17-33, (p. 26).

¹³ Duncan, p. 334.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ John Edward Mercer, *Nature Mysticism*, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile>> [accessed 23.11.09] (original work published in 1913).

artistically, expressing a richer view of nature mysticism than Mercer's rather scientific definition, in which he speaks more as an observer than a participant, explaining it as a 'wide range of intuitions and emotions [...] without definite appeal to conscious reasoning processes.'¹⁶ Webb also owned a copy of Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (1911), still considered a classic of its genre today, and her depictions of mystic experience often chime with Underhill's.

Furthermore, there was a developing interest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century in alternative religions such as neo-paganism. Members of Rupert Brooke's Grantchester Group were dubbed 'Neo-Pagans' by Virginia Woolf because of their habits of walking barefoot and living off fruit and honey. Paganism is a broad term, defined most simply as a polytheistic or pantheistic nature-worshipping religion and its origins date from antiquity. Ronald Hutton states that the growth of neo-paganism (a revival of interest in nature worship) in this period began with the Romantics' view of witches as pagans who were seen to stand for 'religious and social freedom, opposed to a feudal state and intolerant Church'.¹⁷ The Romantics' veneration of the natural world and the deities of classicism made this a subject of topical interest. And Webb's emotional, imaginative and intuitive response to nature was in keeping with artistic and philosophical ideas running from early nineteenth-century Romanticism and its response to 'the de-humanizing nature'¹⁸ of industrialism. Her 'gospel of earth'¹⁹ suggests a re-evaluation of our environment, where we may cease to find 'material aims' (ibid., 58) only, an alternative to a world, which Max Weber suggested was 'disenchanted'.²⁰

Strangely, Webb has not been connected with other influential individuals and groups with similar concerns. For example, Edward Carpenter, whose writing reflects eastern mysticism and ideas of wholeness and harmony; his *Adam's Peak to Elephanta* (1892) depicts 'all the senses unit[ing] into one

¹⁶ ibid., p. 1.

¹⁷ Ronald Hutton, 'Neo-Paganism, Paganism and Christianity', *Religion Today*, 9 (1994), 29-32 (p. 290).

¹⁸ Stevenson, p.82.

¹⁹ Mary Webb, *The Spring of Joy: A Little Book of Healing* (Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2009), p. 1.

²⁰ Max Weber, *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 'Science as a Vocation', 139, H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., (New York: OUP, 1946) (original work published in 1924).

sense.²¹ He also rejected the church in favour of a simple rural, vegetarian life and created a retreat to offer this to others. Webb is also known to have read J. G. Frazer's influential *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1922). Frazer, who was involved with neo-druid organisations such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, describes religion as an anthropological phenomenon, growing out of ancient cultural beliefs in magic. And Webb's own alternative spirituality, rooted in ancient pre-Christian religions, was pagan in many respects so her concerns should have linked her with such ideas, in which her Romanticism mingles with her modernity.

Webb was also modern in her feminism. When describing Webb as a feminist it must be acknowledged that she left no written evidence that she was interested in the Women's Movement of her period. Nevertheless, she must have been aware of events such as the 1913 Hyde Park rally and she would have become eligible in 1918 when the right to vote was granted to women over thirty. This background would have been an influence and, like many of her contemporaries, Webb is preoccupied with female experience and female subjectivity. She can be described as a feminist writer in some respects because she can be understood to be advocating women's rights on the grounds of sexual equality in her representation of female characters who seek liberty from social and religious convention. Women's experience is central in her work as she explores and articulates pantheism, or the realisation of the divine within the known world around us, as 'a most powerful sweetness', something 'beyond' religion.²² In the experimental and independent qualities of her thought, expressed in terms which have parallels with later ecofeminist spirituality, Webb is in fact a very different writer to the simple nature lover critics have misread her as and her writing possesses "a curious "modern" facet which makes her work truly transitional".²³ In her shift from conventional religion, Webb was focusing on what was, for her, a truer grasp of the spiritual.

Feminist spirituality is a movement outside established religions, focused on women's quest for meaning and rooted in female experience,

²¹ Citation by Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1930), p. 7 (original work published in 1911).

²² Mary Webb, *Precious Bane* (London: Virago, 1978), p. 58.

²³ Coles, p. 329.

beyond the patriarchy of male-centred theologies. In 'What is Feminist Spirituality and Why Should We Care?', Dorothy I. Riddle notes that despite the progress of feminism towards gender equality there remain many unresolved questions. For one thing, 'we never actually got to why those attitudes and assumptions had formed in the first place or what was keeping them firmly in place'.²⁴ Webb can be linked with such a movement because she rejects the church, abandons God and articulates her belief in the spiritual power of nature as an alternative. Webb connects both with Goddess theories of antiquity in which goddess figures were worshipped in many parts of the world before the development of other religions, and modern feminist spirituality which refers to a current concern in women's movements that theocracies do not answer women's particular spiritual needs. She also links with ecofeminism, a theory and movement which seeks to synthesize ecology and feminism with the aim of creating a positive understanding of the dialectic between nature and humanity. It is centred in female articulation, a female responsiveness to nature. In combining ecological concerns with feminist ones, ecofeminists recognise that the domination of women and the domination of nature are fundamentally connected. And in claiming Webb as a prescient eco-feminist, I suggest that her insistence upon nature's primacy anticipated ecological attitudes which did not begin to surface until the 1970s, and this is often linked in her work with an attempt to highlight the negativity of female oppression by men. In *Gone to Earth*, for example, she clearly aligns the destruction of nature with the oppression of the working-class female character, Hazel Woodus.

And she is yet to be acknowledged for the true value of her ecopoetics (a term coined by Bate in *The Song of the Earth*). Webb's work can be described as ecopoetic because the poetic qualities of her writing portray a strong ecological emphasis or message. This poeticism is a feature throughout her work and is a further reason to re-evaluate Webb's contribution to the literature of her time. John Buchan observed that 'Mary Webb need fear no comparison with any writer who has attempted to capture the soul of nature in words,'²⁵ 'its

²⁴ Dorothy Riddle, 'What is Feminist Spirituality and Why Should We Care', transcript of talk given at the University of British Columbia's Centre for Women's and Gender Studies, 23 January, 2008 <<http://servicegrowth.net/documents>> [accessed 01.09.10].

²⁵ Cited in Coles, p. 127.

blue ranges lying beneath the transparent or hazy air',²⁶ its woods and forests where 'the larches spired up in their quick green, and the cowslip gold seemed to get into your heart' (*PB*, 14). Her lyrical advocacy of nature imbues her work with continuing significance, articulating her experience of the liminal in which her spirituality and ecopoetics are closely connected. Glen Cavaliero has commented that 'the most interesting rural novelists are [...] those who have written against the grain of the times they lived in.'²⁷ But Webb's work has been criticised as 'too remote from ordinary human concerns [...] epitomis[ing] the limitations of the rural genre.'²⁸ Although Cavaliero admits that Webb was trying to offer 'an antidote to the social and personal malaise [...] in existing urban attitudes',²⁹ 'there is no social awareness in [her] novels, no knowledge shown of agricultural problems, no attempts at social criticism.'³⁰ This, however, is unjust, as *Precious Bane* depicts 'the grim realities of old-world life in an English county',³¹ reflecting the hard manual labour and struggle for economic survival which was the actuality of agrarian life in the early part of the nineteenth-century, when the novel is set. Prue's life is one of personal 'trouble and [...] suffering' (*PB*, 16) as well as 'rumours [...] of battles over sea and discontents at home' (*ibid*, 61). However, her daily life is too full of her brother's instructions to 'dig taters [...] give a hand in the hay, and drive plough' (*ibid*, 45) for her to be distracted by such matters, showing the day-to-day realism of rural life.

Yet, the hope that she 'should at least occupy a more significant place in literature than she has previously been accorded'³² still remains unfulfilled. A 'clearer perspective [...] a more penetrating assessment'³³ recognises Webb's advocacy of nature, her spiritual insight and the quality of her writing. Coles highlighted Webb's neglect over three decades ago when work by neglected

²⁶ Mary Webb, *The Golden Arrow* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 13.

²⁷ Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel: 1900-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 202.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 138.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 145.

³¹ T.P. O'Connor, *T.P. and Cassell's Weekly*, 24 August 1924, p. 487.

³² Coles, p. 328.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 330.

women writers was being actively revived, so her biography should have prompted greater focus on Webb. However, the time is now especially right for her, since her preoccupations can be seen to have been ahead of their time.

The total body of Webb's output consists of five novels published between 1916 and 1924 along with poems, short stories, essays and reviews and a further, uncompleted, novel which she was working on at the time of her death. Despite the encouragement of some leading literary figures, including John Buchan³⁴ and Rebecca West,³⁵ Webb's books failed to sell well or attract critical interest so her short writing career did not bring literary recognition. She began in essay and poetical form, composing her first exuberant responses to nature in a collection of writings which can be taken as her earliest work, although not published until 1917 as *The Spring of Joy: A Little Book of Healing* and, posthumously, as *Poems and The Spring of Joy* in 1928.³⁶ She then progressed to novel-writing using symbolism and mythological motifs as central features in her first two novels, *The Golden Arrow* (1916) and *Gone to Earth* (1917). These devices would become integral to her style and develop in subtlety and deftness in her later works. The symbolic use of opposites in characterisation is also a feature in these two books. Webb's next novel, *The House in Dormer Forest* (1920), was more didactic, her views, at times, too strongly expressed via a cynical, sardonic narrator whose ironic tone is nevertheless at its most prescient and perceptive in its ecopoetic message. In the book which followed, *Seven for a Secret* (1922), she experiments further with an omniscient narrator, but, unfortunately this overshadows the book's key themes. Having used class as a thematic element in *Gone to Earth* and touched upon this in *The House in Dormer Forest* she gives a stronger emphasis to this in *Seven for a Secret*. Although it is strikingly different to her next book, *Precious Bane* (1924), both of these works also further Webb's vision of love as

³⁴ John Buchan's supportive introduction was included in a 1928 edition of *Gone to Earth* and some subsequent editions.

³⁵ According to Coles, Rebecca West befriended Webb (see *Flower of Light*, p. 179 and pp. 237-238). However, West also wrote a review of *Gone to Earth* (*Times Literary Supplement*, 30 August, 1917, p. 416) which both praised and criticised the novel.

³⁶ In this study all citations refer to two later editions, *The Spring of Joy: A Little Book of Healing* and *The Spring of Joy: Poems* (both Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2008).

an apocalypse in the sense of a prophetic and revelatory disclosure, a keystone in her philosophy. As a female writer Webb has often been misread but in *Precious Bane* she can be understood both as a feminist and as a writer of romantic love stories. Furthermore, in *Precious Bane* Webb began to experiment in using different historical periods with dialects to suit, creating an early nineteenth-century setting for this novel, and, in an unusual and interesting development, a medieval context for *Armour Wherein He Trusted* (posthumous, 1929). In this final work Webb used a male protagonist for the first time and, although the novel is very different to her earlier writings, it is important as a lasting message which is still of pertinence to our own era. These experimental shifts indicate that Webb was constantly re-evaluating herself as a writer and reveal developments in her interests and ideas, along with the influences of other writers on themes and style. Her focus on class, gender, nature, sexuality and the spiritual reflect the breadth of her interests - yet criticisms have over-emphasised her flaws and under-rated her merits.

Her work is flawed, as critics have commented. And this study will discuss those flaws, such as Webb's overuse of an intrusive authorial voice in *The House in Dormer Forest*, the badly written ending to *Seven for a Secret* and, in particular, the often regretted excess of style and passion in her writing. There are virtues in her demonstrative style, but these are always tied to what critics denigrate about it as excessive, for the dangers of Webb's writing are inseparable from its strengths. A kind of superabundance is integral to her writing and to her vision, representing a sense of reaching out through which she articulates nature's value and the spiritual mystery she explores:

every flower spike had its family of buds, blue jewels splashed with white, each close-folded on her mystery. To see the whole field not only bright with them, but brimming over, was like watching ten thousand saints rapt in ecstasy.³⁷

Webb describes Hazel Woodus's view of nature here, one which engenders 'a passion no words could express' (*GE*, 165). The image of priests in spiritual ecstasy emphasises the spiritual threshold Webb herself crossed within the natural world and the linguistic elements here are typical of her prose, which,

³⁷ Mary Webb, *Gone to Earth* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 165.

though exaggerated, is poetic. She cannot resist this tendency to over-embroider - 'every,' 'each,' 'whole' - and her verb choices reinforce this aggrandisement - 'splashed', 'brimming' - whilst her hyperbole is furthered in the image of not one saint, but 'ten thousand.' However, in addition to her heightened language and vivid use of imagery there are distinct qualities. Her use of syntax in which phrases have a layering, cumulative effect in creating impressions, and the effect of rhythmic patterning in devices such as alliteration, sibilance, assonance and consonance in phrases such as 'buds, blue jewels splashed with white'. The ear catches these repeated vowel and consonant sounds as they form these patterns, creating pleasurable effects. Through these qualities of the sound and rhythm of her writing Webb concentrates her reader's focus on her poignant evocation of mysticism. Her novels are 'revelatory of her own attitudes and responses,'³⁸ but she also attempts to offer her reader a vision, 'gazing with love and wonder into the complex life of nature' (*SJ: Healing*, 58). Hence, while some will always 'consider her work to be flowery, those who are drawn to the natural world find her work captivating and truly magical.'³⁹ Erika Duncan describes reading Webb as an experience which struck a 'chord so personal and so sacred,' evoking a 'long lost'⁴⁰ personal memory of an elemental 'oneness with the flow of nature.'⁴¹ And the reader has the potential for renewal through the therapeutic quality of Webb's 'unusually significant'⁴² work which imparts 'the inner secret' ('Birds, Beasts and Trees', *CPP*, 71-74, 71) and reminds us of 'a way of life which [...] we are apt to forget.'⁴³ Thus it is the exuberance of Webb's depictions of nature, her joyful evocations of the world, which allow us to share in her understanding:

Here is a kingdom of wonder and of secrecy into which we can step at will, where dwell nations whose very language is for ever unknown to us, whose laws are not our laws, yet with whom we have a bond, because we are another expression of the life that created them. Here we find

³⁸ Coles, p. 195.

³⁹ Beattie, p. 23.

⁴⁰ Duncan, p. 326.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 328.

⁴² Marshall, p. 315.

⁴³ *ibid.*

beauty that takes away the breath, romance that tingles to the fingertips. We think that there is some deep meaning in it all [...] a faint call from afar (*SOJ: Healing*, 3).

In this early work, illustrating the beginnings of Webb's pantheism, her tone is buoyant and abstract nouns are used abundantly: 'wonder', 'secrecy', 'beauty', 'romance'. Her phrasing is hyperbolic, as she depicts a moments of such intensity that it 'takes away the breath' and 'tingles to the fingertips'. But, this excess seizes the reader's attention, engaging their senses, and the anaphoric repetition of 'Here', 'Here' conveys an urgent, eager insistence, denoting her determination to share the profundity of her feelings. And her repeated use of the collective pronoun, 'we', reinforces her belief in this as a message for all. There is a layering effect in the structure of complex sentences, and a rhythmic cadence to the phrasing in which the stress tends to fall upon the final syllable of each clause, as in 'will', 'us', 'laws', 'bond', 'breath', 'fingertips'. Again, this underscores her ardent desire to portray the supreme worth of nature to her readers. This heightened quality exemplifies her writing and is always present, whether in her finest or weakest prose. Webb's ecstatic response is similar to D.H. Lawrence's exhortation in *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation* (1931) that 'we ought to dance with rapture that we should be alive and [...] part of the living, incarnate cosmos [...] the supreme triumph [of being] most perfectly alive'.⁴⁴ Through her passion, she evokes her belief that if 'we love the creatures of earth' (*SJ: Healing*, 33) and 'cease to make ourselves ridiculous in the theatre of the cosmos' (*ibid*, 57) then 'oneness with all beauty, seen and unseen' (*ibid*, 1) creates 'the key to unlock the world' (*ibid*, 33).

This metaphorical concept of a solution or an opening suggests her central notion of recovery, renewal and regeneration. The spiritual re-birth in 'the other side of silence' (*PB*, 60) is at the crux of her ideas and it is her enthusiastic belief in this which makes her so expressive. Her characters and descriptive passages reveal a sort of spiritual individuation opening up via the physical natural world, as she asks: 'What is this mysterious thing that inhabits the depths of man, glimmering there like an underwater town, sounding from the

⁴⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 149.

recesses of being like the plucked harpstring of a mermaid beneath the waves?'⁴⁵ Here she articulates the epistemological focus at the heart of the human condition – the quest for the soul, and her intuitive response to the elusive music of this 'harpstring' is a stirring of awe through which it is possible to 'reach a revelation such as there has never yet been' (ibid.). For Webb, as for Wordsworth 'the soul draws nourishment from the way in which it abides in place'.⁴⁶ And in *Ecstatic Sound* (2001) John Hughes explores Hardy's writings about music and its fundamentality in revealing the soul, since both music and the soul 'share and involve temporal dimensions and qualities which do not correspond to those relatively stable identities given by subjectivity, and the spatial limits of the body'.⁴⁷ When Tess, in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), gazes at a bright, but distant star 'hundreds and hundreds o' miles away'⁴⁸ she experiences a deep sense of individual existence. Similarly, Webb's non-cognitive grasp of being not merely 'in the world' but 'of it' (*SJ: Healing*, 56), suggests actually *being* nature.⁴⁹ Interestingly, the Greek and Latin words for nature are connected respectively with the verbs 'to grow' and 'to be born' and Webb interlinks with such ideas in depicting the growth and rebirth of 'spiritual stretching'.⁵⁰ In her most mature work, such as *Precious Bane*, Webb's interest in the liminal and her endeavour to describe such elusive, transcendent encounters would be crafted with subtlety and control:

You see it in a glass darkly, and the long shadows of rushes go thin and sharp across the sliding stars, and even the sun and moon might be put down out there, for times, the moon would get lost in lily leaves, and times, a heron might stand before the sun. (*PB*, 16-17)

⁴⁵ 'The Core of Poetry', *Mary Webb: Collected Prose and Poems*, ed. by Gladys Mary Coles (Shrewsbury: Wildings, 1977), pp. 37-38.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 92.

⁴⁷ John Hughes, *Ecstatic Sound* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 56.

⁴⁸ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 120.

⁴⁹ In 'On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry', F.W Schiller states that poets 'will either *be* nature, or they will *seek* lost nature', *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 191 (original work published in 1951).

⁵⁰ Duncan, p. 330.

In this elusive vision, through 'a glass darkly'⁵¹ Webb reworks the Biblical idea of a shadowy, unknown God as a pantheistic vision of the mystery of immanence. She depicts a borderland in which Prue Sarn encounters the numinous, crossing the threshold of the material into the spiritual in contemplation of the universe. As symbols of time and change, the sun and moon are associated with birth and death, the regenerative power of nature. There is a sense of abandonment in nature here in which the self is 'lost' but also triumphantly regained in the vision of an idyll as the heron, symbolic in many cultures of wisdom, purity and oneness with nature, is bathed in sunlight.

The luminous qualities of Webb's writing, therefore, belie its failings and are good reason enough to bring her back from the borders of literary interest. A reappraisal of her work must therefore consider Webb in these terms, acknowledging that, for some, Webb's extravagance is an embarrassing weakness. But, whilst admitting this extravagance as a flaw, it is the flaw 'of a rich, potent, copious mind, generative to a fault' and without this lavishness 'she could not be Mary Webb'.⁵² And this evaluation re-examines Webb's exorbitance on a positive turn, recognising it as indicative of her mysticism, of surpassing the ordinary, the everyday and the prosaic. Her style is a register of her exploration beyond the rational and beyond subjectivity. Whilst she wrote in traditional chronological narratives and was not stylistically adventurous, her ideas were exploratory and the qualitative shifts in her writing career show that she was attempting different methods of demonstrating these. As with many writers these shifts reveal highs and lows, failures and successes.

Some reviewers spoke of her 'rare and exquisite gift'⁵³ and heralded her as 'one of the most brilliant among the younger generation of novelists'.⁵⁴ Yet, the publication history of her work has been chequered, her novels going out of print in her own lifetime and little of her poetry published until after her death. Her career was brief, scarcely spanning a decade, and when she died at the

⁵¹ See 1 Corinthians 13:12 NIV - 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known'.

⁵² Charles Sanders, 'Mary Webb: The Pleasure of Discovery', *English Literature in Transition*, 22 (1979), 228-232, (p. 231).

⁵³ Gerald Gould, *Saturday Review*, 2 December 1922, pp. 843-844, (p. 844).

⁵⁴ O'Connor, pp. 487-488.

age of 46 she believed herself a failure. Her death was barely noticed by the press until Baldwin, who was originally from the Shropshire which Webb depicts in her work with such poetic beauty, publicly acknowledged her. This praise unexpectedly, and belatedly, catapulted Webb into popularity and sales of her work soared as a hitherto uninterested world took notice. Webb's friend and admirer, the critic Edwin Pugh, attacked critics for their:

ignorance, vanity and cowardice [...] You see, they are so afraid of backing the wrong horse, and thereby losing something of their prestige, of their reputation for omniscience. So, throughout Mary Webb's brief career, she received hardly one whole-hearted word of adequate appreciation.⁵⁵

Pugh's advocacy of Webb as 'one of the greatest of English novelists in this genre'⁵⁶ of English rural writing was an exception, for the recurring leitmotif of critics was that her work was of some merit - good, in fact - but not good enough. Early criticism is typified by Grace Chapman who noted the charm of Webb's work and her 'exquisite feeling for Nature,'⁵⁷ but was irritated by 'the very penetrating [...] amorphous, spiritual atmosphere.'⁵⁸ Chapman, however, predicted that Webb would be remembered 'not as a great novelist, but as a woman with the soul of a poet and the observation of an artist – an interpreter of the innumerable aspects of country life'.⁵⁹ This is a coherent view and an accurate assessment of generic attitudes towards Webb, both then and now, for these mixed criticisms illustrate recurrent themes in reviews and indicate contrasts in readers' responses, a pattern of criticism which has continued to prevent Webb's reputation rising above minor literary ranks.

From the publication of *The Golden Arrow* Webb was praised for her nature descriptions 'handled with an intensity which not many novelists of the day could rival [...] etched in with vivid strokes,'⁶⁰ but 'too laboured [...] too

⁵⁵ Edwin Pugh, *The Bookman*, 74 (July, 1928), 193-196 (p. 194).

⁵⁶ Edwin Pugh, *The Bookman*, 44 (April, 1923), 7-8 (p. 8).

⁵⁷ Grace Chapman, 'Mary Webb', *London Mercury* (1931), 364-371, (p. 364).

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 368.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Frederick Thomas Dalton, *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 September 1916, p. 428.

tricky [...] excessive.⁶¹ Nevertheless, her reviewer noted her desire ‘to make you feel what she feels, and her poignant sense of colour, sound and meaning in nature often gives a new vividness to the reader’s own perception.’⁶² A review of *Gone to Earth* again complained of ‘exaggerated feeling,’⁶³ although expressed with a noteworthy and graceful sincerity. And Gerald Gould criticised ‘this unsatisfactory but remarkable novel,’ ‘too ambitious [...] the large thought transcends the expression [...] a noble failure [...] a strange mixture of good and bad’.⁶⁴ Hester Janet Colles also thought that Webb was too ‘conscious that her characters are in the clutches of a mysterious destiny, a destiny symbolized in the hills, the woods, and the naked earth around them.’⁶⁵ *The House in Dormer Forest* was also critiqued for its flat characters in ‘elaborately blighted surrounding[s]’, ‘unrelieved intensity [but] real power of imagination’⁶⁶ Another reviewer thought the ending of this novel ‘utterly incredible’⁶⁷ but a further critic considered the characters to be ‘portrayed with remarkable skill’.⁶⁸ *Seven for a Secret* was viewed as a failure for its ‘extravagance of expression [which] violates the mystery it is intended to portray’.⁶⁹ Martin Armstrong was more favourable, saying that the novel makes its readers feel they ‘have penetrated deeply and intimately into the country’⁷⁰ but, nevertheless, felt that it fails to fulfil its themes. Likewise, *Precious Bane* was criticised for its ‘too much richness of lore and season’⁷¹ and being too ‘highly poeticized.’⁷² T.P. O’Connor, however, saw it as ‘touching and thrilling [...] there are on almost every page scenes of poignant feeling that make the breath hurry and the heart throb’.⁷³

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ West, p. 416.

⁶⁴ Cited in Coles, p. 178.

⁶⁵ Hester Janet Colles, *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 November 1922, p. 726.

⁶⁶ Hester Janet Colles, *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 July 1920, p. 471.

⁶⁷ Cited in Coles, p. 213.

⁶⁸ ‘Review of *The House in Dormer Forest*’, *The Bookman*, 52 (1920), 211-212 (p. 211).

⁶⁹ Colles, *TLS*, 1922, p. 726.

⁷⁰ Martin Armstrong, *The Spectator*, 4924, (1922), p. 666.

⁷¹ Austin Clarke, *Nation and the Athenaeum*, 2 August 1924, pp. 569-570.

⁷² Orlo Williams, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 July 1924, p. 448.

⁷³ O’Connor, pp. 487-488.

After Webb's death this picture of her work as both blemished and beautiful continued. H. Marshall had a sense that her work was important, stating presciently that 'we do not yet fully realise how much Mary Webb has given to the world [in her] understanding of the spiritual truths of life which we should be unwise to refuse'.⁷⁴ Yet, the importance of this message, an answer 'to the mystery of life'⁷⁵ is marred, he claims, because she was 'often careless,' 'her ideas ran too swiftly to be woven smoothly,' creating 'a shirking of difficulty, a reluctance to dim the brightness of conception by the labour of restraint'.⁷⁶ Writing at a similar time St John Adcock, though, recognised Webb's 'uncanny understanding', 'subtle art', 'imaginative power' and 'feeling for the magic of words, a beauty of style that none of her contemporaries surpassed'.⁷⁷ In 1933, however, Lorna Collard commented on Webb's 'shortcomings, her lapses into vagueness and inconsistency, and the derivative nature of much of her poetry'.⁷⁸ But, she lauded the poetic quality of Webb's writing, remarking upon how 'at one all Mary Webb's work is,'⁷⁹ for 'the completest personal expression is that which has something universal in it [...] a fundamental factor from which music draws its harmony, poetry its form, human power its energy, and the bird its capacity for flight'.⁸⁰ A few years later Frank Swinnerton briefly included Webb as a notable novelist in a review of early twentieth-century literature. He admits to discomfort at the mannered style of some of her work which makes it 'open [...] to the charge of pastiche'.⁸¹ Though measured in his praise, he speaks of her art as having 'the exceptional flexibility of a poetic and beautiful style,' 'a disinterested love of truth and eager seeking for ever deeper truth

⁷⁴ H. Marshall, 'Mary Webb', *Edinburgh Review*, 249 (1929), 315-327, (p. 315 and p. 327 respectively).

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 317.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 315-316.

⁷⁷ St. John Adcock, *The Glory that was Grub Street: Impressions of Contemporary Authors* (London: Sampson, Low and Marston, 1928), p. 324.

⁷⁸ Lorna Collard, 'Mary Webb', *Contemporary Review*, 143 (1933), 455-464, (p. 455).

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 457.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 463.

⁸¹ Frank Swinnerton, *The Georgian Literary Scene: 1910-1935* (London: Heinemann, 1935), p.327.

which filled her existence and gave it, even in poverty, clear purpose'.⁸² For him, Webb's books offered 'understanding of an uncommon order'⁸³ but Hugh L'Anson Fausset disliked her 'over-rich [...] sensuous response',⁸⁴ echoing Gerald Gould's earlier objection of her work being 'battered [...] into the poetic mould'.⁸⁵ Wilfred Shepherd's later review of 1949, though, commented on Webb having 'the sure touch of an artist [...] wholly sensitive to the mystery of life [...] the way in which the suffering spirit transforms the homespun and the commonplace'.⁸⁶ He praises her genuine love for nature and her imagination but there is also censure, suggestions that she is too emphatic about her ideas among other flaws: 'her range was limited, for she frequently introduces the same characters in differing guise. There is a use of symbolism which leads her into inconsistencies, and a tendency to become vague and verbose'.⁸⁷

Similar criticisms continued to reverberate in a mid-1960s review, the critic complaining that Webb was 'soaked in the joy of her own countryside [...] poetical [but] this is not the primary need in fiction. [Webb was] abnormal [...] neurotic [with] all the side-effects of genius rather than the core of it'.⁸⁸ A decade later, Julian Critchley despaired of the presence of 'so much mysticism and magic' in Webb's 'peculiar view of nature', wishing he 'could have taken her manuscript, cut it by a quarter and, by so doing, improved it by 100 per cent'.⁸⁹ He complains that Webb 'cannot see a buttercup on a spring morning without giving it half a page [and] can drive her reader almost to distraction [for] she slips too readily into a state of rapture'.⁹⁰ As for many critics, when Webb's 'spring "foams", her flowers "froth" with blossom [and] her bees work with "a

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Hugh L'Anson Fausset, *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 December 1939, p. 697.

⁸⁵ Gould, p. 844.

⁸⁶ Wilfred Shepherd, 'The Faith and Fiction of Mary Webb', *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* (1949) 306-311, (p. 310).

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ 'Baldwin's Webb', *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 February 1965, p. 148.

⁸⁹ Julian Critchley, 'Mary Webb's Love Letters to Nature', *Illustrated London News*, 263 (1975), 57-58, (p. 57).

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

ferocity of industry”⁹¹ it is just too much. Yet Critchley also states that Webb ‘deserves better of our times [and] should occupy a more important place in English Literature than that which fashion presently allocates to her’.⁹² Also writing in the mid-1970s, Paul Deane responded to Webb’s sense of purpose, that she intended ‘to examine man both in and out of harmony with nature.’⁹³ In 1981, Marjorie Sykes astutely observed ‘Webb’s novels cannot be taken simply at their surface value: ‘They must be read at a deeper level as well, as poetry and myth with direct application to the times in which they were written’ and this gives her work ‘a timeless validity.’⁹⁴ However, Sykes also describes Webb as an ‘erratic genius who antagonises the reader and enslaves [...] whose faults are as glaring as her strengths are outstanding [...] a maddening creature.’⁹⁵ Sykes’s motive, though, was to re-establish Webb, her ‘wonderful descriptive powers, her singing poetical use of the Shropshire dialect and her total absorption,’⁹⁶ in the landscape of her native countryside.

As this selection of literary criticism indicates Webb, as quoted above, is seen as: ‘excessive’, ‘exaggerated’, ‘careless’, ‘peculiar’, ‘erratic’, ‘vague’, ‘verbose,’ ‘over-rich’, ‘sensuous’ and ‘maddening’. And yet, her work is also frequently spoken of as ‘beautiful’, ‘vivid’, ‘remarkable’, ‘poetic’, ‘poignant’, ‘at one’, ‘noble’ and more than once she has been described as a ‘genius’. These words and phrases, both negative and positive, highlight the sense of otherness which lies at the crux of her neglect. Neither she nor her work are ‘normal’, since a genius is beyond the norm, as Edwin Pugh, who knew her personally testifies: ‘Mary Webb did not belong to this world [...] there was something unearthly, phantasmal about her’ and she seemed ““to float like a ghost through the air””.⁹⁷ Webb has continued to be problematic for critics, who have

⁹¹ West, p. 416.

⁹² Critchley, p. 57.

⁹³ Paul Deane, ‘The Soul of the World: A Study of the Work of Mary Webb’, *Modern British Literature*, 1 (1977), 44-57, (p. 53).

⁹⁴ Marjorie Sykes, ‘The Anglo-Welsh Genius: Mary Webb’, *Anglo-Welsh Review*, 68 (1981), 74-81, (p. 74).

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ Pugh, 1928, p. 193.

attempted to pigeon-hole her as a writer of sentimental country stories but she has eluded simple categorisation and existing definitions. Even in the late 1970s to early 1980s, despite Webb's novels being re-issued by Virago, a champion of women's writing, there was still little interest in her. Because Webb has not fitted within existing critical models or offered the usual social critiques 'there has been a general reluctance to acknowledge her as a major writer,'⁹⁸ but Webb is to be admired because she 'give[s] voice and clarity to those most fundamental things [...]. And it is in [her] insistent inclusion of all that puzzles her that her real contribution lies.'⁹⁹ Today, interest in Webb is finally re-emerging, as the recent publications mentioned earlier suggest. Yet, even latter readings of her work as 'too much "loam and lovechild" storytelling'¹⁰⁰ prevail, as a recent book blog shows, indicating that her reputation continues to be overshadowed by the limiting image of her work as rural romance.

Existing scholarly interpretations of Webb will be referred to in this reappraisal, incorporating their value, whilst also considering what has not been said. Webb's concern with women's lives within social and religious constructs evinces a feminist concern with gender, yet only a few studies have examined Webb's work from a feminist perspective. Key examples are Michèle Aina Barale's *Daughters and Lovers: The Life and Writing of Mary Webb* (1986) and Carol Siegel's 'Male Masochism and the Colonialist Impulse: Mary Webb's Return of the Native Tess.'¹⁰¹ Barale argues that the romance/love story nature of Webb's novels can be seen as 'an artefact of the dominant culture of patriarchy'¹⁰² which consolidates female readers' anxieties in a mother/daughter centred focus while Siegel suggests that Webb's *Gone to Earth* and Hardy's *Tess* can be directly compared in the light of a connection between colonialism

⁹⁸ Duncan, p. 327.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 328.

¹⁰⁰ In 'Mary Webb: Brighter and Better than Thomas Hardy', <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2009/mar/10>>, [accessed Mar 22 2010] Eloise Millar praises Webb, but the name-tag above limits critical reappraisal because of its tendency to fix Webb by attitude and genre.

¹⁰¹ Carol Siegel, 'Male Masochism and the Colonialist Impulse: Mary Webb's Return of the Native Tess,' *A Forum on Fiction*, 24 (Winter, 1991), 131-146.

¹⁰² Michèle Aina Barale, *Daughters and Lovers: The Life and Writing of Mary Webb* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), p. 9.

and masculine desire. Barale gives a useful analysis, in which she identifies feminist characteristics in Webb's focus on the female voice, but pays little attention to Webb's feminist spirituality. Siegel's account highlights Hardy's influence on Webb and her imaginative dialogue with *Tess* but does not fully explore Webb's own, unique voicing of female spiritual experience either.

Although Paul Deane stresses the pivotal nature of the epiphanic mystical experiences of Webb's characters he does not consider the relation of these states to the significance of gender.¹⁰³ And James Homer Thrall's 'Mystic Moderns: Agency and Enchantment in Evelyn Underhill, May Sinclair and Mary Webb'¹⁰⁴ partially considers Webb through a feminist lens but does not fully explore this in relation to her mysticism. Other evaluative approaches to Webb include a focus on the mythopoeic nature of her work, in which she constructs myths herself as well as redacting existing myths. A later section will explore this further important aspect of her work and delineate the meaning of such terms as myth, legend and folklore. W.K. McNeil, in 'The Function of Legend, Belief and Custom in *Precious Bane*',¹⁰⁵ discusses the role that folklore and myth play in supporting realism, mood, characterisation and humour in this work. Whilst the mythopoeic nature of her work does fulfil these literary functions, it offers much more than this, as Webb's re-appraisal and re-creation of myth is closely linked to her mystic vision. Webb found a link with the past and past values within the history of the landscape, so myth is bound up with nature for Webb and a means of reclaiming respect for nature and its regenerative capacity. Her bond with a particular region forms an additional link with other writers, and is elemental in her work. Another commentator has drawn attention to this but her stress on the importance of location rather limits critical development through an over-emphasis on regional concerns.¹⁰⁶

Each of these approaches offer something to an analytical overview of Webb, identifying key areas of interest in her work and its inter-connectedness

¹⁰³ See Deane, p. 45.

¹⁰⁴ James Homer Thrall, *Mystic Moderns: Agency and Enchantment in Evelyn Underhill, May Sinclair and Mary Webb* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Duke University, NC, 2005.

¹⁰⁵ W.K. McNeil, 'The Function of Legend, Belief and Custom in *Precious Bane*, *Folklore*, 82 (1971), 132-146.

¹⁰⁶ See Sykes.

with her own life. Her use of myth, her vision of universal love and her ecopoetics all link to her core concept of a re-creative spiritual reality and her declaration of a deep reverence for nature is an alarm bell to awaken contemporary consciousness. However, no-one has yet linked all these threads and this study brings together these separate strands of landscape, mythology, mysticism and feminism together with ecology, examining the partial accounts and definitions of her work that critics have affected in order to form a more complete evaluation of her worth. These themes are integrally combined in Webb's view of the manifold aspects of the natural world in which the landscape itself is therapeutic and the experience of nature mysticism has a re-creative power. Her ideas reached beyond the confines of her religious education, for, in an era when society and religion were led by men, she proffered a fresh spiritual alternative which links both to ancient and modern ideas about women. Lastly, her re-evaluative re-sacralisation of nature emphasises the harmonisation of humankind with its environment. In novels such as *The House in Dormer Forest* and in her poetry she advocates the rediscovery of a balanced relationship between human beings and their world, centring on the transformative power of nature, both for the self and for society. Her censuring of a consumer society in, for example, *Seven for a Secret* and *Precious Bane*, is also relevant to the reshaping of today's world. This thesis, therefore, makes a claim to bring Webb herself back from 'the other side of the silence' of her literary neglect, where she has been overlooked and under-appreciated for too long. Although Webb's exhilarated and emotional response to nature is overblown for some readers, for others it is evidence of the truth of her claims – that it is possible to encounter, most powerfully and beautifully, the numinous within the world we inhabit.

This principal focus in Webb's work is depicted throughout her work and the following chapters will seek to trace the development of her ideas and the stylistic shifts in her writing. Chapter One, 'Early Responses', considers Webb's formative years and the experiences and influences which led to the writing of the works later published under *The Spring of Joy* titles. The ensuing chapter, 'Mythological Motifs', centres upon her interest in symbolism and myth which informed the writing of the novels *The Golden Arrow* and *Gone to Earth*. Chapter Three, 'Preceptive Perception', focuses on *The House in Dormer Forest*, an important novel because of its ecopoetics and articulation of

maturing pantheism. Following this, the fourth chapter, 'A Dyad', considers *Seven for a Secret* and *Precious Bane* as a duo of particular relevance in examining Webb's work through a feminist perspective. Through a focus on her articulation of spirituality and universal love I evaluate the novels in relation to feminist criticisms and the romance genre. Biographical aspects of Webb's life and its connections with her work are included within these sections and into Chapter Five, 'A Medieval Message', which considers Webb's final years and her last, experimental novel *Armour Wherein He Trusted*. The medieval context of this work builds upon her lifelong love of nature, her interest in a mythic past, her spiritual insight and her ethos of love. The maturity of this novel culminates Webb's literary career and is unusual in style yet still evocative of her key themes and ideas. In summary, this review of her novels, poems and essays promotes the rediscovery of Webb for a new audience.

Life and work were inextricably linked for Webb and her work is axiomatic in its portrayal of her ideas. In this sense it also represents the only autobiography we have. Because of these important links between her life and work, biographical aspects of Webb's life will be incorporated and reference made to existing biographies. Mary Webb was an enigmatic character and difficult to analyse, a task made more problematic by the fact that, unlike other writers, she left very little personal information about her life (there are no journals and few letters) leaving biographers reliant on interpretations of the works to explain the writer herself. But, after her death biographical works were quite quickly produced, reflecting the popularity her novels were enjoying after Baldwin had spoken regretfully of them as books 'of the highest quality that no one buys and that no one reads.'¹⁰⁷ As Webb's first publisher, Jonathan Cape, had commented "unfortunately the sales never measure up to what the reviews lead us to hope for"¹⁰⁸ and in her own lifetime, none of her books sold more than around a thousand per title. With the influence of Baldwin's speech matters changed rapidly, although too late for Webb to witness herself. Her publisher quickly bought all rights to Webb's work and reprinted them with flattering introductions by Baldwin himself, John Buchan and G.K. Chesterton. Suddenly,

¹⁰⁷ See 'Report on the Royal Literary Fund Dinner'.

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Coles, p. 278.

the novels were successful, particularly *Precious Bane*, which was reprinted several times in 1928 alone, and the same year also saw the publication of *Poems and The Spring of Joy*. A companion work, W. Reid Chappell's *The Shropshire of Mary Webb* (1930) promoted her, but cemented her as a regional author, fixing her in Shropshire, the 'land of Mary Webb,'¹⁰⁹ thus limiting critical interpretation. Two biographies appeared: *Mary Webb: A Short Study of her Life and Work* (1931) by Hilda Addison and *Mary Webb: Her Life and Work* (1932), written by Thomas Moulton and commissioned by Webb's publisher. Both give short accounts of Webb's life, her character and the influences which prompted her towards a literary career, whilst engaging in some analysis of her work.

Hilda Addison's work is an affectionate portrait but her depiction of Webb's life is quite sketchy and, judged alongside other biographies, at times rather inaccurate. Critical examination of the novels is limited, the focus tending towards a celebration of Webb, but it does suggest that 'the essence of Mary Webb's teaching [is] the struggle between the mechanistic and spiritual interpretations of life.'¹¹⁰ Moulton also discusses Webb's spiritual outlook and its influence on her work, observing that, 'she put her visionary experience, her perception of what complete mysticism may mean, to very proper and welcome use.'¹¹¹ He reminds us that 'not so many mystics have written worthy novels that we can afford to be disparaging about one who could write them with great distinction.'¹¹² Both biographers comment on Webb's frustration at her lack of literary recognition but make no analysis of the reasons for this. Addison is more or less unfailingly appreciative of Webb's writing, whilst Moulton notes some of her weaknesses, such as the overly done melodrama of *Seven for a Secret* and the faultiness of *The House in Dormer Forest* where 'imaginative power seems to have been displaced by intellectual theorising.'¹¹³ Yet he also suggests that Webb 'had securely established herself in the esteem of critics

¹⁰⁹ W. Reid Chappell, *The Shropshire of Mary Webb* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1930), p. 6.

¹¹⁰ Hilda Addison, *Mary Webb: A Short Study of her Life and Work* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1931), p. 71.

¹¹¹ Thomas Moulton, *Mary Webb: Her Life and Work* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932), p. 274.

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p. 176.

and readers of discernment.¹¹⁴ Addison admits that her work contains only an outline of Webb's life, whereas Moulton's book is more detailed. Moulton had the advantage of having Henry Webb, Mary Webb's husband, as a contributor but this was also a drawback as Henry exerted some control over what went into the book. This is reflected in Moulton's account of what is seen elsewhere as a very troubled marriage in its later years. Addison barely mentions Henry whereas Moulton goes to considerable trouble to demonstrate Henry's magnanimous character, along with 'the desirability of their union [and] happiness'¹¹⁵ Webb found in marriage. He does not refer to the breakdown of this relationship or the innermost sorrow this caused her.

Unfortunately, this upswing of interest did not last. It may be that the appeal of Webb at this time was fuelled by an increased post-war desire for nostalgia and country stories, 'a reaction from the upheaval and horror of the Great War'.¹¹⁶ When Stella Gibbons parodied the rural genre in her successful, and very amusing, satirical novel *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), this helped to provoke a loss of interest in Webb's work. Coles claims that through direct correspondence with Gibbons she verified that her novel attacked the rural genre as a whole, but was 'not a parody of any specific book and certainly not exclusively of Mary Webb's work.'¹¹⁷ But reading tastes were changing, particularly with the build up towards World War II; Webb was perceived as old-fashioned and critics disregarded her. Gibbons' satire highlighted the feature of Webb's work that she had most often been criticised for, her emotional intensity, and the reading world drew further away than ever from understanding and appreciating this unique and gifted author. However, a few further volumes were produced before interest in Webb sank completely. Henry Webb arranged for the publication of *A Mary Webb Anthology* (1939), a selection of his late wife's work which received similar reviews to the original editions. He died shortly after this publication and it was thought that all of Webb's work had been printed, but some years later a small cache of unpublished poems was found amongst Henry's papers and issued in *Fifty-One Poems* (1946). A final volume, Martin

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 214.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 105.

¹¹⁶ Coles, p. 325.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 326.

Armstrong's *The Essential Mary Webb* (1951), a selection of excerpts from novels and poems, attempted 'to give a bird's eye view of [her] genius'.¹¹⁸

In the 1960s Dorothy Wrenn published a brief account of Webb's life and work, *Goodbye to Morning: A Biographical Study of Mary Webb*, in which she sought to 'recreate Mary Webb as a person'.¹¹⁹ This biographer expressed a concern that 'in her own countryside, often Mary Webb was a name and nothing else. There were many people who had never heard of her at all.'¹²⁰ The account is rather limited but does attempt to provide a more rounded portrait of Webb than previous biographers, as Wrenn suggests that Webb could be jealous and possessive and did not always make her husband's life 'an easy one'.¹²¹ This contrasts with other rather idealised views which acknowledge Webb's intensity but not how difficult she may have been to live with.

Like her previous biographers Wrenn is full of admiration for Webb's work, but she also admits to its faults, noting its flaws in plot, characterisation and sentimentalism. However, she rightly recognises that the value of Webb's writing is in the poignancy of her vision and aptly states that Webb is 'essentially a poet',¹²² her lyrical work conveying 'her own inner self [...] her unclouded vision'.¹²³ Despite this recognition Wrenn places little emphasis on Webb's mysticism, merely commenting that 'something of the mystic was there',¹²⁴ her pagan faith centred on a residual belief in a Christian God, but she does not explore Webb's spiritual development as seen in her work.

During subsequent decades interest in Webb waned further, apart from a brief revival in the 1970s when her five completed novels were republished by Virago, but these failed to reignite much critical interest as Webb's romantic love stories appeared to accept patriarchy. A much more thorough account of

¹¹⁸ Mary Webb, *The Essential Mary Webb*, ed. by Martin Armstrong (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951), p. 7.

¹¹⁹ Dorothy Wrenn, *Goodbye to Morning: A Biographical Study of Mary Webb* (Shrewsbury: Wilding and Son, 1964), p. 1.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

¹²¹ *ibid.*, p. 59.

¹²² *ibid.*, p. 109.

¹²³ *ibid.*, p. 111.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 33.

Webb's life and work also appeared in Coles's *The Flower of Light* in 1978. This well researched and documented biography defends Webb's work with vigour, aiming 'to tell the story of her tragic life and to draw attention to a neglected talent'.¹²⁵ Coles makes a significant contribution to the study of Webb but we may question how far she achieves her aims, and a review by Patricia Beer suggests its lack of a clear critical appraisal. Coles aims to prove her point through repetition alone, or as Beer puts it: "What I say three (or nine or ten) times is true."¹²⁶ Because Coles is so adamant in her defence of Webb 'she is naturally cross with critics [...] who do not share her enthusiasm.'¹²⁷ Neither does Beer share Coles's enthusiasm as she finds that 'the reason Mary Webb's novels are little regarded today is that they are not very good, and no amount of drawing attention to them or talking of neglected talent will make them so.'¹²⁸ Beer complains that Webb's work 'shows how very crude soul can be,'¹²⁹ underscoring her absolute dislike of Webb's rhapsodic style. However, Beer's point is that Coles cannot alter this view because she does not carry out an unbiased critical review of Webb's work and this study attempts to tackle this problem by examining both its weaknesses and strengths.

The Flower of Light does give a far more searching version of events which shaped Webb's life than earlier biographers, particularly noting the impact of her father and the effect of his death, which 'cannot be overestimated.'¹³⁰ This biography also examines Webb's literary influences, not just novels and poetry but also science and psychology, highlighting the scope of Webb's interests. Coles is accurate in recognizing the breadth of Webb's vision and her ambition 'to transmit her inner landscapes, to reveal an unimagined reality to the world.'¹³¹ So Coles's comments should have helped secure Webb as a significant writer, but did not. Hence, her neglect has persisted because critics

¹²⁵ Coles, p. xi.

¹²⁶ Patricia Beer, 'The Crudities of the Soul', *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 September 1978, p. 1049.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

¹²⁸ *ibid.*

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

¹³⁰ Coles, p. 93.

¹³¹ *ibid.*, p. 214.

have not yet seen her true worth and her unguarded rhapsody has continued to set her outside critical models. Terry Eagleton once observed, that ‘we can drop once and for all the illusion that the category “literature” is objective.’¹³² And Webb has disturbed expectations of what is acceptable, whilst critics have compartmentalised her as a nature writer. But she also lucidly articulates mystic experience, explores socio-cultural concerns, creates her own mythopoeia, promotes a female viewpoint, challenges religious conventions, and foresees an urgent need for humanity’s reconnection with its environment. And the nuances of her poeticism offer ‘the human gift of language [...] meaning, tone, overtone, music, pattern, memorability [...] the power to move and delight’.¹³³ And William Rueckert’s comment that green plants and poems ‘help to create a self-perpetuating and evolving system [...] to create creativity and community [...] when their energy is released and flows out into others’¹³⁴ is appropriate in re-evaluating Webb. As has been wisely noted, ‘we must be careful by what canon we judge her.’¹³⁵ And this study aims to demonstrate that the time is even more ripe to see Webb with ‘fresher’ eyes, as Coles hoped. It was once observed that one day Webb will be remembered for the ‘something of greatness that is in [her] novels’.¹³⁶ Let us hope that this view will finally be proved right, and more readers will appreciate the ‘finality and completeness’¹³⁷ of her work, her poignancy and pertinence, both to her era and, moreover, our own.

¹³² Terry Eagleton, ‘Canonicity and Value’, in *Modern Literary Theory*, ed. by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Hodder, 2001), pp. 400-405 (p. 401).

¹³³ Sean O’Brien, ‘Read poetry: it’s quite hard’, *The Guardian* (8th March 2008), Review p. 3.

¹³⁴ William Rueckert, ‘Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism’, in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. by Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 105-123 (p. 111).

¹³⁵ Marshall, p. 317.

¹³⁶ Adcock, p. 324.

¹³⁷ See Fausset, *TLS*, 2 December 1939, p. 697.

Chapter One

Early Responses: *The Spring of Joy*

1881-1914

There never was an author in closer kinship with nature. The palpable hills and streams, fields and forests, flowers and fruit, the impalpable skies and winds, mists and clouds, sun and shade, all alike are real and living in her eyes as sentient creatures.¹

Edwin Pugh evinces here Webb's sensitivity to the natural world which inculcated her work with an infinite awareness of the numinous, 'the other side of silence', in which every aspect of the landscape breathed with an animate life-force in which she perceived its sacred value. This chapter will discuss Webb's early instinctive and passionate responses to nature, developing from a childhood bond with her environment into a belief in nature as the sacral source of spiritual wholeness. Comparisons with other nature writers, such as Gerald Manley Hopkins, Rosamond Lehman, Elizabeth Von Arnim and A.E. Housman will indicate parallels which further a positive evaluation of her work and demonstrate her value. She 'capture[d] and fix[ed] permanently the qualities of life in rural Shropshire,'² but her ideas were much broader, since 'what she found to love in all the earth was simply represented by her own small area.'³

For Webb, growing up in the rural environment of Shropshire initiated an intimate familiarity with nature. Retaining a sense of remoteness even today, in its Victorian and Edwardian days Shropshire was sparsely populated, a borderland county dotted with small villages and distant farms. Webb's formative years were spent amongst a background of steep hills, rolling fields and deep meres, relatively isolated from the outside world, and this increased the intensity with which she responded to the landscape as a place of rich fascination. She describes her childhood self as 'awe-stricken' (*SJ: Healing*, 44) and she spent many hours outdoors, studying her environment, her intuitive, receptive personality attuned to every mood and seasonal variation:

¹ Pugh, 1923, p. 7.

² Deane, p. 57.

³ *ibid.*

To know the beauty of the earth's lineaments, one must watch them through the seasons. Spring is the time of points and immature half-rounds, when everything is folded. There is a gradual thickening of outline, a massing of shapes, a growing indefiniteness of branch and twig. The intrinsic structure of winter is being veiled by the new, extrinsic forms. Leaves cover the bare hawthorn; flowers foam over the leaves (ibid., 40).

In this extract her use of the verbs 'know' and 'watch' indicates her patient observation and her intimacy with the world around her and her familiarity with its 'lineaments' as it changes throughout the year. Spring, though, is of particular poignancy because of its associations with new life and hope and these concepts would later form a cornerstone in her thoughts and ideas. In the lines above she refers to the newness of things when everything is 'immature', 'massing', 'thickening' and 'growing' as the dark and dormant days of winter are forgotten and this imagery also acts as a metaphor for the healing power of nature to elicit a flourishing of the spirit, a core concept in Webb's pantheism. Her lexical choices here all connote a sense of change, of reshaping and reforming, images of the fleshing out of the skeletal forms of winter into more rounded 'new[ness]' and the metaphorical 'foam[ing]' of flowers is overstated but effectively suggests a tidal movement which evokes the rapidity with which new life and energy cover the once bare trees. Webb's 'deep sense of natural beauty and of what lay behind and within it'⁴ was obvious to Pugh as he knew her personally and he believed her long rural ancestry had helped to foster this:

Doubtless her native talents are largely the heritage of her race that is bred of the soil; for she was born of an ancient yeoman line, and has lived for the most part of her life, for certainly that most vital part of her life, her childhood, on Wenlock Edge and in other country homes in one of the Welsh marches.⁵

Webb's mother, Sarah Alice Meredith, was Scottish but her father, George Edward Meredith, came from a long line of Welsh forbears, a lineage he was extremely proud of. It was his Celtic strain which made him 'imaginative,

⁴ ibid.

⁵ Pugh, 1923, p. 7.

sympathetic, perceptive [with] a great love of his native Shropshire'.⁶ This love of Shropshire, then, seems to have been part of Webb's genetic and cultural history in a region 'where Saxon and Celt have mingled in language, outlook and history to produce something vital and unique.'⁷ And Sykes cites Matthew Arnold's representation of the Welsh in *The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), in which he notes the deep connection between the Welsh and their history:

Wales, where the past still lives, where every place has its tradition, every name its poetry, and where the people [...] still knows this past, this tradition, this poetry, and lives with it, and clings to it.⁸

How familiar Webb herself was with Arnold's work is unknown but Arnold was writing from a distance, whereas Webb's ancestry was Celtic. Nevertheless, Arnold's depiction of Celtic characteristics of imagination, melancholy, and a love of nature certainly chime with Webb's deep attachment to place, her identification of self with the landscape and its past.

The first of George and Sarah Meredith's six children, Mary Webb was, appropriately for a nature lover, born on a spring day in a small Shropshire village on March 25th 1881. There were family moves, but the whole of Webb's childhood, adolescence and early adulthood was spent within close proximity to acres of unspoilt countryside. Also integral to her childhood experience of life in Shropshire was her relationship with her father. As the eldest child she was extremely close to George Meredith, who encouraged his daughter's naturalist and artistic interests. They spent a considerable amount of time together so Webb's early life was, in many respects, idyllic. An inquisitive and receptive child, Webb was partly educated by her father, an Oxford MA who tutored students for university entrance, but she also had governesses and attended a finishing school. One of her governesses, known as Minoni, was a particular influence in fostering her literary knowledge and tastes, introducing her to a wide range of writers, an exposure which would later influence Webb's own writing. Webb's education was typical for a young middle-class woman of her era. She was fortunate to have wide access to a range of books, but, of course,

⁶ Coles, p. 6.

⁷ Sykes, p. 80.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 75.

received far less education than her brothers. She was not so lucky as other women writers, such as Virginia Woolf, Vera Brittain and Rosamond Lehman, who experienced university, although she did later attend a series of Cambridge University outreach lectures. Since she was largely confined at home, it was her teacher-father who had the greatest influence, both academically and culturally. Father and daughter took frequent outings together, exploring the countryside and this relationship with environment was part of her deep bond with him:

Often, on fine afternoons, her father would take her out with him in the brougham. They would drive along the ridge of Wenlock Edge, and he would teach her the names of the hills [...] He told her stories too; of Wild Eric [...] who is said to ride across the Stiperstones dressed all in green, with Godda, his fairy bride. All his wild hounds stream after him, and his appearance is said to foretell a national disaster.⁹

This countryside would later characterize her work and memories of local tales such as these also became important features in Webb's novels, deepening their texture and thematic issues, as her strong feeling for the folkloric history of the region was interconnected with her spiritual identification with the land.

Webb's relationship with her mother, Alice, was less rewarding. Alice, managing a large household, was a more distant, stricter parent and a stern disciplinarian in contrast to the more indulgent George. As Webb grew up, becoming an increasingly sensitive teenager, she began to hold strong views, developing a hatred of blood-sports and becoming a vegetarian. These were issues which would later appear in her work in images of the 'threatening, ghastly tumult' of the hounds as they advanced 'clamorous for blood' upon Hazel and her fox (*GE*, 283). Webb refused to accept that animals 'were made for our sole benefit' and believed in a future 'when the corpses of the defenceless will be seen no more upon the tables of those who profess the gospel of love' (*SJ: Healing*, 57). Both of Webb's parents hunted and mealtimes, as Webb refused to eat meat, became contentious, particularly between Webb and her mother. Webb had an innate love of wildlife and we can now clearly see that her vegetarianism and defence of animals were elements in her ecocentred desire to protect and preserve nature. She had already found

⁹ Wrenn, p. 9.

the ‘sense of wonder, of awe at the vastness of Nature, and of humility at our own dependent and insignificant place in it, which we need if we are to function realistically as part of the biosphere where we belong’.¹⁰

Quite what her parents made of Webb’s ethical view of animals is unknown, but the tension generated by this was probably eased when her mother took a less dominant position in the family. A hunting accident in 1895, in which Alice Meredith damaged her back, caused her to remain bed-bound for the next five years. Webb now had an increasingly important role in the household, becoming a sort of surrogate ‘wife’ to her father and a mother to her siblings and it was a position she adored, devoting herself to her five brothers and sisters and her beloved father. Accounts of her mother’s reclusive behaviour are intriguing as it is possible that there were reasons other than physical injury for her retreat. It has been suggested that it was ‘a psychological withdrawal’¹¹ and that Alice was choosing sexual abstinence and freedom from household responsibilities, that she was ‘an escapist, taking refuge from a circumscribed existence.’¹² Another suggestion is that Webb’s close alliance with her father now took on an added nuance in which the reversal of roles, in a sense, ‘sexualised’¹³ the relationship. Barale is not suggesting here that the relationship actually took on a sexual form, but is emphasising the intimate closeness which existed between father and daughter.

The next five years were intensely happy for Webb, for when not busy in her domestic role, her father encouraged her to sketch, paint and write about the natural world. Her early work illustrates her simple joy in nature and implies her conventional religious upbringing in which she attended several services on Sundays and sang in the choir. We may picture the family, their ‘faces shiningly clean, wearing their stiff “best”’, the children ‘immersed’ in ‘the institutional religion which had played so dominant a part in the lives of her parents and grandparents.’¹⁴ Filling in for her mother, Webb also took on charitable duties,

¹⁰ Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), p. 145.

¹¹ Coles, p. 31.

¹² Wrenn, p. 18.

¹³ Barale, p. 25.

¹⁴ Coles, p. 45.

delivered, and contributed to, the parish magazine. It would have been very unlikely for Webb to have considered a future career – the purpose of her education was simply to refine her. The constraints of her role as a young woman meant that, outside domesticity, charity and writing were the only other possible pursuits for self-development or expression. And some of her first published poems appeared in these parish magazines. The poem, ‘Spring’, exemplifies her first works, its joyous tones reflecting her pleasure in nature:

Come out beneath the hoary apple trees!
 Their boughs are rich with myriad shades of green,
 Blushing with flowers
 Which throw sweet petals on the balmy breeze
 Down to the grass, which seems to nod and lean
 Under their showers (*CPP*, 96).

Written in 1898 at the age of seventeen, this paean conveys Webb’s exultant, youthful innocence in a beautiful world. There is certainly an excess of euphoria in the exclamatory tone and vocabulary choices but Webb was responding to what seemed a perfect world. The apprehension of renewal and the richness of natural life is evident here, as the apple trees are re-clothed with greenery, their blossom brings ‘sweet[ness]’ and a ‘balmy’ breeze soothes and refreshes. Figurative language in which the grass accepts and delights in the showering petals furthers an atmosphere of bliss. In addition, the simple repetition of an abc rhyme scheme creates an audible chiming pattern which adds to the pleasurable tone of the verse. The short five syllable line on every third line (repeated, like the rhyme scheme, throughout the poem) adds variation to the pentameter lines and creates slight pauses as if the speaker catches her breath in the long, complex sentences which evoke her excitement. Thus, although apparently simple, there is evidence here of a crafted response.

This first response to nature was shaped by the belief that it was created by a benign (masculine) deity and the poems compare strikingly with those of Gerard Manley Hopkins in their exultant worship. Hopkins died when Webb was only a child but his posthumous fame for his religious verse established him amongst Victorian poets, so she is likely to have read his work. His rhythmically and structurally experimental poetry is considered to have been influential on

later poets, but a prominent feature is its celebration of nature as a means of knowing and praising God for his artistry and benevolent supremacy:

Glory be to God for dappled things –
 For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut falls; finches' wings [...]
 Praise him'.¹⁵

Similarly, in 'God's Grandeur' Hopkins worships 'the grandeur of God', for through him 'nature is never spent [...] Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.'¹⁶ This idea that God could be glimpsed through his creation was also Webb's first view, as suggested in her poem, 'The Vision':

In the busy tongues of spring
 There's an angel carolling.
 Kneeling low in any place,
 We may see the Father's face [...]
 Feel the rush of beating wings (*SOJ: Poems*, 82).

Nature was her chief inspiration but the influence of an education in Christian literary tradition is clear here as she attributes nature's beauty to the Creator's skill. In the poem 'A Conquerer', Webb clearly shows that God is synonymous with this loveliness – 'the beauty that is God' (*SJ: Poems*, 119). And similarly in 'Among the Hills' she writes: 'the fingers of God linger slowly / o'er the keyboard of peace' (*ibid.*, 115). In 'Dawn' she speaks of the 'silvery notes [...] thrilling with love' (*ibid.*, 99) in the blackbird's morning song and extols the Almighty: 'Praise God above!' (*ibid.*). In a further untitled poem she lauds the perfection of creation, its multiplicity shaped with God's omnipotence: 'God made the daisies, / and agrimony, / And a brown sedge-warbler to sing His praises / In the pale thorn-tree' (*ibid.*, 122). Although her faith would undergo a radical shift, she would retain this musical metaphor as a means of describing the spiritual.

¹⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Pied Beauty', *The Nation's Favourite Poems* (London: BBC Books, 1996), p. 109 (original work published in 1918 in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*).

¹⁶ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur', *The Nation's Favourite Poems*, op. cit., p. 169 (original work published in 1918 in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*).

This initial awareness of a spiritual presence in nature was, then, identifiable with Christian teaching. Hopkins, it has been observed, ‘attempted to touch the things of the created world in such a way that they would “ring and tell” of themselves to others’, expressing his belief that nature is “charged with love [...] charged with God.”¹⁷ For Hopkins everything, including poetic language, comes from God so his words are a form of worship and thus act as a means towards ‘union with God.’¹⁸ Like Hopkins, Webb evokes similar celebratory images of the natural world. Her focus on the small sensory details of colour, pattern and sound indicates her delight in nature’s infinite variety and beauty and her equivalent desire to reveal this ‘to others’. Hopkins famously invented the curial sonnet and is known for his unique style, but there is also a similarity between his work and Webb’s poems above in their use of regular rhythm and rhyme, both of which help to emphasise views of the completeness and perfection of God’s world. ‘Pied Beauty’ is carefully crafted in its proportional relation to the Petrarchan sonnet and is thus more complex than Webb’s simple trochaic heptameter in ‘The Vision’ but her words also seem to burst emphatically from the verse (‘busy’, ‘angel’ and ‘rush’) recalling the celebratory tonic stress of Hopkins’s ‘Glory’, ‘God’ and ‘Fresh’ in ‘Pied Beauty’.

Readers may find these examples of Webb’s early poetry over-emphatic but there are strong visual and auditory qualities which make it expressive and moving. However, her verse has received very little critical attention, which is disappointing as it offers much of interest. A reviewer of a collection of her poems published after her death described her verse as ‘divinatory’, expressive of ‘her dreams, her reverence, her wonder’.¹⁹ The power of her poems, as this critic suggests, is in their ‘communication of a secret [...] a harmony of soul and sense [written by] a free and patient worshipper’.²⁰ As this review and the examples above suggest, many of Webb’s poems do express her joyful, reverent ‘wonder’ of nature, but others describe her deep sorrow and her

¹⁷ Rachel Salmon, ‘Prayers of Praise and Petition: Simultaneity in the Sonnet World of Gerald Manley Hopkins’, *Victorian Poetry*, 22, (Winter 1984), 383-406 (p. 386).

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 391.

¹⁹ Edmund Charles Blunden, ‘The Poems of Mary Webb’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 December 1928, p. 1022.

²⁰ *ibid.*

suffering. In 'Alone', 'the lonely cuckoo calls [...] and knocks upon my heart again and yet again' (*SJ: Poems*, 67) articulating her darker days.

For Webb's idyll was not to last. Contentment and the close affinity with her father received a severe blow in 1900, when an unexpected event occurred, as 'Alice reappeared at the breakfast table [...] suddenly terminating the five-year retreat in her bedroom. From this time onwards she would resume her position as Mother in the centre of family life.'²¹ Webb's role as mistress of the house and companion to her father was abruptly over. Now a young woman, she found herself dispossessed and as a consequence spent more time than ever outdoors. A solitary figure, she would often sit gazing at the landscape for hours and at home she would spend her time in her room, reading and writing.

Unable to spend so much time with her father she became increasingly isolated and introspective, communing only with the natural world. But this 'emotional and spiritual intensity took an early toll on her frail body'²² and Webb became seriously ill in 1901 with Graves' Disease.²³ Her experience of suffering was materially increased and this became a watershed in shaping her spiritual beliefs as, emerging through sickness, she would find renewal in the power of nature. Through this Webb would begin to look beyond the conventional Christianity of her youth to form a mystical view centred upon nature. This epiphanic realisation of mystic awareness has been described as 'that crucial phase of development, the *fine pointe* of moulding, in which her mature personality – and her literary art – would evolve from a matrix of influences'.²⁴

Webb's early sensitivity towards her environment had paved the way for mystic vision, the spiritual revelation which came via the physical, but she was seriously unwell. Hilda Graef shows that pain is necessary in the process towards mysticism, as a conversion from worldly pleasures to physical poverty is enacted. This frees the mystic from experiences which 'agitate the mind' and

²¹ Coles, p. 50.

²² *ibid*, p. 52.

²³ It is impossible to certify the reasons for the onset of this disease in which the patient's own immune system attacks the thyroid gland, causing it to over-produce thyroxine. The condition is known to commonly affect women over twenty, although it can be contracted at any age, and it may be that some people have a genetic predisposition towards it.

²⁴ Coles, p. 51.

enables the quiet contemplation which results in an ecstatic state of 'certainty'.²⁵ This attempt to unify the perfect and the imperfect into one is the central problem for many mystics: a struggle to relate 'the one transcendent and perfect Creator to this world of multiplicity and imperfection.'²⁶ This concept is also emphasised by Roger Bastide: 'The mystical life is no primrose path but a continual struggle', a 'painful effort', leading to 'negation', 'the eventual identification of the soul' with God.²⁷ Webb was also interested in Dame Julian of Norwich's fourteenth-century work, *Revelations of Divine Love*,²⁸ in which Dame Julian upholds, controversially, that the role of suffering is not a divine punishment but a means to spiritual growth. This sentiment is comparable with the 'divine necessity of pain'²⁹ in the progress towards 'the unitive life'.³⁰ This is the final phase in the five stages of Christian mysticism which Underhill describes in *Mysticism*, echoes of which can be recognised in the progress of Webb's own pantheistic journey, as reflected in her work. Although Underhill and Webb were writing about different types of mysticism there are commonalities in their descriptions of the struggle towards the mystic goal. This alignment is a means of comparing other experiences of mysticism with Webb's, highlighting common ideas about the spiritual journey, whilst also suggesting the unique qualities of Webb's personal experience and vision.

²⁵ Hilda Graef, *The Story of Mysticism* (London: Peter Davis, 1966), p. 18.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁷ Roger Bastide, *The Mystical Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), p. 83.

²⁸ Julian of Norwich, *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love* (New York: Magisterium Press, 2015). Dame Julian, believed to have been the first woman to write a book in the English language, is an important English mystic. She was a sort of live-in hermit at the Church of St Julian of Norwich, from where she took her name, and was devoted to a contemplative life of prayer. During severe illness (circa 1393) she experienced religious visions and recorded these. The first printed version of *Sixteen Revelations* was produced in 1461 and later reproduced in 1901, edited by Grace Warrack. This publication was extremely popular and became the subject of many lectures and writings and so came to Webb's attention. Dame Julian's mystical experiences were securely Christian but her ideas were quite radical. Her writing 'made a profound impression' (Coles, p. 116) on Webb and fostered her interest in mysticism.

²⁹ Underhill, p. 222.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 425.

In 1901 there was no treatment for Webb's condition and her illness and its physical effects had a profound effect upon her. With protuberant eyes and a goitre caused by her thyroid condition she felt damaged and physical weakness meant she was forced to remain indoors. Now she felt 'desolate, lost' (*SJ: Healing*, 4) and 'all beauty seem[ed] denied' (ibid., 5) as she was filled with 'despair' in which 'death loom[s] like a black chasm' (ibid, 57). Her vocabulary, with its hard plosive sounds and simile which imagines a final, empty void, suggest her own harrowing suffering on such dark days. Webb's biographers have asserted that her illness was caused by nervous strain and excessive physical exertion or anaemia due to her inadequate vegetarian diet. Barbara Hannah speculates that Webb may have been anorexic, that she aggravated the disease through her failure to eat 'nourishing food' and that ultimately, 'in a way she even starved herself to death.'³¹ Barale also points to Webb's 'lifelong difficulty with food and eating,'³² although she recognises that these factors are complex. Biographical accounts note that when the teenage Webb became a vegetarian no alternatives to meat were offered, so she did not eat a well-balanced diet. In later life she would go for long periods without food, so absorbed in her work that she neglected to cook or eat. Caradoc Evans's description of Webb as 'a spindly, earthy little woman' with 'stoopy shoulders' and 'thin and trembly' fingers confirms her physical frailty.³³ However, Graves' Disease itself affects the metabolism, causing weight-loss, so it is not viable to conclude that Webb suffered from anorexia, a modern term in any case. Current medical reference works make no suggestion that Graves' Disease is linked to nutrition or anything as vague as nervous strain, but it is held that the disease itself can cause long-term mood disturbances so it is possible that Webb's illness 'both coloured her writing and killed her'.³⁴ There was, and still is, no cure for Graves' Disease, although today the symptoms can be treated. For Webb, there was little that could be done and at her worst she could only sleep, too weak even to eat. As she convalesced, confined indoors and craving close contact with nature, this triggered a major shift in her understanding, as she

³¹ Barbara Hannah, *Striving Towards Wholeness* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), p. 73.

³² Barale, p. 31.

³³ Caradoc Evans, 'Mary Webb', *Colophon*, 3 (Winter, 1938), 63-6 (p. 64).

³⁴ Critchley, p. 58.

realised the true depth of her fundamental need for nature. When strong enough she wrote essays and poems, using memory and imagination to replace physical proximity to nature, a spiritual philosophy emerging as thoughts and images of nature stimulated recovery. A 1902 poem articulates her relief at this:

Nature has opened her gates again!
 Her gates of gold and green;
 Has opened them wide to welcome me
 Back to her glorious liberty [...]
 Wave upon wave of its peace profound
 Steals on my spirit and circles me round
 With the stillness of eternity

And a great protecting calm ('The Gates of Gold and Green,' *CPP*, 97).

Webb writes in tones of exhilarated celebration and the image of unlocking/opening reflects a liberating rebirth or renewal. The exclamation mark, adjectival phrasing, 'glorious liberty' and repetition, 'wave upon wave', would clearly irritate readers who wish for a more subtle, controlled use of language. But this is an early-career Webb, a young woman who is utterly relieved to find some release from sickness and begin to rediscover health and well-being. She also wrote in an essay on colour that 'green is the fresh emblem of well-founded hopes' (*SJ: Healing*, 48). The colour green, therefore, was deeply symbolic in evoking the natural world and gold is implicit of beauty, preciousness and celebration. There are still elements which recall Hopkins's joyous tone but she no longer refers to God here – it is Nature itself which is the active force. And it is a source of spiritual security, as absolute peace 'circles [her] round,' denoting a protective presence. There is an emphasis on 'stillness' in which she apprehends truths beyond understanding and her sibilant phrases, 'steals', 'spirit', 'circles' and 'stillness,' usher in a hushing sense of calm. This is aided by the patterning effects of alliteration and consonance, adding regularity of rhythm to the lines, and highlighting her developing adeptness at composition at this early stage. In a later novel she explains the cathartic process of writing about nature, recreating the experience of spiritual oneness:

And while the silver ploughshare cut into the stiff soil, his spirit drove its way into the heart of the moor and left on its stern beauty the long, shining, fruitful furrows of the imagination. He wrapped himself in the

moor, and he attained a beauty he could not have won in a town. Little by little he made his poem – rugged, sweet and wild – and when he sat alone by the fire in the evenings, he was comforted by this unifying of himself with the beauty of the earth, by this caging and taming of remote loveliness, by the welding of phrases and the ripple of metres and the mysterious mingling of his soul with the sweeping dark expanses with their grey roofing cloud.³⁵

Here Webb emphasises an experience of ‘becoming’ nature, as Schiller suggests:³⁶ the ‘unifying’ and ‘mingling’ of the material with the spiritual into a state of wholeness, in which the ‘soul’ is at one with the ‘heart’ of the landscape. And her prose ‘ripples’ with a dynamic energy which evokes the sacramental poetics of her vision of nature; the phrases ‘sweep’ and ‘mingle’ into a lyrical whole which reveal her gift for expressing her pantheism. Webb’s verb choices add a sense of energy and movement in which the motion of the ploughshare as it ‘cut’ and ‘drove’ is linked with the action of Robert’s pen in ‘caging’ and ‘taming’ his experience of nature into words which express his affinity with the ‘sweeping’ breadth of the outdoor world. There is often a rhythm to her writing, as emphasised here in the anaphoric ‘by this, ‘by the’ which forms a repetitive beat, conveying a sense of strong emotion. The tonic stress of her alliterative and sibilant phrases adds to the lyricism of her language and always there is a sense of poetic completeness which enhances her vision of wholeness through nature. In an essay, ‘The Core of Poetry’, she again speaks of poetry writing and the sacral role of the poet, who as ‘a priest’ becomes ‘in tune with the bee’ in ‘those rare utterances of the soul that remain for all time mysterious and thrilling’ (*CPP*, 37-38). Although Webb’s work is quite different to Rosamond Lehman’s, there are touches of similarity in lyrical style. Lehman writes poetically with a flowing use of compound and complex sentences enriched with simile, metaphor, sensory detail and repetition:

It was autumn, and soon the lawn had a chill smoke-blue mist on it. All the blurred heavy garden was as still as glass, bowed down, folded up into itself, deaf, dumb and blind with secrets. Under the mist the silky

³⁵ Mary Webb, *Seven For a Secret*, (London: Virago, 1982), p. 166.

³⁶ See earlier footnote, Schiller, *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism*, p. 191.

river lay flat and flawless, wanly shining. All the colours of sky and earth were thin ghosts of themselves: and in the air were the troubling bitter-sweet odours of decay.³⁷

Lehman was not a nature writer as such but there is an enchanting quality to her prose. Whilst her vivid writing recalls Webb's in some ways Lehman has just enough restraint to avoid the suffusion of sense and sentiment that so many readers have disliked about Webb's prose. Lehman also writes about passion, desire and love, as Webb does (as discussed in Chapter Four), but, for Webb, nature is not just scenery: it is the stimulus for her ideas and vision. And these ideas developed further as she recovered from illness. The realisation of the physical ravages the disease had wreaked upon her, both in corporeal well-being and in appearance, made her withdraw further from social interaction outside her family, retreating deeper into the solace of nature. Only here could she feel freedom from the importunity of society and heal.

In this there are some commonalities with the work of Elizabeth Von Arnim, about whom there is a lack of research and thus no information about her spiritual views. However, her work powerfully evokes the depth of her connection with the natural world and the healing power nature provides. As Beattie notes, 'nature permeates [Von Arnim's] written work [and] it is a short hop from a life drenched with a love of nature, to embracing it in its most spiritual aspects.'³⁸ In *The Enchanted April* (1922) Von Arnim depicts the transformative experience of four disparate women who, seeking to escape drudgery, men and domesticity, escape to a romantic Italian castle, San Salvatore, where the castle's beautiful gardens provide solace, enchantment, and healing. From the moment of their arrival (in the dark) the women sense 'all the sweetness'³⁹ of the gardens surrounding them. By the next morning Lotty Wilkins, stultified by her London life and marriage to a disgruntled, unimaginative husband, wakes to freedom and delight, 'the discovery of an entirely new joy [...] the sun poured in on her [...] Such beauty; and she alive to feel it [...] sheer bliss [...] here she was [...] not going to do a thing she didn't

³⁷ Rosamond Lehman, *Dusty Answer*, first published 1927 (London: Virago, 2000), p. 11.

³⁸ Beattie, 'Elizabeth Von Arnim', pp. 64-73 (p. 66).

³⁹ Elizabeth Von Arnim, *Enchanted April* (London: Virago, 2014), p. 54.

want to do.⁴⁰ Another of the women, Lady Caroline Dester, a society beauty, is depressed and sick of the relentless attention of men, of being objectified by their desire. Here, sitting where ‘the lilies crowded their ghost heads, she had looked out into the gulf of night, and it had suddenly seemed as if her life had been a noise about nothing [...] she had better stop a moment and look round her.’⁴¹ These experiences, in which the women seek individuality and identity, hint at a frustration with the limitations for them in a male-dominated society. By the end of the novel, all four women have experienced very different, although equally revelatory, experiences and they leave renewed, reinvigorated and reformed, having found purpose, identity and hope. And, as with Webb’s work, the richness and detail of the writing enrapture the reader in this imaginary place with its beauty and recuperative properties:

That last week the syringa came out at San Salvatore, and all the acacias flowered. No one had noticed how many acacias there were till one day the garden was full of a new scent [...] To lie under an acacia tree that last week and look up through the branches at its frail leaves and white flowers quivering against the blue of the sky, while the least movement of the air shook down their scent, was a great happiness. [...] even after they had got to the bottom of the hill and passed through the iron gates [...] they could still smell the acacias.⁴²

Von Arnim’s use of sensory detail to depict an intense, emotional experience of nature recalls a description by Webb of the power of fragrance to uplift the soul:

These immemorial essences fill the mind with purple haze and auroral mist [...] Fragrance is the voice of inanimate things [...] The whole earth is a thurible heaped with incense, afire with the divine yet not consumed. This is the most spiritual of earth’s joys [...] it penetrates the physical being to its depths (*SOJ: Healing*, 23-26).

Considering Webb’s language from an affective critical view it is clear that her style lends itself to an examination in terms of the feelings it evokes. By its nature, this is largely subjective. For some readers the lines above are a ‘purple

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 263.

patch' (as in Horace's phrase *purpureus [...] pannus* in *Ars Poetica*, c. 20BC) exemplifying her heightened floriferous writing. Webb's rhetoric can be described as grandiloquent but close examination of the passage can also reveal the dynamic experience her writing offers as aromas are closely connected with emotional responses. As she comments, scent touches us to our 'depths' and who has never been swept back to a place, memory or moment by the sudden catching of a wisp of fragrance? She says the scents of nature are 'immemorial' making us reflect that humans have probably responded to fragrance throughout history. She attempts to evoke the effect of scent on the brain as it activates the limbic system and she draws out spiritual associations with fragrance with reference to a censer, incense-burning having been used in religious rites since ancient times. Even if her writing is 'purple' it manipulates our feelings and this is significant in our experience of her work.

Von Arnim does not show that this is a spiritual epiphany but the importance of place and the revelatory experience of nature as a source of cathartic wisdom is evident and this creates an interesting link with Webb. For the women in *The Enchanted April* being present and absent are significant states – to be present amongst this profusion of nature evokes a state of bliss and it is hinted that even in absence the characters will always remember their experiences at San Salvatore, as they depart, breathing in the scent of the acacias for future reminiscences when far away.

As we have seen, nature's role as the wellspring of Webb's vision was fostered by her immersion in the Shropshire landscape, and her absence from it. Although she recovered her health, another severe bout of Graves' Disease in 1907 weakened her further. Undaunted, she always returned to nature to restore her and she never lost her faith in its therapeutic powers. For Von Arnim, too, it was also the troubles in her life that perhaps led her to nature and to writing about it. Her two marriages were unhappy, a fact reflected in her writing as in *The Enchanted April* women are trying to escape from men and in *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898), the narrator seeks escape from her domineering husband, referred to in the novel as the 'Man of Wrath', in nature. *Elizabeth and her German Garden* is written in epistolary form in diary entries in which the eponymous narrator (who shares her Christian name with her creator, hinting at a personal link) recounts her troubles with domestic worries and an

unresponsive husband. Her only refuge is her garden, the place she truly wants to be and into which her desires stream: 'I see a time coming when the passion for my garden will have taken such a hold on me [...] yet see what love will do – there are more roses in my garden than any other flower!'⁴³

And Webb, during periods of recovery, poured her passion for nature into her work, gathering her essays into a collection, exploring her theory of 'Vis Medicatrix Naturae'. It was only when she had succeeded in publishing her first novels that she eventually published these essays in 1917 as *The Spring of Joy: A Little Book of Healing*. At this time she believed this little book could offer hope to a world stricken by war, suffering and horror by demonstrating the absolute value of the natural world and its capacity to heal. In reality the slim volume was scarcely noticed by a country which was too busy struggling with the casualties of World War One. Her message, 'here is the gospel of earth ringing with hope, like May mornings with birdsong, fresh and healthy as fields of young grain' (*SJ: Healing*, 1), probably seemed naïvely simplistic at this time. The title, *The Spring of Joy*, centralises Webb's first ideas about regeneration through nature in a metaphor of the vitality of life-giving water. A poem, unpublished until 1928 in the anthology *Poems and the Spring of Joy* (included with the re-printed essays), and simply entitled 'Joy', clearly links to this title:

In pain's deep forest [...]
I knew that dark way led
Straight here [...]
Then my soul knelt, and I,
Among the white and glistening flowers around it
And drank the vital water with ecstasy –
So glad because through grief and love we found it,
The spring of joy!⁴⁴

Sacred springs have long been venerated for their healing, holy powers and the element of water is linked to many creation myths and stories, emphasising its sacred qualities. And central to this volume is Webb's sacralisation of nature, its

⁴³ Elizabeth Von Arnim, *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (Dead Dodo Publishing), Amazon Kindle e-book, location 1553-1565.

⁴⁴ Mary Webb, *Fifty-One Poems*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), pp. 26-7.

'abundant sacrament,' 'for our souls' in 'the purple fruit of evening with its innumerable seed of stars' (ibid., 2). Nature is sacred since it offers the 'sacrament' of spiritual grace and is imbued with the potential for rebirth through its multiplicity of 'seeds'. Webb's metaphor evokes a healthful image of 'fruit' which links to mythical notions of abundance, nourishment and healing such as Hera's magical apples, a wedding gift from Gaia. Hence, Webb's intuitive, non-cognitive response to nature emphasises its nurturing, revivifying qualities. And her writing offers her reader a soothing, restorative experience, elucidating her faith in nature's redemptive power with the richness of vocabulary and figurative language which became typical of her prose:

Out in this world the spirit that was so desolate, lost in the strange atmosphere of physical inferiority, may once more feel the zest that he thought was gone for ever [...] sweeping into the mind and into those recesses of being beyond the conscious self, it overflows into the body, Very often this great rush of joy, this drinking of the freshets of the divine, brings back perfect health (*SJ: Healing*, 4).

There is another lexical set here of water imagery and its movement in cleansing, refreshing actions: 'sweeping', 'overflow[ing]' and 'drinking' of flowing freshwater streams, 'freshets'. This heals the 'inferiority' of the ailing body and brings emotional and spiritual 'joy', 'the divine'. Again, some readers will find Webb's tendency to over-embroider here. Webb's language is insistent: the intensifier, 'so'; dynamic verbs such as 'sweeping'; and emphatic adjectives, 'great' and 'perfect'. Others will see that these lexical choices usher in a deeply felt ecstasy, through which the reader may glimpse this experience for themselves. But, as yet, her writing did not demonstrate the full scope of her potential. In time she would develop her talents and would elucidate her ideas with greater delicacy and sophistication. If we consider an extract from *Precious Bane* in which she expresses oneness with the natural world we see how controlled and mature her writing becomes:

There would be warmship that lapped you round, and the queenly gift of the scent of corn. What other scent is like it? There is so much in it, beyond other sweets. There is summer in it, and frost. There is water in it, and the heart of the flint which the corn has taken up into its hollow stalks. There is bread in it, and life for man and beast (222-223).

Here there is a subtlety in the methods used to draw the reader into a depiction of rapture and the writing illustrates Webb's craftsmanship. The rhetorical question and personal pronoun are persuasive in involving her reader's imagination. The anaphoric sentences have a repetitive, patterning effect which creates a rhythmic emphasis and the combination of simple and compound sentences forms a series of individual ideas interspersed with thought-provoking pauses and a measured pace, allowing each image to develop vividly as we read. Her imagery is carefully constructed, bringing in sensory detail and synaesthesia which satisfy desires for warmth and scent, and appeal to thirst and hunger, culminating with a spiritual reference with a biblical connection – 'the Bread of Life' (John 6:35 NIV). It is nature here which inspires but Webb's love of language means she often uses the Bible's richness of vocabulary.

A comparative example from *A Little Book of Healing* demonstrates that this is the work of a much less experienced writer:

to whatever extent people are set aside from the world, they can make their lives magnificent, bringing an evangel of peace to the travel-worn companies of men. They dwell in the land of consolation, beside the healing watercourses – lily-bordered, poplar-circled, flowing purely from the divine sea. In this land (no visible country) they are caught away into holiness by the vision (58).

This extract expresses a similar idea to the one from *Precious Bane* above – that to be absorbed in the spirit of nature is to be comforted, healed and renewed. There is already evident the richness of expression and the large idea which would mark her out. Yet it is less captivating. Webb speaks of 'people', 'they' and these more detached terms do not actively engage her reader as powerfully. The series of complex sentences has a more hurried texture, as if Webb has hastily attempted to get her thoughts down onto the page in her eagerness to portray her ideas. This indicates a less crafted approach but her thoughtful use of imagery is already evident, with visual and auditory references to engage the senses and the water symbolism extended. Spiritual experience, being 'caught away into holiness,' is conveyed, but the *Precious Bane* passage utilises a more inferential method and is thus a more subtly adept piece.

What she is attempting to describe, though, is elusive. It requires a sharpened skill to depict the evanescence of the sacral, but *The Spring of Joy*

marks her first attempt to describe ‘a faith of the woods and the high places of the hills and the beauty of all living things [...] a pagan creed in many ways, nature worship rather than Christianity.’⁴⁵ As I have mentioned, there are certainly pagan aspects in Webb’s view although it is more accurate to define her spirituality as pantheistic because of her certainty of immanence within the physical world rather than through a remote and ruling Deity. In the poem ‘The Ancient Gods’ Webb speaks of ‘unheralded, majestic’ tree-like ‘ancient gods’ and ‘tall young goddess[es],’ ‘white birches’ and ‘catkin-covered sallow[s]’ which are part human/part tree, some ‘massive-browed and massive shouldered’, some ‘with deep hair of willows’ (*SJ: Poems*, 90-91). Here Webb clearly sees human spirits, male and female, bonded with the green world, living materially and spiritually with nature. And this connects with paganism, which Vivianne Crowley defines as a belief which ‘encourages us to live in love and kinship’⁴⁶ with nature, since the world:

was not created by the Gods for our benefit. We are part of Nature – cells in a functioning whole. Instead of perceiving the universe to be anthropocentric and available to be exploited to meet the needs of human beings, Paganism sees it as holistic and having its own purposes in which human beings play only a part.⁴⁷

Paganism as a belief system can be traced back through thousands of years of human civilisation and is still practised today. Webb, therefore, in her rebuttal of traditional religion was connecting with other ideas (as she also does through mythology and ideas of the Goddess as further chapters will discuss) and her emphasis on the cyclical beauty of nature, its ‘deathless seed’ (‘Rose-berries’, *SJ: Poems*, 13), a self-renewable, regenerating source of life, is at the centre of paganism, both ancient and modern, since paganism ‘venerates the force of life itself, which is continually unfolding, renewing, disintegrating, returning to its source, resting and then awakening and renewing again.’⁴⁸ Paganism can be taken to include Wicca, which is said to have developed in England during the early decades of the twentieth-century amongst people with an esoteric desire

⁴⁵ Wrenn, p. 40.

⁴⁶ Vivianne Crowley, *Paganism* (London: Thorsons, 2000), p. 12.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 11.

to recapture elements of ancient faiths. It did not come to public attention until mid-century and has been seen as an alternative to the hegemony of Christianity. Gerald Gardner, born in 1884 and thus a contemporary of Webb, is claimed to be the founding father of modern Wicca following his publication of *Witchcraft Today* (1954). As Ronald Hutton illustrates in detail, though, ‘cultural forces which had been developing for a couple of centuries combined in [Gardner’s] emotions and ideas to produce a powerful, and extreme, response.’⁴⁹ Hence, the foundations for Wicca had been developing since the eighteenth-century: ‘if it is the child of any single phenomenon then it is the belated offspring of the Romantic Movement.’⁵⁰ Webb may never have heard of Wicca but her focus on the sacred within nature rather than in the heavens links to some extent with such ideas.

Webb emphasises, though, that it is only through patient contemplation that one understands such things. Her knowledge of the physical natural world was gained through quiet study and her writing reveals a detailed botanical knowledge: ‘there is a striking unity in some flowers between the shape of the pollen grain and that of the calyx and corolla’ (*SJ: Healing*, 41). And she speaks of gazing at a seemingly empty ploughed field only to be surprised to find that it is full of feeding birds, a revelatory moment in more ways than one:

So, at first, the patient watcher of earth sees only inanimate beauty, voiceless, without initiative. Then suddenly there is a clapping of wings, a flash of immortal radiance, a strange, haunting cry – and he has had a vision of the Soul of the World (*ibid.*, 59).

She describes here a transcendent experience in which the ‘watcher’ sees beyond the material, the surface ‘beauty’. This intuitive catching at a glimpse of an ‘immortal’ reality beyond the ‘inanimate’ illustrates her grasp of the numinous, not outside the known world but within it, portraying her developing pantheism. And she advocates a reunion with nature in which human beings can learn to live like the birds, who are metaphorically, ‘the soul of the field – gifted with music and motion and the freedom of the sky’ (*ibid.*). It is possible,

⁴⁹ Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 239-240.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. viii.

Webb maintains, to stand apart from worldly desires, 'to be absorbed in nature, dissolved in it even to the losing of personality' (ibid., 45) and in such oneness with it that we can experience the same 'flash of immortal radiance' as the birds (see extract above). Her phrasing here is movingly lyrical in its imagery which underscores the concept of a unified life within nature and this is enhanced by a sort of musical tone in the sequencing of disyllabic words such as 'absorbed' / 'dissolved' and trisyllabic words such as 'immortal / radiance'.

By this point conventional religion was redundant for Webb - 'the church has crumbled with its dogma' (*SJ: Healing*, 48-9) - and had been replaced by nature's 'kindly curtain' (ibid.), 'an evergreen love that embraces all' (ibid.). Nature as the renewable source of spiritual faith, evident in the metaphorical phrase, 'evergreen love,' had superseded the deistic transcendent of man-made religion, for 'man can never hope to touch, in things of his making, the perfection of forms of nature' (ibid., 36). Although this stage in her spiritual beliefs was very different to Underhill's first mystic state, 'the awakening of the self,'⁵¹ there is a parallel in that Webb had been 'awakened' to an entirely different view to her earlier Christian beliefs. Now she could say, 'I have my church where the daisies grow, / Under a whispering sycamore tree' (Untitled poem, *CPP*, 100). However, although she had lost her conviction in an all-powerful, watchful God, the foundations of her faith in Christianity were still evident at this point. Her use of capitalised epithets such as 'the Creator,' 'the great Giver' and 'the Deity' suggest that she was not yet ready to entirely abandon the idea of a supreme divinity, but the idea of a remote God had changed to belief in a divinity found within not beyond the material universe. She speaks of 'the essential life [...] immanent in the humblest creature,' a centrality found in 'the germ that holds in its littleness the Lord of Immortality' (ibid., 7) and evokes a metaphysical Christ-like figure in the poem 'The Vagrant' which is profoundly and mysteriously part of nature itself: 'Now I know surely / Who set the birds a-fire and touched the grasses - / Silent, without a footprint, no shade throwing' (*SJ: Poems*, 83-84).

This imaginative spirituality was influenced in some measure by her reading of Romantics such as William Blake. Her views on nature were very

⁵¹ Underhill, p. 176.

different from Blake's complex radicalism, yet she did share his ability to be inspired by nature and his belief in an individual quest for spiritual meaning: 'to see the world in a grain of sand, / And a heaven in a wild flower' is to 'hold infinity in the palm of your hand, / And eternity in an hour.'⁵² Blake saw the *potential* of spiritual reality within the physical beauty of nature and René Wellek explains in more detail: 'To Blake nature is everywhere fallen. It fell with man; the fall of man and the creation of the physical world were the same event.'⁵³ The concept of nature is created, for Blake, through imagination. Nature itself is a human categorisation, even as we ourselves are a part of it, but it is symbolic for Blake of the infinite possibility of our aspirations and creativity: 'In the Golden Age to come, nature will (with man) be restored to her pristine glory. Man and nature are, in Blake, not only continuous, but emblematic of each other.'⁵⁴ Webb's views were simpler, but she also found this potential as she discerned that there is more in nature than is explicable. She saw within it 'infinite worlds [where] fathomless eyes met mine' (Webb, 'The Vagrant', see above), elucidating a sense of stretching beyond the known into far-reaching possibilities. Hence, in her visionary ideas she has some commonality with Blake in his imaginative perception and his belief in spiritual truth. For Webb, it was only by being 'submerged' within the world of nature that she could 'transcend [her] poor mortality' and find a true inner peace in which she could reach beyond the corporeal ('In April', *SJ: Poems*, p. 8).

This vision was to be further tested and developed as, over the next few years her brothers, whom she had always been close to, departed from the family home, and then, in 1909, came the death of her beloved father. She was stricken with loss and wretched with a grief so deep and so prolonged that 'the strain certainly undermined her health still further.'⁵⁵ Attempting to assuage her grief, she wrote elegy after elegy, lamenting the extremity of her loss. In 'The Difference', for example, she writes: 'I walk among the daisies as of old / But he

⁵² William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence', *William Blake*, ed. by Peter Butter (London: Dent, 1996), pp. 77-80. (The poem is from The Pickering Manuscript and unpublished until 1863).

⁵³ René Wellek, 'The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History', in *Romantic Writings*, ed. by Stephen Bygrave (London: The Open University, 2002), pp. 326-335, (p. 328).

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 326.

⁵⁵ Coles, p. 92.

comes never more by lane or fold / [...] And none can fill the heart that loved him so' (*SJ: Poems*, p. 62). Webb's use here of primarily monosyllabic sounds recalls Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'The Woodspurge' and helps convey a similar depth of grief. In Rossetti's poem, a moment of spiritual revelation is implicit and emergent through loss and, for Webb, the death of her father changed her forever. It pushed her further into a borderland of isolation, which she attempted to fill by writing, although she received little encouragement or advice. Yet through this there came further realisation, a sea-change for Webb: 'This traumatic period saw her final rejection of institutional religion and marked an important step in her literary development.'⁵⁶ It seems that it is during this dark period that she utterly loses sight of God in the landscape of her beliefs. The poems which mourn her father are filled with 'a blast / which drowned all music and made loud the air / with wild despair' ('The Little Sorrow', *CPP*, 106). As I have suggested, Webb uses music metaphorically to represent spiritual experience – here that is lost. And the fricative alliteration in 'Harps in heaven [...] made all of glass' (*CPP*, 120) conveys an almost sobbing breathlessness whilst the metaphor stresses the fragility of the angels' instruments and thus the music's fragility. Her soul is depicted as adrift – 'In the cold, rainy wind I go / To find my harp, as green as spring, / My splintered harp, without a string' (*ibid.*) Here Webb extends the musical metaphor as the broken, string-less harp symbolises a broken faith. The inference is that she must move away from the failed promise of a remote heaven, alone, to search for a different solution.

Webb had read widely and deeply during the years after her illness between 1902 and 1909 and now considered ideas from J.G. Frazer, whom she read alongside Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley, but her philosophy was not modelled on any one theory in particular. She had rejected the teachings of the Church in which God the Creator is master (but has given the stewardship of the world to humans) and now replaced her earlier view of nature as church with an idea of nature as the creed itself. Her reading of Darwin's theories on the 'Struggle for Existence'⁵⁷ may have implied an impersonal cosmos without a

⁵⁶ Coles, p. 93.

⁵⁷ Charles Darwin, *On The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, ed. by William Bynum, (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 14 (original work published in 1859).

God and she probably felt ‘the full impact of this negation, the pathos of humanity blindly struggling in a meaningless, mechanical universe.’⁵⁸ She was left doubly fatherless by George Meredith’s death and her loss of faith in a guiding, paternal God. This sense of being adrift is clear in her poem ‘November’: ‘Where shall I turn, since God is far withdrawn, / And heaven a palace fallen in the sea’ (*SJ: Poems*, 74).

This post-Darwinian outlook was, for many, very bleak. David Matless draws attention to the nature-mysticism of two early twentieth-century geographers, for whom this ‘unease with more utilitarian readings of social and biological change was displayed in attempts to combine the spiritual and scientific in an optimistic projection of an ever-improving future of humankind.’⁵⁹ Geography is a discipline which is essentially concerned with nature and environment so Matless’s comment is interesting as he indicates that Vaughan Cornish and Francis Younghusband, of whom he writes, came to nature mysticism as a result of Darwinian debate, seeking to locate their scientific studies within an overarching spiritual understanding of nature. Both geographers read and wrote about mysticism and Matless draws attention to the influence of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and also Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), which recognised nature worship as a powerful force in the early twentieth century. Matless cites Younghusband’s comment that mysticism was often wrongly “‘confused with mistiness”⁶⁰ and states that Cornish made clear that mysticism provided “‘not confusion and the irrational but the most certain knowledge of all.”⁶¹ Webb, who again sought refuge in nature and in writing, would surely have agreed with this view. And Matless’s article further highlights the depth of interest in mysticism during Webb’s era, indicating that her writings upon the subject engaged with a strong cultural phenomenon, of which she was most certainly a part.

A Little Book of Healing is, therefore, significant for its connection with contemporaneous ideas and it clearly demonstrates the foundations of her

⁵⁸ Coles, p. 95.

⁵⁹ David Matless, ‘Nature, the Modern and the Mystic: Tales from Early Twentieth Century Geography’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 16 (1991), 272-286 (p. 273).

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 281.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

lifelong view that 'Life in the green country makes philosophers [...] amid the integrity of nature' (ibid., 55-6). And both these essays and the poems of this period evince the beginnings of her ecological awareness, denoting that she was always more than a 'sentimental and easy nature-lover.'⁶² *A Little Book of Healing* has received scant attention from critics - Beattie, for example, makes only slight reference to it as 'immensely beautiful and detailed.'⁶³ But here Webb begins to 'force on readers [...] the tragic defoliation and pollution of the earth'⁶⁴ which she would later press more urgently in works such as *The House in Dormer Forest*. In 1977, as modern environmental awareness was emerging, Paul Deane wrote that *A Little Book of Healing* had 'increased in importance, relevance, and astuteness in the past half century.'⁶⁵ Now this is even more so, since Webb was helping to spear-head a movement of political relevance:

It is possible that, as the spiritual ties between man and nature grow stronger, all disease may vanish before the vitality that will stream into us so swiftly [...] A man who holds direct intercourse with the cosmic life through his heart and mind knows a glad comradeship with cloud and tree; there dwells with him a consciousness of surrounding splendour – of swift currents, marvels underfoot and overhead; he has a purpose in waking each morning, a reason for existing (*SJ: Healing*, 4).

No doubt Webb's emphasis here on 'comradeship with cloud and tree' may well have been dismissed as excessively fervent, sentimental nonsense by early readers, but her idea seems to make a good deal of sense now in a world of air pollution and deforestation. Her numinous vision of nature answers existential doubts and envisages a better world in which humanity is in harmony with its environment, bonded by 'spiritual ties.' Implicit in Webb's stress on 'ties' is a denial of anthropocentric views in which nature is there for our use and an emphasis on the fundamental human dependence on nature. In another extract she creates the voice of nature calling: 'Go out into my garden and forget. The skies are clear; see where I lead out my sidereal flocks!' (*SJ: Healing*, 6). Webb's exaggerated description is of a paradisaical earth, a 'garden', and her

⁶² 'Mary Webb's Poems', *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 February 1947, p. 96.

⁶³ Beattie, (p. 18).

⁶⁴ Deane, p. 51.

⁶⁵ ibid., p. 45.

exclamatory phrasing is doubtless immoderate. But she is also demonstrating nature's power as it 'leads' even the distant stars like 'flocks' of biddable sheep. The imperative 'go' urges her readers towards this understanding and she adds that here in the 'garden' are 'tall young larches [...] dreaming of green; there is moonlight in the primrose woods. There is a fit dwelling for you; go, and be at peace' (ibid.) She reminds us that this 'fit dwelling' is a home of sufficiency for us, where we may 'dream' and be content in a world of 'green'.

Mary C. Grey notes that 'both men and women, as bodily-enspirited, *ecological* organisms, interdependent with plant and animal life, have particular responsibilities for sustaining this.'⁶⁶ Grey emphasises that the process of recovering a harmonious balance with nature necessitates 'seeing the connection between the false reification of the self and the ecological crisis in which we are plunged [and this is] an invitation to conversion'.⁶⁷ Webb's concern was with this rejection of the super-ego and with the capacity of nature for this 'conversion', to recreate ourselves through a deep understanding of nature. She refers to 'recreation' in the poem 'Contrast': 'If you are a child of the earth you are not 'fond' but impassioned, devastated, recreated by these things' (*CPP*, 55). Her philosophical belief in the transformative power of nature and her connection with the natural world as 'a child of the earth' are very clear.

The idea of 'recreation' forms 'a more inclusive way of knowing the world and, in particular, on redeeming lost connections with the non-human world'⁶⁸ but could also be widened into a socio-cultural renewal in which ecopoetics seeks to 'recover mystical experience as a *community* experience'.⁶⁹ This stress on the need for both personal and social transformation is at the root of Webb's own discourse on the role of nature, for her ethos is personal and global. She was already beginning to convey this at this early stage of her career, for both nature and writing are creative processes since 'green plants [...] are nature's poets [whilst] poems are green plants among us.'⁷⁰ Clearly, Webb's insistence on the relationship between nature and humanity indicates her foresight, and

⁶⁶ Mary C. Grey, *Sacred Longings* (London: SCM Press, 2003), p. 200.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 200.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 153.

⁷⁰ Rueckert, p. 111.

ecocritical studies have expanded greatly in recent years, as the anthology *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* (2015) highlights in the breadth of ideas expressed within it. Our thinking about nature has become much more complex but one factor which unites ecocritical studies is that literature has ‘a major role to play in our shared challenge of forging an environmentally better future.’⁷¹

We can now see that *The Spring of Joy* essays and poems elicit Webb’s first efforts to help shape a ‘better future.’ And we hear, more poignantly, her clarion call to humanity in the name of the nature, as expressed in the poem ‘The Spirit of the Earth’: ‘Love me – and I will give into your hands / The rare, enamelled jewels of my lands’ (*SJ: Poems*, 18). Webb knew the healing revival of the self was important but that individual life was but ‘a passing light upon the sea’ (*ibid.*) in comparison to the life of these rich and ‘rare, enamelled jewels’. Her emphasis here is on value and rarity, implicit in the metaphor of precious gems, underscoring nature’s worth and the gravity of its loss. She exhorts us in this poem to cherish ‘flowers red and blue, / tender with air and dew’; ‘green armouries of pools and meres’; ‘lucent sheaves of spears’ (*ibid.*). Through listing images of blooms, lakes and grasses she portrays the sheer abundance of colour, variety and form in nature, reinforcing our appreciation of its complexity. And the poem’s series of short phrases helps to convey a mood of excitement at this luxuriance of life and beauty, which readers will find effusive. But if we look further in the poem she depicts the soul of nature as a wood-bird that must ‘clap her wings and flee’ (*ibid.*), articulating an encroaching threat to nature so she ‘was cognizant of what man was doing to nature, to the world, in her day – and what he has continued to do with ever-increasing virulence and rapacity since.’⁷² It has been said that ‘no one ever wrote more beautifully and truthfully’⁷³ than Webb in *A Little Book of Healing* but reviews have dismissed the work as vague, offering ‘no answer except fortitude and a pathetic clinging to life’s worth.’⁷⁴ Certainly the circumstances of war were too great for a little book of nature essays to have had much impact, but there is nothing ‘pathetic’ about Webb’s wholehearted belief in nature and the more we read her the more

⁷¹ Ken Hiltner, ed., *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. xii.

⁷² Deane, pp. 50-51.

⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 44.

⁷⁴ Shepherd, p. 310.

clear-sighted her vision appears as she reminds us that we are ‘united to the soil by all ties of life’ (*SJ: Healing*, p. 59). Walter de La Mare once wrote of Mary Webb’s world as “a place of almost unbearable wonder”⁷⁵ and this paradoxical description is entirely true of Webb’s love of nature, a sort of agony of ecstasy.

In discussing Webb, it is inevitable that we are drawn back to the questionable quality of sentiment in her work, which has so prohibited the recognition of her worth. Yet she is more pertinent than her perennially popular fellow Salopian, A.E.Housman, whose romantic and sentimental *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) has remained in print. Webb is known to have owned Housman’s work which poeticized the landscape she knew well: ‘High the vanes of Shrewsbury gleam / Islanded in Severn stream.’⁷⁶ And Webb shares this affectionate nostalgia: ‘A fair town is Shrewsbury - / [...] You’ll hardly find a fairer’ (‘The Elf’, *SJ: Poems*, 24-25). His acceptance of the inevitable brevity of existence, his ‘star-defeated sighs,’⁷⁷ is met by Webb’s own predeterminism, that life is short and death merely ‘a white gate swinging upon the infinite’ (*SJ: Healing*, 57). Both poets reflect on the pastoral, love and death, topical themes during World War One. However, Housman’s rather masculine tone, with its patriotic exhortations to ‘lads’, soldiers who will ‘die in their glory and never be old’,⁷⁸ suited the mood of the nation. Webb’s implication that war’s brutality opposed the natural harmony of the world (insinuated in *Gone to Earth*) refuted this, so did not proffer a viewpoint that was popular at the time. As a female response to Housman’s masculine view, Webb’s rejoinder shows her interest in Housman but her modernity goes beyond his wistful traditionalism.

And where Housman mourns ‘that is the land of lost content, [...] The happy highways where I went / And cannot come again,’⁷⁹ Webb sees beyond the self: ‘For every year my heart is set / With the pansy and the violet [...] Submerged within their beauty, I / Transcend my poor mortality’ (‘In April’, *SJ: Poems*, 8). Housman’s rather egocentric view sees only personal loss and

⁷⁵ ‘Mary Webb’s Poems,’ *TLS*, 28 February 1947, p. 96.

⁷⁶ A.E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad*, Introduction by Tom Paulin (London: Hesperus, 2008), Poem XXVIII, pp. 38-39.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, Poem XV, p. 23.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, Poem XXIV, p. 33.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, Poem XL p. 52.

death, but Webb looks further than her own unimportance, for 'the world itself does not privilege the human,'⁸⁰ knowing that the oneness of nature was superior: 'We share together, the butterfly, the bee / And I, and the little beetles that gleam and shine' ('The Wild Rose', *SJ: Poems*, 85). So her response is sharper than Housman's nostalgia and, as a Shropshire Lass she speaks for nature, moving beyond what Lawrence called 'the old stable ego of the self'.⁸¹

Through the importance of place and family she had fostered a deeply personal relationship with the land and inherent in this was a connection with the past embedded in the landscape. The following chapter will explore Webb's extensive use of myth, folklore and legend, which adds a rich texture to her work whilst also developing her central themes. In discovering the 'warmship' of oneness with nature she was mentally, physically and spiritually regenerated and in finding this legendary secret she 'wanted nought of any man' (*GA*, 288).

⁸⁰ Michael Bell, 'The Metaphysics of Modernism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. by Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2006), pp. 9-32 (p.13).

⁸¹ *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, Vol. 2, ed. by George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 182.

Chapter Two

Mythological Motifs: *The Golden Arrow* and *Gone to Earth*

1914 - 1918

For Mary Webb the past was as palpable as the now, and the awareness of the present was coloured by countless memories. The dark period after her father's death in 1909 was superseded by a happier phase because of a second deeply significant man in her life. During the period between 1910 and 1911, Webb became very close to Henry Bertram Law Webb, whom she had met after he and his family moved to Meole Brace, the Shropshire village in which Webb's family were then living. The two met at a local Literary Society where 'discussing literature, they found a great deal in common.'¹ To some extent Henry may have filled the gap left by the death of Webb's father and in 1912 they married, moving to Weston-Super-Mare, where Henry had gained a teaching post. Their wedding was quite unconventional and aspects of this are echoed in Hazel's wedding, at which her 'loving though incompetent bridesmaid' (*GTE*,138) is her pet fox. Webb's own 'otherness' was evident in her unfashionable wedding attire, bouquets of wild flowers and her guests - the entire population of the local workhouse.

The early years of their marriage were intensely happy and, although Webb was separated from the Shropshire landscape, she was able to re-create it through memory as she began work on *The Golden Arrow*, imbuing it with her abiding love for the county of her birth and her memories of her father. Personal memory was important for Webb since it was through this that she was able to retain vivid scenes of nature along with many legends connected with the landscape and recreate them in her work. The past seemed to become increasingly significant to Webb throughout her life as a later comment in a foreword to *Precious Bane* suggests: 'the past is only the present become invisible and mute [...] and its murmurs are infinitely precious (6). As well as personal memory, Webb used an idea of mythological 'memory' to describe a need for nature which she felt had been lost in a post-industrial world. Mythology is 'expressive of universal and timeless realities, embodying

¹ Coles, p. 99.

primordial truths common to mankind,² connecting with Webb's deep reverence for nature and experience of 'the other side of silence'. Her use of myth is also part of her modern outlook and many writers were interested in mythological history because of 'an underlying recognition of the projective nature of all historical meaning'.³ Bell adds that there are 'intrinsic values represented emblematically in myth'⁴ and this is how Webb uses mythology, as a deep unconscious way of thinking about the world. Claude Lévi-Strauss comments that 'for each scholar and writer, the particular way he or she thinks and writes opens up a new outlook on mankind.'⁵ And Webb forms her own personal myth system to create a 'new outlook,' reusing, retelling and redacting myth, interpreting it as a metaphor for deeper meaning and furthering her central themes of the immanence in nature and her defence of the natural world. Thus her mythopoeia is a 'positive use of history.'⁶

Throughout history legends and myths have evolved in attempts to understand and describe the mysterious complexities of the natural world and its central, cyclical processes of life and death. And human beings have tended to mythologize nature's phenomenon in ways which revere and spiritualise it. Stories abound in ancient mythology that explain the constellations, the sun rising and setting and a myriad other phenomenon. In 1922 J.G. Frazer expressed such an idea in *The Golden Bough*, commenting that, historically, the natural world was understood to be in the hands of the gods, 'beings who control the gigantic machinery of nature'.⁷ Frazer suggested that anthropocentric religious beliefs came about in ancient society as a means of rationalising the vastness of nature and the human realisation of our relative 'littleness and feebleness in the presence of it.'⁸ Because early civilisations felt so insignificant, Frazer suggests, they inevitably thought 'how vast and

² *ibid.*, p. 24.

³ Bell, 'The Metaphysics of Modernism,' (in Levenson, see above), p. 15.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p. 2.

⁶ Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 31.

⁷ J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 91.

⁸ *ibid.*

powerful⁹ were the gods who ruled over nature. Later research has also suggested that the so-called primitive mind was ‘moved by a need or a desire to understand the world’¹⁰ but that myth cannot be over-simplified. Lévi-Strauss’s structural approach examines the complexity of myth as language and so draws out its meaning in human society. He suggests that whilst our knowledge of science gives us greater ‘power over the environment’¹¹ it is the deep understanding which we achieve through myth that has enabled us to grasp the complex world of nature. There is, thus, a much deeper connection between myth and the human understanding of the world than as an explanation of natural phenomena and this is what Webb explores. It is true that ‘there is not the absolute gap [...] between mankind on the one hand and all the other living beings’¹² and Webb’s retelling of myth is a means of studying nature as ‘a symbolic language.’¹³ And she reworks recorded legend to explore mythic links between nature and the numinous. This chapter explores the ways in which she uses memory, myth and legend to create her own mythopoeic pattern.

Memory, myth and legend are, therefore, threads which intertwine in Webb’s work as part of her personal relationship with the land. The term ‘legend’ is taken to refer to traditional historical stories, passed down through generations - local folklore or traditional beliefs which recollect the past and persist within a community. Webb uses an assortment of these in her work, such as ‘telling the bees,’ a practice which reflects the agrarian context to novels such as *The Golden Arrow* and *Gone to Earth*. In doing so, she depicts a vivid sense of country life, adding ‘local colour’¹⁴ and an ‘accurate picture of nineteenth-century rural Shropshire.’¹⁵ Such customs also relate to the image of Shropshire as a rural borderland, where legends and traditions were maintained for longer than in urban areas because of an interdependence with nature.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Lévi-Strauss, p. 12.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 13.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹³ Wellek, p. 332.

¹⁴ McNeil, pp. 141.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 132.

'Myth', however, is understood as a narrative, usually involving supernatural characterisations, which embodies popular ideas on natural or social phenomena and is used by Webb as a way of thinking, a means of exploring values and metaphysical beliefs. Her use of the mythology of the supernatural explores relationships between human beings and the natural environment, often the source of such mythological narratives.

'Memory' concerns both personal recollection and universal ideas about human experiences of the world. Webb incorporates both the personal and the collective, interlinking a rich sense of mythology with her mystic vision. She attempts to bring the best of history into her present and into her vision of a possible future, refusing traditional readings of myths and using mythology artistically to decipher fundamental truths. Hence, she uses myth beyond mere nostalgia, recognising the deeply intertwined links between the land, its history and its people as she later commented in a foreword to *Precious Bane*:

Shropshire is a country where the dignity and beauty of ancient things lingers long, and I have been fortunate not only in being born and brought up in its magical atmosphere, and in having many friends in farm and cottage who, by pleasant talk and reminiscence have fired the imagination, but also in having the companionship of such a mind as was my father's - a mind stored with old tales and legends that did not come from books, and rich with an abiding love for the beauty of the forest and harvest field (6-7).

Through this infrangible bond with Shropshire emerged Webb's powerful link with the land and its 'magical' qualities which 'fired the imagination' and her emphasis above on 'dignity' and 'beauty' suggests her desire to use myth to examine the qualities and importance of 'ancient things'. This strong bond also meant that she could recall minute details of the region even when elsewhere, recreating the sense of actually being there and enabling a:

concentrated inner focus: her land within [...] a distillation of Shropshire, all that it had given her in quickening of the senses, in shaping of her spirit, in nurturing of mystical love; a country of the soul and the imagination vitally real with its own intense reality.¹⁶

¹⁶ Coles, p. 251.

This 'inner focus' of an 'intense reality' created a vision of a past that was about more than just personal memory. Her grasp of the 'past' was metaphysical, overcoming mere historical change and focused on the recovery of something lost. The complexity of this elusive search, of something both real and evanescent, the 'land within', was an encapsulation of her memories and her spiritual ties with the land. This 'inner focus' connects both with the Romantic concern with the self, but also with 'the modernist imperative to "look within."' ¹⁷

She had already elucidated what it is like to really feel in tune with nature, to hear 'the mysterious soul, without reason' ('Spring in the West' *SJ: Poems*, 57) and *The Golden Arrow and Gone to Earth* further her intuitive sense of nature as a continuum in which the past is embedded in the present:

The echoes are in us of great voices long gone hence [...] echoes of things outside our ken – the thought that shapes itself in the bee's brain [...] the upward push of folded grass, and how the leaf feels in all its veins the cold rain (*GE*, 62).

Although, Webb's excessiveness in style is again evident here as she crowds metaphor, repetition and phonological features into the writing, she vividly evokes small moments and minute specks, furnishing each one with a profound significance. Her ability to empathise with a blade of grass and the cold leaf draws our attention to the fundamental importance of aspects of nature which we take utterly for granted. She makes her reader aware that there is much more in the world than our dulled senses tend to appreciate, for the past reverberates in everything around us and each item takes on a sense of mythical importance because every action of the bee and upward thrust of the grass is of value. And the cadence of Webb's sentences has a cumulative effect, building a mounting realisation of this for her reader.

Webb's concern with myth, her 'great fund of knowledge of legend, folklore and superstitions,' ¹⁸ was an intrinsic part of her 'intense involvement with her surroundings.' ¹⁹ And 'no one was more soaked in the history and tradition of her county [...] All the old legends and folk traditions of Shropshire she knew

¹⁷ Stevenson, p. 85.

¹⁸ Chapman, p. 368.

¹⁹ Coles, p. 24.

and loved, bringing them into her novels as archetypal images of profound significance.²⁰ Her detailed knowledge of local folklore was engendered by her father, who would recount the legends of Shropshire during their long walks so its stories and ancient history became absorbed into her consciousness. It has been noted, that for Hardy, 'to belong in a place means to know its history'²¹ and Webb, too, was 'steeped in the lore'²² of her county; her interest in folklore is part of her passion for the landscape since legends are often connected with place and are part of the deep embedded history of a region. And, like Hardy, who used the store of Dorset legends and stories passed on by his mother and grandmother in his novels, Webb assimilated the local stories of her cultural history into her writing. Hence, the locus of self is profoundly connected with a place and its past. And Webb's genetic and cultural inheritance has been described as a blend of Saxon and Celt, which:

mingled in language, outlook and history [produced] something vital and unique [...] a symbolical borderland where spiritual and material, light and dark, truth and falsehood, righteousness and sin, life and death met and joined forces.²³

Cut off from mainstream society in a small rural community, Webb's peripheral position in a literal borderland enabled her understanding of this 'symbolical borderland'. When she then became a writer 'these early impressions welled up from her memory, clear and bright with all the sharp vision of childhood',²⁴ and she 'selected legend and superstition [...] as carefully as she selected features of landscape [...] in the interests of her central themes.'²⁵

In *The Golden Arrow* Webb uses mythological motifs of The Devil's Chair and The Golden Arrow to explore key themes of nature, mysticism, and love. She uses the landscape feature, The Devil's Chair, to examine ideas about nature's power and our relationship with the natural world, and this is another branch in her ideas about its regenerative power, as myth is a means of

²⁰ Sykes, p. 78.

²¹ Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 18.

²² Chappell, p. 36.

²³ Sykes, p. 80.

²⁴ Wrenn, p.11.

²⁵ Coles, p. 137.

reawakening respect for nature. The heathery slopes of the Shropshire Stiperstones are topped with Diafol Mountain, a range of steep and rocky outcrops, chief of which is The Devil's Chair. In *Shropshire Folklore: A Sheaf of Gleanings* (1883), an anthology of local legends and a useful source for Webb, Charlotte Sophia Burne describes this long rise of rocky outcrops as an ancient mythical beast – 'the Stiperstones rears its long fish-shaped back, crowned by a row of five curious projecting rocks, which from a distance look as if they might be the huge fins of some primaeval monster.'²⁶ She relates popular stories of the creation of The Devil's Chair, formed when the Devil was travelling from Ireland with an apronful of stones which he dropped as he crossed the Stiperstones or flattened down because of his hatred for England. And Webb echoes Burne's description, evoking layers of the past surrounding the Chair's presence:

some [...] spoke of voices – wordless shouts – the sound of feet that passed and came again in the stillness of an August noon. They said that the Chair shook in the heat-haze and a tongue of flame leapt from it like a flung torch (GA, 152).

Here Webb's striking description is exaggerated for effect, the onomatopoeia and imagery depicting a monstrous, mythical creature with a fearsome presence which straddles generations of time. Webb's verb choices denote the power of the rock as it seems to shake with malevolent fury, hurling out a fierce fire that will consume all in its path, as the metaphor of the 'tongue' suggests. She over-states the imagery, making the rock appear as a character from a fairy tale, but then legends are built up by layers of repeated, elaborated story-telling. The imposing Chair is a 'mass of quartzite blackened and hardened by uncountable ages' and 'gigantic' in its 'aloofness' – 'Nothing ever altered its look [...] It remained inviolable, taciturn, evil' (GA, 31). Webb's lexis characterises this landscape feature as a menacing yet impassive figure and is reminiscent of Hardy's Egdon Heath, 'a face on which time makes little impression [...] full of watchful intentness [...] unmoved [...] through the crises of so many things.'²⁷

²⁶ Charlotte Sophia Burne, *Shropshire Folklore: A Sheaf of Gleanings* (La Vergne, TN: Kessinger, 2010), p. 4 (original work published in 1883).

²⁷ Thomas Hardy, *Return of the Native* (London: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 33-4 (original work published in 1878).

Both Hardy and Webb are concerned with humanity's interaction with its often 'unchanging, impassive and indifferent surroundings'.²⁸ And Webb's mythic landscapes also share Hardy's painterly quality in illustrative sketches such as:

The tessellated plain, minute in pattern as an old mosaic, seemed on this fervent day to be half-molten, ready to collapse. The stable hills shook in the heat-haze like a drop-scene just lifting upon reality. The ripening oat-fields, the already mellow wheat seemed like frail wafers prepared for some divine bacchanalia. A broad pool far down among black woods looked thick-golden, like metheglin in a small ebony cup' (GA, 23).

Webb's excessive and rather grandiose style is much in evidence here. She uses such a wealth of metaphor and simile that she seems in danger of overdoing her writing by making it top heavy with lavish imagery. Yet, despite her lack of restraint the poetic crafting of her writing is there too and it is filled with intriguing ideas and images, through which it maintains its interest for the reader. And Webb understood the importance of the aural effects of language. There is a repetition of assonance and consonance here, in phrases such as 'already mellow wheat', which subtly binds the language together, forming a patterning of sound which makes her work so rhythmically poetic. Sensory detail adds a vivid impression of the sun's heat through the metaphor of the 'half-molten' landscape, suggesting that it has been warmed almost to a point of liquidity. The aspirant alliteration of 'heat-haze' adds a sound effect which reinforces this intensity and the reader is drawn into a mood which is redolent of mystery, myth and magic through references to the feasting of the gods. Her use of colour and form denote an artistic view of the landscape as a richly-patterned and coloured 'mosaic'. Her imagery testifies to a closely observed familiarity with environment and this calls to mind passages of Hardy's in novels such as *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), which depict a landscape which is 'all health and colour. Every green was young, every pore was open, and every stalk was swollen with racing currents of juice.'²⁹ The sense of an intensely alive world is palpable in this description, as in Webb's. Clearly, there are reflected elements of imitation, adaptation and allusion within Webb's novels which

²⁸ Patricia Ingham, *Thomas Hardy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 215.

²⁹ Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 142.

acknowledge her admiration of Hardy. Michael Millgate records Hardy's comment that the country boy will not 'rush to pick a flower [...] it is part of [his] life. It grows in his soul – he does not want it in his buttonhole'.³⁰ And Giles Winterborne's absorption into the woodland in Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (1887) suggests this: 'the tree seemed to shiver, then to heave a sigh: a movement was audible, and Winterborne dropped almost noiselessly to the ground'.³¹ This is also strikingly true of Webb, for her countryside was embedded in her memory and was fundamentally part of her life and her soul, and this idea is repeated in the tree-like Hazel in *Gone to Earth*.

But Webb does not simply imitate Hardy. Like Flora Thompson, she has been pigeon-holed as a regional writer and read all too often as embedding a nostalgic view of the countryside. A close tie with locality can limit critical perceptions through assumptions that regional writers, particularly women, are primarily concerned with specificity and nostalgia rather than social insight. The perpetuating myth of Webb is that she is "the little rustic" [...] the homespun mystic of the Shropshire hills.³² This belittling of her value fails to acknowledge that her work, as with Thompson's, is of as much relevance as that of male rural writers such as Hardy. Yet even Webb's foremost biographer cautiously claims that 'to compare Mary Webb with Hardy is not to class her with him'.³³ In fact 'the Presence of Thomas Hardy, in whose immanent shade Webb was so frequently cast [was] certainly almost fatal',³⁴ but the two writers 'are so very different that comparison is to do each a disservice',³⁵ for just as 'there is no one Hardy',³⁶ there is no one Webb.

For Webb and Thompson both deny the myth of the pastoral idyll in their presentations of the struggles of rural life as much as they demonstrate a deeply-felt love of the countryside and its ways. Hardy himself noted that 'a

³⁰ Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 31.

³¹ Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 126.

³² Barale, p. 148.

³³ Coles, p. 169.

³⁴ Sanders, p. 231.

³⁵ Brian Watkin, 'A Shropshire Lass: Mary Webb', *Country Life*, 162 (1977), 1100-1101 (p. 1101).

³⁶ Peter Widdowson, *Thomas Hardy* (Plymouth: Northcote, 1996), p. 97.

writer's work should be judged as a whole'³⁷ and the same must be said of Webb and Flora Thompson, who are also 'recorder[s] of timeless truths'³⁸ in depicting the beauty and the reality of the countryside, the hardship and poverty which was equally a part of rural life.

Flora Thompson is best known for her nostalgic portrayal of rural Oxfordshire in the last decades of the nineteenth century in *Lark Rise* (1939) in which her 'exaltation in the physical wonder of the world [...] her childlike vision of the ecstasy of nature, and of a life lived close to it, has never been more relevant.'³⁹ Thompson writes autobiographically depicting the rural writer's intense awareness of nature's seasonal minutiae:

Against the billowing gold of the fields the hedges stood dark, solid and dew-sleeked; dewdrops beaded the gossamer webs, and the children's feet left long, dark trails on the dewy turf. There were night scents of wheat-straw and flowers and moist earth on the air and the sky was fleeced with pink clouds.⁴⁰

Like Webb, Thompson writes with rich, sensory language, which is often endearing and poetic. But Thompson also reflects the realities of work, poverty, change and industrialisation so she is not just sentimental. She writes that 'the mechanical reaper with long, red, revolving arms like windmill sails had already appeared'⁴¹ for such country scenes were at the time of her writing, 'a little over fifty years distant from us in time, but in manners, customs and conditions of life [...] centuries away.'⁴² In fact, Thompson believed in technical progress, albeit, 'mediated by respect for the best of the past.'⁴³ She also reflects urban

³⁷ Thomas Hardy and Florence Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, (London: Wordsworth, 2007) p. 419 (original work in two volumes: *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy*, published 1928, and *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy*, published 1930).

³⁸ Ingham, p. 213.

³⁹ Richard Mabey, 'Diary of a Country Woman', *The Guardian*, 13 December 2008 <<http://the-guardian.com>> [accessed 11 October 2017].

⁴⁰ Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1982), p. 234. Original work published as *Lark Rise* in 1939, followed by *Over to Candleford* (1941) and *Candleford Green* (1943); reissued in one volume as *Lark Rise to Candleford* in 1945.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 259.

⁴³ Mabey, *op. cit.*

migration, for 'the population of the hamlet was falling,'⁴⁴ and rural poverty: 'The hamlet was indeed in a state of siege and its chief assailant was Want.'⁴⁵ Regional writers can thus also reflect larger concerns such as the loss of the qualities of the past in the face of modernity. Thompson's attitude was not quite the same as Webb's, but Webb also desired to preserve the 'best of the past' and this is what she uses myth for. Nevertheless she also depicts the reality of country life, battling against the weather and the manual graft of farming:

After a January of blinding snow and almost unbroken frost, February came with the first minute white points of snowdrops pricking through the soil [...] It was lambing time, and John was busy night and day, with his flock, often sitting up till dawn in the fold-house where the sheep were (GA, 265).

Her language here is probably justifiably exaggerated, for high in the Shropshire hills on a winter's day the snow and frost can be harshly persistent. Even the snowdrops are just 'pricking through' suggesting the effort it has taken for the tiny flowers to force their way through the frozen soil. And John (Deborah Arden's father) is literally working 'night and day', labouring through the dark hours to ensure the season's lambs are safely delivered. The Ardens' premises are also humble, a point Webb makes clear in the novel's opening:

John Arden's stone cottage stood in the midst of the hill plateau, higher than the streams began, shelterless to the four winds [...] Beyond the kitchen and attached to the house was the shippen [...] Sitting in the kitchen on a winter night, the Ardens could hear the contented rattle of the two cow-chains [...] the gentle coughing and stamping of folded sheep (GA, 13).

The 'shelterless' position of the cottage and the proximity of the animals to the family's own living quarters further Webb's realism. Both Webb and Thompson also portray the limited lives of young women in rural backwaters. Thompson outlines the possible employment for them as dairymaids or under-servants in country houses, followed by marriage to milkmen, butchers or farm labourers. And Webb depicts women's rural roles, milking cows, feeding the animals, and

⁴⁴ Thompson, *Lark Rise*, p. 81.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 97.

tending to domestic chores. In *Precious Bane* Webb would also portray the real labour of farm-work that women undertook. Yet at the same time, Webb's writing, like Thompson's, is filled with her great love of the countryside. And *The Golden Arrow* emphasises the importance of a harmonious understanding of nature, which embraces the beauty of country-life as well as the work and poverty, a deep respect for a world in which 'people *live in rhythm with nature*'.⁴⁶

In the novel Stephen Southerwood's discordance with nature and his lack of empathetic awareness of the numinous means that he sees the Chair as 'an empty throne [...] no devil, no angel, no god ever was there, ever would be, nothing [...] He shuddered at the appalling picture. He could not get the look of the empty throne of black rock from his mind' (*GA*, 181). The repetition here of the negativity of emptiness signifies the emptiness of a human condition without faith, love or respect, for Stephen has no mystic understanding of nature and is at odds with his environment. When a hard frost blackens the garden flowers, Stephen hates this, finding the 'enforced intimacy with every mood of Nature [...] very wearing [...] owing to his unawakened state' (*ibid.*, 172). The phrase 'an unawakened state' is most significant here as this relates to Webb's key concept of pantheistic realisation, which she is using myth to further explore. Stephen's disconnection deepens and 'every day the reaches of plain, the ridges and rock-masses, the glittering spar [...] were more hateful to him' (*ibid.*, 172-3). Taunted by the implacable solidity of The Devil's Chair he attempts to destroy it with dynamite. His efforts are futile: –

The chair stood exactly as it had always done. He could not detect even a nick in it [...] All his trouble had not altered it in the least [...] he had made little more difference in its appearance than a woodpecker makes to the tree on which he hammers' (*ibid.*, 203).

Webb effectively juxtaposes the obdurate, immutable chair and Stephen's puny incapacity for, as Webb observes elsewhere, nature 'remains dark and unresponsive beetling upon [man] as he creeps ant-like, from his momentary past to his doubtful future, painfully carrying his tiny load of knowledge.'⁴⁷ Nature is portrayed as mythic and mysteriously 'dark', contrasting with the banality of humans, forming a controlled bathetic effect which elevates nature

⁴⁶ Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Mary Webb, *The House in Dormer Forest* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 12.

and belittles human ego. This recalls Henry Knight in Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), as he is left soaked by icy rain and clinging to the upper slope of a vertiginous cliff, contemplating the impotency of his position and nature's absence of concern in its 'lawless caprice'.⁴⁸

Peter Widdowson comments that 'Hardy's fiction challenges and refutes humanist realism'⁴⁹ and Webb also criticises egocentric hubris, in which humanity sees itself as central to all things. The moral of this is clear when Stephen's egotism is replaced with self-sacrificing despair at the end of the novel, in which 'it was as if humanity ran blindly down the steep, hastening with unquenchable longing toward some mystery that the night cradled' (GA, 287-8). The glimmering of this unfathomable 'mystery' is the grasping of spiritual truth, and this differs from Hardy, for whom a belief in spiritual presences is never wholly conclusive, as he doubtfully questions, 'is it only the breeze, in its listlessness?'⁵⁰ Webb's work elucidates a very different and determined view. She found a new belief in the enigma of the natural world, where the reclamation of the spiritual self was possible and the surety of her belief in this makes a strong contrast with Hardy. She follows on from his aesthetic, but counters his uncertainty: 'Has some Vast Imbecility, / [...] Framed us in jest, and left us now to hazadry?'⁵¹ As she had written earlier, 'one who has lived under the large arbitrament of earth ceases to question' (*SJ: Healing*, 57). But those who 'feel within them the stir of a growing soul prefer the dour laws of earth [...] and fly from the house of man to the forest, where the emotionless silence always seems to be gathering [...] to the disclosure of a mystery' (ibid., 12). Webb knew that the 'laws of earth' are 'emotionless', that in the natural world the struggle for survival is constant and this is implicit of her own suffering, yet she moves beyond this to express the just tangible grasp of 'mystery'. She had assimilated the duality of nature, of pleasure and pain, life and death, and she

⁴⁸ Thomas Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 241.

⁴⁹ Peter Widdowson, *Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 73.

⁵⁰ Thomas Hardy, 'The Voice', *The Wordsworth Poetry Library: The Works of Thomas Hardy*, (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1995), pp. 325-6 (poem originally published in 1912).

⁵¹ Thomas Hardy, 'Nature's Questioning', *Wordsworth Poetry Library: Works of Thomas Hardy*, op. cit., pp. 58-59 (poem originally published in 1898).

appears to have been interested in these contrasts, as the use of opposites in both *The Golden Arrow* and *Gone to Earth* suggest. One of the remarkable features in her understanding of the natural world was her acceptance of two apparently conflicting views of nature and she had no difficulty in combining indifferent nature's 'amoral and all-directing natural law'⁵² with her belief in the spiritual reality within it. This is reflected in *The Golden Arrow*, in which Stephen struggles to understand the landscape cognitively but Deborah sees nature's detachment whilst also intuiting its permanence as symbolic of spiritual security:

She gazed into the distance while the slow, honeyed loveliness of evening intensified towards its climax [...] The Devil's Chair had a light behind it from the setting sun; rays came from it as if it had a heart of warmth (280).

Webb writes poetically, her metaphor vividly conveying a moment of complete peace. The synaesthesia of 'honeyed loveliness' evokes both colour and taste, suggesting an instant of almost ineffable spiritual sweetness. Her personified imagery of the mythic chair's 'heart of warmth' implies her view of nature as the source of this wisdom and healing power or "the old ancient charm" called content.⁵³ When Stephen abandons Deborah, then eventually returns a broken man, it is the reassuring presence of the landscape which heals them both. Thus, Webb reworks and redacts legend as the land re-awakens Deborah and Stephen to new life and Webb urges her understanding of nature's potent capacity to renew and to regenerate. Deborah's spiritual response contrasts with Stephen and also with her sister-in-law, Lily, whose self-centred materialism opposes Deborah's faith in nature. Deborah believes that the landscape will 'circle her in from all uproar, all grief and gloom' (*GA*, 286). And it is nurturing, comforting: 'the bracken pushed out soft fingers, and cuckoos cried from orchards at the foot of the cwms. The snipe summoned his love from his airy circles, and curlews ran along the hilltops' (*ibid.*, 278). In this picture of new life the re-growth of the bracken and beneficent images of 'softness' and 'love' reinforce a profound and empathetic relationship with nature.

⁵² Barale, p. 87.

⁵³ Moulton, p. 241.

The theme of love, as emergent through spiritual enlightenment, is also a key concept in the novel in Webb's recreation of the Shropshire legend of The Golden Arrow from which the book takes its name. In the paradoxical legend of The Golden Arrow, which is believed to have been upheld until around 1865, the finders of the arrow will be first hurt then healed by its dart. Apparently, the young people of the district would race to the top of Pontesbury hill on Palm Sunday. The first person to pick a branch, or palm, from an old yew tree there would then search for the golden arrow. What exactly this arrow was has become lost in time but to find it meant great good fortune for life. According to Wrenn, Webb met locals who remembered taking part in this excursion and 'the story fascinated her.'⁵⁴ There was also a deeply personal meaning for her in the legend as the dedication of the book to her husband indicates:

To a Noble Lover, H.L.W – 'We have sought it, we have sought the golden arrow / (Bright the sally-willows sway) / Two and two by paths low and narrow, / Arm-in-crook along the mountain way (GA, Copyright Page).

In the novel, when Deborah and Stephen finally experience this then 'they'm got their light – the kindly light – and the thorn's white over' (GA, 288). Her metaphor of the 'light' and the image of white blossom connote a revelatory rebirth. Love, for Webb, is a rebirth into oneness, a pantheistic realisation of being 'arm-in-crook' with the beloved, a wholeness created through the mystic and mythical restorative power of nature. Love, as Chapter Four will discuss, is a unified force in which nature, sexuality and spirituality are one and her dedication to 'a noble lover' perhaps reflects her own experience of this epiphanic merging of love, sexuality and the spirit.

Webb's symbolic use of the golden arrow is thus a re-creation of traditional folklore - a mythological reworking in which the arrow becomes a motif for love as a crowning achievement of spiritual truth. In their union Deborah and Stephen finally appear mythologised themselves as:

white wraiths of mist [...] detaching themselves with soft determination from the physical world of rock and tree, like spirits too delicate and too eager for the limitations of a material world (GA, 285-286).

⁵⁴ Wrenn, p. 56.

In this ethereality beyond the strictures of the known, they become part of the landscape and embody Webb's vision of achieving spiritual wholeness through mystic love. The elongated alliterative bilabial 'w' sounds in 'white wraiths' effectively helps to convey eerie tones which reinforce the phantasmal images of Deborah and Stephen. And the simile 'like spirits' repeats this idea for further emphasis, although this is, perhaps, not entirely necessary. And whilst the repeated adverbial phrasing of 'too delicate', 'too eager' also adds overstatement it extends the point that spiritual love lifts them above the temporal. In her mythopoeic use of the golden arrow legend Webb is moving beyond mere historical detail to read nature as "a symbol of something behind or within nature not ordinarily perceived."⁵⁵ As her grasp of this 'something' developed, her confidence in a non-religious anti-anthropocentricism grew.

Her early view of the world as God-created had long vanished. Nature had become 'inscrutable [...] secret, remote, vast' (GA, 286) but with 'a light which shone [...] with a large glory' (ibid.). This view was liberating for Webb, freeing her from the authoritarian limits of a male dominated religion. And in *The Golden Arrow* she seems to depict a fond goodbye to the father who had been so influential in guiding her in that religion and shaping her childhood beliefs. She had grown beyond his influence into her own ideas and the novel could be seen to mark a turning point as she lets him go by immortalising him in the character of John Arden who 'fulfils the early childhood fantasy of an all-protecting father who can at least ameliorate, if not actually rectify, the inequalities of the world'.⁵⁶ His family name, 'Arden' suggests 'ardency' or even 'garden' (even perhaps a reference to the Forest of Arden of the pastoral *As You Like It*) and he is a deeply loving, protective father who leads his daughter towards an understanding of spirituality in the 'garden' of earth. This image of the 'all-protecting father' suggests the significance of male figures in Webb's own life: firstly her father, then the God of the male-centred and male-led Church of her upbringing, representing the patriarchy of society and religion. However, it is Deborah's, not her father's voice, which becomes increasingly emphatic in *The Golden Arrow*, the writing of which was perhaps a cathartic

⁵⁵ I.A. Richards, cited in Wellek, p. 326.

⁵⁶ Barale, p.37.

process as Webb both honoured her father and left him behind. And this is reflected in her characters, who, from Deborah onwards, demonstrate an independence of thought which reveals ‘a kind of emphasis [...] on being who you are, outside of constructs of society.’⁵⁷

Webb, therefore, was clearly forming her own views, which she had earlier begun to explore in *The Spring of Joy* and poetry. But for her vision to grow she had to be near nature and, specifically, she had to be near nature in her own county, where she knew the landscape intimately. She had managed to sustain her need for her home county by working on *The Golden Arrow* but she yearned to return to her homeland, for she never really belonged anywhere except within that spiritual borderland. As she progressed with the novel, she had become unable to bear the separation and, after convincing Henry to return to Shropshire, in 1914 they moved to Rose Cottage in Pontesbury, a rather remote area. Here they would live frugally, ‘rent a cheap house with a large garden and be virtually self-sufficient for food’,⁵⁸ earning a living through writing. Like Edward Carpenter the Webbs were hoping for a simpler, purer way of life, deep in the countryside, and Webb spent two idyllic years here. This begins to explain why *The Golden Arrow*, published in 1916 when war was so evident, concludes in such a positive tone. Webb was full of love and hope at this stage so somewhat oblivious to the horror in Europe.

However, financially the Webbs really began to struggle and the lack of success of her novels (and Henry’s own writing) did nothing to help as they were often forced to exist ‘on bread and scrape and tea’.⁵⁹ Perhaps Webb was happier here than her husband, for after two years of penury, Henry Webb returned to work, teaching in Chester, where they lived during the week with Webb’s mother and travelled to Shropshire at weekends. Once more Webb suffered from the separation from her own landscape and her unhappiness was exacerbated by the strain of living with her mother. Travelling to and fro was exhausting and she longed for “‘lovely, impossible things.’”⁶⁰ Living in Chester,

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵⁸ Bernard Steff, *My Dearest Acquaintance: a Biographical Sketch of Mary and Henry Webb* (Ludlow: The Kings’ Bookshop, 1977), p.11.

⁵⁹ Coles, p. 297.

⁶⁰ Moulton, p. 176.

where there was a large Red Cross Centre providing care for wounded soldiers returning from the Somme, Webb would have been much more painfully aware of the consequences of war and her sensitive nature would have found these reminders of terrible suffering difficult to bear. These factors are reflected in the much darker tone of *Gone to Earth*, which criticises ‘the suffering which is inflicted by men upon animals and upon all defenceless creatures.’⁶¹ In her antipathy towards violence and barbarity, as depicted in *Gone to Earth*, written and published during the dark days of World War One and the horror of the Russian Revolution, Webb was responding to ‘a collapsing civilization’⁶² and the end of ‘a golden age of social harmony and rural idyll.’⁶³ Webb both empathises with what Wilfred Owen called ‘the pity of war’ and holds a mirror up to a brutal, dismantled world. And Michael Bell comments elsewhere that the Great War was seen in the early twentieth century as ‘a bitter confirmation of fundamental errors within Western culture at large [...] a radical turning-point and a dilemma with which we are still coming to terms’.⁶⁴ Webb was also at this ‘turning-point’ and was trying to give a ‘mythic interpretation of the world,’ just as the Romantics adapted myth.⁶⁵ Blake, in particular, was the first poet to form a new, complex and visionary use of mythology. Bruce Woodcock observes of Blake that it was ‘only through the imaginatively resonant symbolic narratives’ of his poetry that he could demonstrate the interrelationship between the social, historical, psychological, ideological and cosmic.⁶⁶ Webb’s re-evaluative understanding also demonstrates a desire to examine human experience of the cosmos through the imaginative use of myth and the truths this reveals.

In *Gone to Earth* the mythological motif of the Death Pack symbolises man’s inhumanity towards, men, women and animals. An ‘awful resistless flood of liver and white and black’ flings itself ‘with a ferocity of triumph’ (*GE*, 287)

⁶¹ West, p. 416.

⁶² David Trotter, ‘The Modernist Novel’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (see Bell, above), p. 70-99, (p. 77).

⁶³ Light, p. 31.

⁶⁴ Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth*, p. 19.

⁶⁵ Wellek, p. 331.

⁶⁶ *The Selected Poems of William Blake*, introduction, notes and bibliography by Bruce Woodcock (Ware: Wordsworth, 2000), p. xvi.

upon Hazel as she flees from the hounds in desperate defence of her pet fox. Webb's criticism of the viciousness of the hunt echoes her ideas about the brutality of war, her use of myth vividly depicting the destruction of life in war, for the hunt is a (rather obvious) metaphor for war or, as Radford observes, 'a manifestation of Wotan, god of war, storm and frenzy,'⁶⁷ through which Webb 'articulates her basic perception of historical crisis'.⁶⁸ And the hunt also prefigures modern concerns, the "horrible story of the progressive ruin of our landscape"⁶⁹ and the brutality of blood sports, which have resulted in the Hunting Act of 2004. The eco-poetical view Webb had earlier expressed now took on a tone of greater urgency and we can also read *Gone to Earth* in strongly ecofeminist terms because Webb clearly aligns the destruction of nature with female exploitation under the dominance of patriarchy. Kate Rigby stresses that nature 'becomes thematic in literature only when it becomes problematic in reality'⁷⁰ and this we can say was Webb's state of mind at this time – that the damage to human life and landscape and the struggle for female self-determination seemed all of a piece with the sickness of a warring world.

It is interesting to note that around this time Paul Nash was working on a series of war pictures for a London exhibition, *Void of War*,⁷¹ which portray in brutal detail the blasted landscape of war, its trees mere stumps, bereft of leaf and limb, and seeming to represent the equally mutilated bodies of the men (human corpses are rarely actually included in these paintings). In one of this series, *The Mule Track*, a train of animals are being led through a landscape strafed by enemy aircraft. A constant concern in the body of Nash's work is with the genius loci, or spirit of place, and it has been observed that 'Nash's war work illustrates human catastrophe less than it does the continuous grinding

⁶⁷ Andrew Radford, "'Gone to Earth': Mary Webb's Doomed Persephone', *The Lost Girls: Demeter – Persephone and the Literary Imagination, 1850-1930* (Amsterdam, NY: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 138-171, (p. 167).

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 143.

⁶⁹ Mary Butts, cited in Radford, p. 146.

⁷⁰ Kate Rigby, 'Writing After Nature' in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* (in Hiltner, see above), pp. 357-367 (p. 358).

⁷¹ See Andrew Causey, *Paul Nash: Landscape and the Life of Objects* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2013).

down of nature by constant fire.⁷² *Gone to Earth* was published in September 1917 and Nash's exhibition opened in May 1918, again highlighting that although Webb was not directly involved with other movements of the time, she was thinking in similar ways to others who were expressing a deep concern with the impact of human activity upon the world, for Nash (a painter of pure and beautiful landscapes before the war) was representing man-made destruction.

Webb's own pertinent response to chaos was articulated through her writing, as was other women's such as Rebecca West and Vera Brittain, and is another reason to appreciate her work more. These writers show the consequences of war from a female perspective. Rebecca West was already a successful journalist when she wrote *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) and the novel explores the losses of war from an alternative view to death tolls or economic costs, which may have been immediate responses to the conflict. She depicts the novel, not from the front lines as Brittain does in *Testament of Youth*, which incorporates accounts of her experience as a nurse tending the injured behind the front lines, but from a viewpoint which considers the chaos caused at home by war. West's novel centres mostly upon women's experience, highlighting the ways in which women were deeply 'hurt by all the war's violence and grief'.⁷³ She focuses on the far-reaching psychological consequences of war as Captain Chris Baldry returns from battle suffering from amnesia, a result of shell-shock, and the ripples of destruction this creates for the women in his life. In his confusion he has forgotten who his wife, Kitty, is, remembering only his first love, Margaret. Through this love triangle West portrays Chris's trauma, in which he must struggle between his inner self, which delights in the magical experience of early love and his outer life in which reality crowds upon him. But the novel also demonstrates the chaos caused to the women around him, including his cousin Jenny, who narrates the story. Anxiously awaiting Chris's return, Jenny describes the deep-seated fear which haunted the wives and families of soldiers: 'I wanted to snatch my cousin Christopher from the wars and seal him in this green pleasantness [...] I had

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷³ Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate, eds., *Women's Fiction and the Great War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 11.

had bad dreams about him [...] running across the brown rottenness of No Man's Land, starting back because he trod upon a hand [...] my dream was packed full of horror.'⁷⁴ This fear is also reflected in Webb's poem, 'The Lad Out There', in which Webb expressed her fear for one of her brothers at war: 'Oh, Powers of Love, if you still lean / Above a world so black with hate [...] The sight of death, the sleep forlorn, / The old homesickness vast and dumb [...] Let my long thoughts about him come.' (*SOJ: Poems*, 65). Here Webb calls upon a mythic force, the 'Powers of Love', suggesting hidden deities which may or may not be there for supplication and the tone of the poem is filled with longing as she attempts to make her 'long thoughts' stretch across land and sea to reach her brother. Likewise, Vera Brittain writes in *Letters From a Lost Generation* (1998), a collected edition of the letters between Vera Brittain, her fiancé, brother and friends which Brittain drew upon to write *Testament of Youth*, 'Oh! don't "get hit by something" [...] When I think how all my world would go down into the abyss'⁷⁵ The despair of women waiting and the sense of impotence – that there is nothing they can do but wait, dream and hope – portrays the suffering of women in war time. Muriel Hammond, in Winifred Holtby's *The Crowded Street* (1924) also thinks of the war with feelings of powerlessness and frustration: 'For those who were not in the War, it was a grinding hunger, an agony of isolation [...] You felt no pride of loss, no glory of sacrifice. There were only shameful tears to shed, and the long ache of pain which had no remedy.'⁷⁶

Holtby and Brittain were friends, and feminists, sharing an interest in equal rights and were both members of The Six Point Group, founded in 1921 by Lady Rhondda to press for changes in legislation. Mark Bostridge notes that Brittain's account is one of many such writings by women in the 1920s and 30s, such as Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement* (1931) and Mary Lee's *It's a Great War* (1929).⁷⁷ West, Brittain and Holtby poignantly describe the psychological suffering of war from a woman's point of view and in doing so

⁷⁴ Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier* (London: Fontana, 1980), p. 17.

⁷⁵ Alan Bishop and Mark Bostridge, eds., *Letters From A Lost Generation: First World War Letters of Vera Brittain And Four Friends: Roland Leighton, Edward Brittain, Victor Richardson, Geoffrey Thurlow* (London: Abacus, 1999), p. 191.

⁷⁶ Winifred Holtby, *The Crowded Street* (London: Persephone Books, 2015), p. 141.

⁷⁷ See Mark Bostridge, Introduction to Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, op. cit., p. 7.

they refute and destroy the 'myth' of the nobility of war. In West's novel, all the characters are destroyed by Chris's shell-shock: 'Kitty lay about like a broken doll,'⁷⁸ Jenny is agonized by her exclusion from Chris's life, Margaret must shatter Chris's illusion that they are reunited in young love, breaking both their hearts. The novel ends with bitter irony, as Chris, now restored to reality, returns "every inch a soldier".⁷⁹ Brittain also learns the truth about war, nursing at the front: 'No one realises the meaning of emergencies who has not been in France. Nor does one know the meaning of "bad cases" for they don't get to England in the state we see them here.'⁸⁰ And she loses all her men - fiancé, brother, friends – leaving her to wish that 'Perhaps some day the sun will shine again / And I shall [...] feel once more I do not live in vain.'⁸¹ Bereft and filled with sorrow, like many women, Brittain had to pick up the shattered pieces of her life and seek purpose and meaning in the world once more. Webb, too, was anxious, nervous and depressed during the dreadful days of war, with all three of her brothers at the front, although her husband had, to her relief, been declared unfit. She retreated into nature: 'It was all so heartrending that I just hibernated in the beauty of Nature.'⁸² This 'hibernation' allowed her to heal her broken spirit and enabled her to see beyond the war, that 'The moon, beyond her violet bars / [...] / Sheds calm upon our scarlet wars, / To soothe a world so small, so loud' ('The Night Sky (1916)', *SOJ: Poems*, 22). And *Gone to Earth* shows, albeit obliquely, that this 'scarlet war' was brutal and inhumane, for 'she was attempting to transmit her intuitive philosophy to a war-torn humanity.'⁸³ Webb creates a powerful image of the terror of the conflict:

The hounds came over the ridge like water [...] breaking from the wood on every side, came the Hunt. Scarlet gashed the impenetrable shadows. Coming as they did, from the deep gloom, fiery-faced and fiery-coated, with eyes frenzied by excitement, and open, cavernous mouths, they were like devils emerging from hell (*GE*, 285).

⁷⁸ West, *Return of the Soldier*, p. 77.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 111.

⁸⁰ Brittain, *Letters from a Lost Generation*, *op. cit.*, pp. 377-378.

⁸¹ 'Perhaps', *ibid.*, p. 205.

⁸² Mary Webb, cited in Coles, p. 138.

⁸³ Coles, p. 137.

For once, Webb's use of excess is entirely justified. This extract is laden with simile, metaphor and symbolism – but this works because she is describing a war of which the nightmarish qualities went far beyond anyone's expectations. As the hounds flow over 'the ridge' they resemble troops 'going over the top' as they plunge into battle. The scarlet coats of the huntsmen become a vivid and horrible image of human blood striating the 'shadows' and 'gloom'. And the hunters are demoniac, the reiteration of their 'fieriness' reinforcing the diabolic terror of such battles as Gallipoli, Passchendaele, Verdun and the Somme. Webb's sentences seem almost to topple over one another, evoking a chaotic pace and her tone expresses a dreadful fear, reinforcing her potent imagery.

Hence, the 'myth' of war as glorious and patriotic is crushed by writers such as Brittain and Webb, just as male poets and writers who had experienced its horrors destroyed this idea. But this demonstrates that women understood war's realities even though (and perhaps because) they did not fight. The unnecessary deaths of Hazel and Foxy by the Death Pack or Wild Hunt, led by Reddin as the Black Huntsman, can be read as implicit of war as male-created and male-led. Radford agrees, suggesting that Webb's view is 'cleansing for a masculinised state whose competitive and overly mechanized processes had culminated in a war.'⁸⁴ Hazel and Foxy, woman and animal (the fox is also female), are equally defenceless as the death-pack pursues them. There is a clear parallel between the oppression of Hazel, who is both working class and female, and the oppression of nature, symbolised by her pet fox, as both are destroyed by Reddin and his hunters. The savagery of the hunt is the antithesis of all that Hazel holds true in her pure love of nature which opposes Reddin's violent, androcentric and anthropocentric attitude. Her fear of the pack has been inscribed since childhood, for 'Harm was for the house past which it streamed, death for those who heard it give tongue' (*GE*, 17) and her fear is prophetic. It seems inevitable that the violent forces of man will obliterate the innocent and the moment arrives when 'One picture burnt itself on her brain in blood and agony. One sound was in her ears – the shrieking of the damned' (*ibid.*, 286-7). Reddin, in his 'hauteur of masculinity' (*ibid.*, 276), 'spurring' (*ibid.*, 286) his hounds 'till the blood ran' (*ibid.*) fails to notice Hazel, 'small and dark' (*ibid.*,

⁸⁴ Radford, p. 152.

287), 'clutch[ing] the warm body' (ibid., 286) of the animal as 'the pack [...] raved for her convulsive body' (ibid.). And Hazel, who 'identified herself with Foxy, and so with all things hunted and snared and destroyed' (ibid., 17), becomes one with the persecuted fox as they are pursued to a violent death by the masculine hunter and, like Actaeon, torn apart by hounds. In her empathy with 'the crazy terror of small slaughtered beasts' (ibid., 62) tortured by the 'lurid nightmare' (ibid., 86) of masculine aggression Webb interlinks with protests against the inequality which women were attempting to defeat. The deaths of Hazel and Foxy implicitly underscore the abuse of nature and woman and refute male oppression. This emits an ecofeminist message which 'debunks the objectification of the natural world, women, matter, bodily natures, and non-human species, and opens new eco-vistas into exploring the dynamic co-extensivity and permeability of human and non-human bodies and natures'.⁸⁵ And Webb makes clear that Hazel represents woman *and* nature:

She had so deep a kinship with the trees, so intuitive a sympathy with leaf and flower, that it seemed as if the blood in her veins was not slow-moving human blood, but volatile sap (*GE*, 163).

The repetition of the intensifier 'so' underscores this point and the metaphor of her blood as sap aligns Hazel with the trees in the forests which surround her whilst the adjective 'volatile' connotes an idea that because of this close 'kinship' Hazel is much more alive. Hazel's name is also, of course, the name of a tree so perhaps makes the point that Hazel is akin to nature rather too obviously. The idea is also furthered too emphatically by the close similarity between Hazel and her pet fox. The fox is described as 'a tawny silent form, wearing with the calm dignity of woodland creatures a beauty of eye and limb, a brilliance of tint' (ibid., 11). Hazel herself has 'strange, fawn-coloured eyes' and hair which 'was tawny and foxlike, and her ways were graceful and covert as a wild creature's' (ibid., 13). Webb rather forces the point here and thus lacks the subtlety she would later show in her use of symbolism in *Precious Bane*.

But Hazel is a representation of the maternal goddess, Gaia, protector of animals, struggling against the giant Orion, who brings chaos in his masculine

⁸⁵ Serpil Oppermann, 'Feminist Ecocriticism: The New Ecofeminist Settlement', *Feminismo/s*, 22 (2013), 65-88, (p. 68).

quest for world dominion. In the Greek myth Gaia defeats Orion by setting an enormous scorpion upon him. The sting of the scorpion kills Orion but in Webb's novel Gaia is defeated and this sends an urgent signal to humanity that it must re-evaluate its relationship with the natural world, restoring Mother Nature as earth goddess. If we envisage Orion as a metaphor for humanity and patriarchy then Webb's use of Hazel as a mythical representation of nature and symbol of woman recreates an ancient link between mythology, the goddess and nature. And Radford also connects Hazel with nature myths, arguing that she is 'a guileless embodiment of the virginal nature-goddess,'⁸⁶ Persephone, 'who was abducted by Hades and taken to the underworld, and her story becomes a means of scrutinizing 'received notions of gender, class, nationhood and sexuality.'⁸⁷ Hence, Webb presses her readers to respect and honour nature and at the same time highlights female inequality. Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen provide a thorough summary of the work of writers and activists who preceded modern ecofeminism: 'In 1892, for example, when a working-class, feminist newspaper reviewed Henry Salt's book, *Animal Rights* [...], the writer, Edith Ward argued that "the case of the animal is the case of the woman"'.⁸⁸ Clearly, Webb was connecting with such an idea in the significant alignment between the woman and the fox in *Gone to Earth*. Their deaths are symbolic of man's destruction of the natural order,⁸⁹ 'expressive both of the tragic spirit of the age [...] and the pathos of mankind in all ages.'⁹⁰

Usefully, Radford therefore supports the view that Webb does not write with 'cloying sentimentality'⁹¹ in advocacy of traditional values, helping to refute the accusation that Webb makes too little social comment.⁹² In fact she is one amongst other women writers who have not been acknowledged for their significance in defending animals in ways which contributed towards modern

⁸⁶ Radford, p. 144.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p. 148.

⁸⁸ Carol J. Adams & Lori Gruen, eds., *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals & The Earth* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 7.

⁸⁹ See Cavaliero, p. 139.

⁹⁰ Coles, pp. 166-7.

⁹¹ Radford, p. 164.

⁹² See Cavaliero, p. 145.

ecological viewpoints. Barbara Gates was apt when, twenty years ago, she highlighted the work of Webb and others as developing ‘not just an ecological consciousness but an ecofeminist consciousness, a worldview that remained untheorized until the 1970s.’⁹³ And Webb’s defence of animals defies the legacy of eighteenth and nineteenth century attitudes in which the creatures of the earth (and women) were subordinate and exploitable. Game hunters, empowered by British imperialism as its Empire expanded, plundered the animal kingdom, turning the body parts of their kills into trophies of mounted heads, tiger-skin rugs and utilitarian objects such as umbrella stands made of hollowed out elephants’ feet (also a by-product of the ivory trade). Victorian women’s hats were fashionably resplendent in the feathers of murdered birds (and Gillian, in *Seven for a Secret* is guilty of the death of a bird for this vanity). Webb must have been appalled by such destruction, linking with women such as Emily Williamson, who in 1889 founded The Plumage League (now the RSPB) in protest against the destruction of birds for the adornment of women’s hats and Eliza Philips who began the Fur and Feather League at a similar time. Twentieth and twenty-first century errors have been little better, as wildlife organisations have compiled ever-longer lists of creatures in serious danger of decline and ‘insecticides and the like, thrust slapdash into complex ecosystems, have produced disasters by killing, along with our competitors, squadrons of our friends and allies.’⁹⁴ The idea that animals ‘must come at the end of the queue’⁹⁵ is still under debate as a prevailing conviction that humans somehow matter more continues, but Hazel’s self-sacrificing defence of Foxy refutes this.

Webb refuses the myth of human mastery over the animal world and her vision was of an age beyond ‘the bloodshot centuries’ (*GE*, 163) when ‘we shall have outgrown our [...] brainless egoism’ (*ibid.*) and pushes against ‘a culture habituated to ignoring the interests of animals’.⁹⁶ Webb refuses the ‘the system of [civilisation’s] trade; from the vivisection table to the consumptive genius’ (*GE*, 100). She may be aligning herself here with ‘the consumptive genius’, the

⁹³ Barbara T. Gates, *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 252.

⁹⁴ Midgley, p. 24.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 18.

artist or author who protests against society's faults and, although such authorial interjections are, at times, intrusive they do not detract from her message and the missive hits home. When Hazel offers her own death in order to save her fox, Webb makes a statement which firmly endorses equality – Hazel dies to save her fox because the animal's worth is equal to her own: 'she would not desert Foxy [...] she could not go on living with that cry in her ears' (*GE*, 285-6). Webb thus refutes 'the blanket dismissal of a whole class of conscious beings'⁹⁷ and the rational, orthodox world which assumes that 'the least privileged' are 'the most expendable.'⁹⁸ Her concern with animal welfare and vegetarianism echoed Carpenter and connects with Hardy's belief that the idea that 'a second or tertiary morality was considered good enough towards the "inferior" races'⁹⁹ of animals was no longer maintainable. However, this was and is an ethos which is still not globally accepted as the extinction of species continues and animal cruelty persists in mass meat production, battery farming, animal experimentation, and so on. Webb's modern sensibilities reveal an important progression from attitudes such as Richard Jefferies' in *The Amateur Poacher* (1879). The work regales stories of (masculine) pastimes of hunting, shooting and fishing, adventures in which there is 'a mere puff of a report, and then a desperate fluttering in the tree [...] a heavy fall among the bushes,' 'a beautiful bird'¹⁰⁰ is killed, for 'almost everybody and everything in the place got shot dead in this way without knowing it.'¹⁰¹

Webb's writings on animals and on nature have been seen as simply sentimental and this view obscures the real extent of her concerns. Hazel shocks Mrs Marston in her declaration that 'animals be my brothers and sisters' (*ibid.*, 72) and in her insistent belief in animism. In Hazel's firm 'yes, they have, then! If they hanna, *you* hanna!' (*ibid.*, 72), Webb articulates a rejection of Christian doctrine that animals have no souls and boldly argues for equality for

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 95.

⁹⁸ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. 81.

⁹⁹ Hardy, *The Life*, p. 359.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Jefferies, *The Amateur Poacher*, Balsham, Cambridge: White Lion Books, 1993, p. 12.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 4.

animals and the life of all nature and implicit in this is the life of women. Hazel's argument would not have been met with much support in Webb's era in which women, let alone animals, were far from achieving equality with men.

Webb would further her concern with male oppression and the objectification of women in *Seven for a Secret* and link this again to the persecution of animals in *Precious Bane*. In this novel bull-baiting is depicted as a brutal, repulsive past-time: 'there it all was, then, the crowd, the shouting and betting, the yapping and snarling of the dogs, people elbowing and pushing [...] watching the bull, very skeered' (*PB*, 143), which is then driven to tear the dogs 'to ribbons' (*ibid.*, 142). Webb creates here, through the listing of crude, aggressive actions, a cynical view of human behaviour which contrasts with the pathos she develops for the bull. The incident further highlights Webb's hatred of injustice to animals 'because it's a cruel, miserable business' (*ibid.*, p. 145). McNeil notes that the last bull-baiting in Shropshire was held in 1833 and therefore not something Webb could have experienced personally but that it would have been popular at the time of the novel's setting. In *Precious Bane* Prue is horrified by the vile practice and there is a strong link between the exploitative treatment of the animals and the people's persecution of Prue as a 'witch.' This, therefore, is a further ecofeminist aspect in Webb's reuse of legend to purposefully refuse barbarity and oppression, both of animals and women.

But Webb was 'a woman both behind and ahead of her time,'¹⁰² who, like Hazel, did not fit into her world for she was too sensitive for her own era and 'in need of a culture that is itself badly in need of her kind of sensitivity.'¹⁰³ Like her two contemporaries, Frances Power-Cobbe and Alice Dew-Smith, Webb was anticipating 'an ecological revolution'¹⁰⁴ and Webb herself comments that Hazel is representative of 'the far future' (*GE*, 163) when people will finally understand the damage our wanton disrespect for the natural world has incurred. And Webb is advocating, through mythological motifs, the pressing need for the world to find its sensitivity. All Hazel ever wants is to be at one with nature but,

¹⁰² Gates, p. 247.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 252.

as with Webb, there is no way for Hazel to 'be herself within society'¹⁰⁵ and no-one listens to her 'powerful outcry against cruelty of every kind.'¹⁰⁶

The journalist, essayist and author, Frances Power-Cobbe, was an anti-vivisectionist as well as a leading women's suffrage campaigner and social reformer. She founded the National Anti-Vivisection Society in 1875 and the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection in 1898, which continues today as the animal protection group Cruelty Free International. Power-Cobbe was a prominent woman and her writings, such as commentaries on Darwin and J.S. Mill, were taken seriously. But women's attitude to animals have often been viewed whimsically. Alice Dew-Smith worked as a teacher and journalist and also supported women's suffrage. In her work *The Diary of a Dreamer* (1900) (novel-like in form but can also be read as a series of memoirs or essays) she writes, 'It is impossible to attach too much importance to the part played by domestic animals in a household'¹⁰⁷ and animals feature widely in her account of a woman's every-day experiences of married life and setting up a home. But a contemporary reviewer, though complimentary, was distinctly patronising. The book was described as 'amusing [...] the animals are charming [...] all very well described [...] the prettiest piece of writing.'¹⁰⁸ Yet, the narrator, as she sits at her writing table seems to want to be taken seriously by the literary world and as she manages her busy household, whilst still finding time to write, she is capable, resourceful and ponders on the transience of life. Animals are her beloved and trusted friends, but such an idea has tended to be regarded as the sentimental preserve of children's stories. Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse* (1878) was an immediate best-seller and has retained its popularity, but it was not intended as a children's book. Sewell's aim was serious and she writes in the novel, "there is no religion without love [...] if it does not teach them to be good and kind to man and beast, it is all a

¹⁰⁵ Barale, p. 78.

¹⁰⁶ Patricia Craig, 'An Excess of Countrification', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 December 1999, p. 19.

¹⁰⁷ Alice Dew-Smith, *The Diary of a Dreamer* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam, 1900), <<http://archive.org/details/diaryadreamer>> [accessed 9 November 2017], p. 6.

¹⁰⁸ T. Fisher, 'The Diary of a Dreamer. By Alice Dew-Smith', *The Spectator*, 30 June 1900, p. 38, <www.archive.spectator.co.uk> [accessed 9 November 2017].

sham.”¹⁰⁹ And the novel is considered to have been influential in bringing about legislation to protect animals, thus serving a political purpose. Henry Williamson’s *Tarka the Otter* (1909) has also been influential as a nature work, but its style is very different and characterised by a lack of sentimentality and an avoidance of anthropomorphism, in contrast to Beatrix Potter’s animals who wear clothes, live in furnished homes and talk. But Potter was really a natural scientist who, in 1897, submitted a research paper to the Linnean Society. As a woman, though, she was not allowed to attend society meetings or to present her paper and her scientific work has yet to be properly evaluated. Hence, her children’s books, though so successful, cannot be said to represent the proper scope of her knowledge, understanding and attitudes to wildlife and nature.

The depth and breadth of Webb’s novels has not been properly recognised either, for she has been seen as ‘too cut off in her own imaginary world to speak effectively to the world outside it.’¹¹⁰ Here Cavaliero highlights Webb’s otherness, that she was ‘cut off’ in a borderland which was geographical, intellectual and emotional. Yet *Gone to Earth* clearly demonstrates a ‘sense of kinship with nature which is so characteristic of many of the foremost thinkers of the day’¹¹¹ and Webb was in line with these thinkers. Her work was, for example, comparable to some of the work of May Sinclair, a contemporary of Webb’s, and for whom Webb wrote some reviews of her work. There are commonalities in their writings as Sinclair’s work is also concerned with female consciousness and there are distinctive features of myth and mysticism in several of her stories. A comparison with Sinclair underscores Webb’s neglect, for Sinclair is widely recognised for her contribution to literature through her modernism and her promotion of mysticism, philosophy, and psychoanalysis to a wider audience. Sinclair is frequently referenced in critical accounts of significant early twentieth-century writers yet Webb is entirely overlooked, despite the fact that ‘her philosophy is surprisingly modern’.¹¹² Sinclair has been recognised in particular for *Mary Olivier* (1919) and its concern with ‘constraining conventions’ and the consequences for women’s

¹⁰⁹ Anna Sewell, *Black Beauty* (London: Jarrold & Sons, 1886), p. 67.

¹¹⁰ Cavaliero, p. 202.

¹¹¹ Mercer, p. 1.

¹¹² Rowan Pelling and Jason Cowley, ‘Back in Print’, *New Statesman*, 129 (2000), p. 57.

'consciousness and outlook.'¹¹³ In addition, her novel, *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (1922) is 'a potent analysis of the destructive and infantilising effects of Victorian ideals of self-sacrificing womanhood.'¹¹⁴ Additional sections in this thesis will further considerations of Webb's contribution to fictionalised portrayals of women's lives and the extent to which she questions patriarchal assumptions. Both women were moving beyond social constructs, so Webb's comparable omission from literary studies stands out. And they were engaged in questioning and redefining androcentric assumptions which underlie cultural and spiritual beliefs, since they both depict women's experience of the supernatural and this can be seen to highlight 'the existence of an unknown feminine consciousness that lies outside the construction of female identity.'¹¹⁵

Interest in the otherworldly in the latter end of the nineteenth-century (during Webb's early life) was mirrored in the popularity of the ghost story, famously influenced by Henry James's novella, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). And Sinclair's interest in the supernatural is explored in *Uncanny Stories* (1923), ghost stories which 'unsettle the reader [and] disturb the reader's own sense of self and other, good and evil, living and dead.'¹¹⁶ In Sinclair's 'The Flaw in the Crystal', Agatha experiences divine joy through nature, finding that 'in every leaf, in every blade of grass, this life was manifest as a strange, a divine translucence.'¹¹⁷ In *Gone to Earth* Hazel's relationship with nature is also spiritual when she picks 'wimberry-flowers' and 'suck[s] out the drop of honey from each flower like a bee [...] Hazel ate the fairy tulips as a pixie might [...] So she partook of her sacrament in both kinds, and she partook of it alone' (*GE*, 168). Hazel's feast is a paganised version of the Christian Eucharist as she is spiritually nourished by wildflowers and honey, rather than the wafer and wine which represent Christ's crucified body and blood. This imagery therefore rejects the mythical symbolism of the Christian ritual and replaces it with an image of the sacred within nature. However, for both Agatha and Hazel,

¹¹³ Stevenson, p. 47.

¹¹⁴ Ingman, p. 2.

¹¹⁵ Paul March-Russell in Introduction to May Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), p. 19.

¹¹⁶ March-Russell, *ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹⁷ Sinclair, *ibid.*, p. 78.

pantheistic ecstasy is corrupted by the invasion of men. Agatha suffers a sort of metaphorical rape when, psychologically defiled by a negative male presence, she now sees ‘the green of the grass, and of the young corn [as] violent and frightful [...] a loathsome transparency [with] no sense of the divine.’¹¹⁸

After Hazel is raped by Reddin the supernatural presences in nature also take on a different mythic aspect, reflecting the sordid loss of her innocence. The world is now full of ‘forebodings [...] the pressure of the night. It appeared to stoop nearer, blind, impassive, but intensely aware of them under their dark canopy of leaves (ibid., 193-194). The pathetic fallacy is used to suggest that the natural world is as defiled as Hazel: ‘the trees brooded [...] the hill hung above [...] the bats went with a lagging flight’ (ibid., 195). Hazel’s intense happiness in nature, ‘as a fish [...] when it plunges back into the water’ (ibid., 163) is annihilated and even Reddin, who normally lacks any empathetic awareness of the natural world shudders in the pin-pricking of his conscience. Webb’s linguistic choices now evoke fear and horror at an unkind world, haunted by misery. Having seized ownership of Hazel, Reddin takes her home to Undern Hall (its name suggestive of a dark place beneath the bright outdoor world), filled with an aura of past sufferings, symbolizing the cruelty of its owner:

They went through the echoing rooms, and looked out of the low, spider-hung casements [...] They stood under ceilings dark with the smoke of fires [...] The doors creaked and sighed after them, the floors groaned [...] there was a moaning of wind. It was as if all the storms that had blown round it, the terror that had been felt in it, had crept like forgotten spirits into its innermost recesses [...] A soft rumour, as of a mute but moving multitude crept along the passages in their wake (*GE*, 196-197).

This description echoes Hazel’s internalized thoughts and emotions as she and Reddin pass through the house. Although it is written in third person there are elements of free indirect discourse as the deictic pronoun ‘they’ suggests that the experience relates to the characters rather than the narrator and there is no introductory clause to indicate this directly. This technique allows the reader insight into Hazel’s mental processes as immediately following this extract, Hazel asks, “‘Be there ghosses?’” (ibid., 197). Webb’s technique denotes her

¹¹⁸ ibid., p. 95.

awareness of the ghost story to add dramatic effect and connects with the many recorded Shropshire tales of ‘the fear of ghosts [...] still a living and present dread.’¹¹⁹ And the gothic motifs of darkness and ‘terror’ along with the onomatopoeic sound effects and personification of the groaning house and the mournful wind add to a mythic vividness. Elements of the passage are clichéd in the ‘moaning’ wind and ‘creak[ing]’ doors, highlighting that although her literary dexterity is developing, the greater subtleties of Webb’s best writing are still to come. But the soft, low tones of the alliterative phrase ‘mute but moving multitude’ evoke the haunted or ideas of hidden secrets, linking to the mythological, the presence of invisible, inexplicable but potent forces.

And Webb’s interest links to Sinclair’s concern with contemporaneous philosophical debates about whether the universe was knowable to human consciousness. In Webb’s vision revelations of complete consciousness offer redacted experiences of the ‘other’, the supernatural or the spiritual within the cosmos. A perception of the metaphysical is rooted in a recognition of ‘the secret processes of nature and of the narrow limits within which it is in our power to control and direct them.’¹²⁰ Webb use of the ghostly concerns the unseen at the heart of spiritual belief and she often writes of these ‘secret processes’: ‘Rich, on the wintry heaven, I see / A white, immortal hawthorn-tree’ (‘A Hawthorn Berry’, *SJ: Poems*, 80). Here the tree’s ‘immortality’ conveys an inexhaustible spiritual immanence, a spectral image illustrating otherness within the known world and Webb’s mythic descriptions reflect a deep unconscious way of thinking of the unseen embedded within the actual. Thus *The Golden Arrow* and *Gone to Earth* demonstrate the modernity of *her* use of myth in exploring conflicts between past and present, local and national, rural and urban, and individualism and universalism. Webb’s thematic use of place, memory, myth and legend underscore the rural as deeply significant to the need, individually and universally, for a home, both physical and spiritual.

A home, with all the connotations of the word of belonging, family, security and happiness, was what Webb herself longed for. A true home in the depths of Shropshire, surrounded by its hills, woods and fields. Life in Chester

¹¹⁹ Burne, p. 129.

¹²⁰ Frazer, p. 162.

was difficult and weekend visits back to Shropshire were insufficient to fuel her intense need for her homeland. Henry obtained a teaching post at Shrewsbury and an advance of money from Webb's mother enabled them to build, in 1917, a small cottage at nearby Lyth Hill. 'Spring Cottage', was an idyll and Webb was reunited with the landscape which fed her bodily and spiritually. She now succeeded in publishing her earlier essays as *The Spring of Joy: A Little Book of Healing* and revitalised by her own 'spring of joy', Shropshire, Webb now wrote with renewed vigour, beginning her third novel, *The House in Dormer Forest*. Reviews for her first two novels had been mixed, *The Golden Arrow* critiqued as lacking the 'deeper, more patient insight'¹²¹ of a great artist yet with a quality which reveals Webb's 'exceptional gift.'¹²² *Gone to Earth* was noted for its 'grace and sincerity'¹²³ but this review intimated that the scope of Webb's vision of nature was too limited. Neither novel created much interest or sold many copies. Disappointed but undaunted, Webb pressed on, keen to advance her nature philosophy. Her time away from Shropshire had sharpened her memories and developed her ideas. Whilst she harked back to a mythic past to re-establish the value of nature, she also rejected archaic tradition and orthodoxy, and her next novel makes an acerbic attack on conventional attitudes, both social and religious.

¹²¹ Dalton, p. 428.

¹²² *ibid.*

¹²³ West, p. 416.

Chapter Three

Preceptive Perception: *The House in Dormer Forest*

1918 - 1920

The House in Dormer Forest is much more outspoken than Webb's previous works and is an important novel because its anti-materialist stance and its derisory denigration of conventional religion strengthen Webb's spiritual view. It adds to Webb's modernity as it looks outside accepted socio-cultural views and 'reaches through the human motive to a spiritual purpose beyond our ordinary comprehension.'¹ Her concept of self-renewal encountered through sacred nature is now evoked in even stronger eco-poetical terms and, as Webb relies less heavily on symbolism in this novel, she is more direct in stating her fears about humanity's destruction of nature. The work is flawed, but it is significant for its sacramental poetics and poignancy of mystic expression as Webb strives to further her depiction of nature's 'spell of wonder [...] sweetness [and] comfort' (*HDF*, 158-9). As she writes, she entrances her reader with her vivid use of sensory imagery and metaphor and the growing maturity of her writing effectively portrays nature as a worthy cynosure.

Webb appears to find, in *The House in Dormer Forest*, a solution to the darkness and the doubts which had beset her during the writing of *Gone to Earth* and this is particularly evident in the mood of positivity in its concluding chapters as the lucidity of her mystic expression is revealed with increasing surety. In the insistence of her voice, though, the work does become preceptive in its adamancy: 'In this novel she is often overt in her message, at times allowing the doctrine, rather than the drama demonstrating it, to occupy her attention.'² However, this tendency to overstate reflects her perception that the world had been badly affected and needed a fresh start, since her didacticism 'sprang from the urgency of her desire to give the "blear-eyed world" a new vision of life, following the disaster of the Great War.'³ Although this novel does not reach the mastery of her final works it is a powerful vehicle for her ideas.

¹ Marshall, p. 316.

² Coles, p. 196.

³ *ibid.*

Published after the war, when peace was once again restored, the tone of the novel reflects a post-war hope for a new order, a reaction against tradition, and a concern with the current state of humanity. Webb's personal contentment with life at this juncture also emerges through this tone. Comfortably ensconced in the cottage at Lyth Hill and surrounded by the lush Shropshire countryside and its imposing, encompassing hills Webb must have felt secure and at peace. As a consequence the novel evokes a more certain, concrete view, and her confidence in her spiritual outlook is more assured. Michèle Aina Barale notes in an introduction to the 1981 Virago edition of *The House in Dormer Forest* that this novel 'details the suffocation of body and spirit which occurs when human feeling is made secondary to social ritual' (5). Barale is thinking here of the 'domestic entombment' of the story's female characters, for whom society dictates their lives according to their status and marriageability. However, Barale's comment could equally be used to refer to the 'suffocation of body and spirit' by materialistic desire and conventionality.

Webb's earlier novels had touched upon a concern with an increasingly materialistic society but this becomes a much more concentrated focus in *The House in Dormer Forest* and now 'she pours forth belief in the futility and decay of materialism.'⁴ Her insistence upon the spiritual represents a rejection of the exploitative, industrialised, technological world which had been so evident in the machinery of World War One, such as tanks and aeroplanes, and the growth of cable and wireless companies. The agricultural world had also altered radically with the development of tractor technology and other machinery, furthering an increase in lack of contact with the land. Webb protests against an increasing disconnection from nature that is a far greater concern today, a view recently highlighted by Lynne Dickson Bruckner: 'the degree to which we have become physically separated from nature is emblemized in a new self-propelled hay harvester that can cut crop rows without a human in the cab.'⁵ This divorce from the land is driven by economic principles that see agriculture in terms of the maximisation of business potential and Webb prefigures this both here in *The*

⁴ Shepherd, pp. 308-309.

⁵ Lynne Dickson Bruckner, 'N/nature and the Difference "She" Makes', in *Ecofeminist Approaches to Early Modernity*, ed. by Jennifer Munroe and Rebecca Laroche (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp.15-16 (p. 17).

House in Dormer Forest and later on in *Precious Bane* in the contrast between Gideon and Prue's attitudes to the natural world. For Gideon the land offers profit, 'I want to make money on the place – a mort of money' (*PB*, 39); for Prue the beauty of the land and the spiritual reality it offers is enough: 'We came out into the open fields, and I thought no day had ever looked so fair [...] and there was a richness on the world' (*ibid.*, 96). Prue's metaphorical 'richness' is in nature's beauty, not the exploitation of it to make 'money' as it is for Gideon. Gideon's lust for wealth even drives him to prioritise money over human life, poisoning his mother to avoid the cost of supporting her. And *Seven for a Secret* also highlights the negativity of material desire in Isaiah's and Ralph's avarice, their lives 'mapped out' in 'concentration on business' (155).

Although the economic cost of the war had been enormous, for some industrialists the war had been an opportunity to make money and this appeared to be an unsavoury exploitation of the war effort whilst millions suffered and died. Webb's focus on the natural was a means of disassociating herself from the mechanised, industrial and warring world. Elaine Showalter observes that in nineteenth to twentieth-century literature 'women writers responded to the war by writing within [...] the world seemed dominated by the violence of ego; women writers wanted no part of it.'⁶ And Webb was writing deep 'within' nature, disassociating herself from the temporal outside world. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva have recently furthered concerns with the continuing growth of a materialistic society in the modern era:

How the planet and human beings evolve into the future will depend on how we understand the human impact on the planet. If we continue to understand our role as rooted in the old paradigm of capitalist patriarchy – based on a mechanistic world-view, an industrial, capital-centred competitive economy, and a culture of dominance, violence, war and ecological and human irresponsibility – we will witness the rapid unfolding of increasing climate catastrophe, species extinction, economic collapse, and human injustice and equality.⁷

⁶ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (London: Virago, 1982), p. 240.

⁷ Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2014), p. xix.

Webb's defence of the natural world in the early twentieth-century pre-figured today's anxieties and she sought to contest these 'mechanistic', 'industrial' and 'capital-centred' tendencies in her own era. Some critics have recognised this, Marshall noting that Webb suggested an alternative to 'the modern flurry of material activity'⁸ and Shepherd seeing an emphasis on the 'futility and decay of materialism'⁹ as a central impetus for Webb. Deane also pin-pointed Webb's focus as the problem of 'natural man in an unnatural world.'¹⁰ This 'unnatural world' is the (literally) man-made world which Webb repeatedly shows as driven by power and greed, unlike the 'natural' world of nature.

And the views expressed in *The House in Dormer Forest* clearly reject capitalist consumerism in the chief characters' lack of personal ambition and their contentment with a non-affluent lifestyle, contrasting them with other figures who only set store by materialistic value. Webb had incorporated this theme into her earlier novels as in *The Golden Arrow* the miserly and mean-spirited Eli Huntbatch is contrasted with John Arden's mystic gentleness and contentment with a simple life. In *Gone to Earth* Mrs Marston is concerned only with physical possessions which are emblematic of her social status. Acquisitively, she lines her shelves with produce (which is not to be eaten), her full larder representing selfish materialism: 'Mrs Marston was one of those that, having great possessions, go sadly all their days' (*GE*, 90). In *The House in Dormer Forest* this theme is amplified in Webb's scathing depiction of the Darke family (their name is implicit of their unenlightened state) who are intoxicated by 'the sleepy poison of [...] material preoccupations' (232). Money and status are the Darke family's only motivations, of which they are 'so full [...] they destroyed the impalpable' (*ibid.*). Webb's use of an omniscient narrator and strong language are didactic as she expounds this view, but she makes clear that materialism impedes spiritual apprehension and Dormer House itself is used symbolically as a negative image of material wealth:

The place had been patched and enlarged by successive generations, very much as man's ideas are altered, the result in both cases being the

⁸ Marshall, p. 315.

⁹ Shepherd, p. 308.

¹⁰ Deane, p. 48.

same – a mansion to the majority, a prison to the few. On clear evenings, when the westering sun struck up the valley and set the windows on fire, one could see the centuries in the house, like ferns in a fossil [...] The house, as a whole, had something of a malignant air, as of an old ruler from whom senility takes the power, but not the will, for tyranny (9-10).

Webb uses rather too much figurative language to describe the house, which consists of Elizabethan, Queen Anne, Georgian and Victorian sections, all growing outwards from ‘an ancient cottage [...] its nucleus’ (ibid., 10). Organic images depict the house as something both living and dead. It is alive in the sense that it has a central ‘nucleus’ as if it is an organism mutating through time. Yet, it is also dead, as Webb’s simile connotes, its layers preserved ‘in a fossil’, which suggests that there remain forms recognisable for their living features but life, or the spirit, is no longer there. Although still overdone, Webb’s symbolism is becoming more subtly drawn than in *Gone to Earth*. A ‘mansion’ suggests a domicile of large proportions created and maintained by generations of wealth, whilst the antithetical noun, a ‘prison’, conveys a concept of cramped entrapment and poverty. This juxtaposition highlights that for the ‘majority’ material wealth is a satisfactory goal in itself but for a ‘few’ who recognise the superior importance of the spiritual this wealth is a gaol which inhibits the spirit.

The reader has to infer Webb’s meaning from the images and the symbolic ideas, making this a more crafted articulation of her ideas than some of her earlier work. Foreshadowing is also a technique which she employs regularly in her novels and here Webb pre-echoes the destruction of the house by fire at the end of novel to indicate the futility of materialism. Symbolically, the house and everything it represents is razed to the ground by fire. As the family wealth is destroyed and the house crumbles, nature watches impassively: ‘From its height the forest contemplated them. It had its own preoccupations, its dreams of bronze and copper and clear gold. It was cold to the death of humans and of houses’ (ibid., 291). Webb’s anthropomorphic image suggests nature’s supremacy over the vainglorious, hubristic pursuits of humanity and, in the trees’ thoughts, she reminds us that nature is living and feeling.

In her own life, Webb was anything but hubristic or materialistic for she thought nothing of material wealth, giving money away to anyone in need ‘in an

overwhelming urge to console and heal,¹¹ frequently leaving herself in poverty. Although she knew the importance of personal suffering she could not bear to see others endure it and responded to individual need in this way because she saw this as symbolic of the need of humanity as a whole. Her sensitivity and pantheistic vision meant that she felt this ardent need to bring relief to a world in pain and to make it a better place. And in this novel she furthers the spiritual centrality of nature to humanity and it is a heartfelt response to a world which was increasingly laical and detached from nature. She attempts to 're-enchant a broken-hearted world, speaking the language and the music of the heart to the addicted consumer, the jaded, hypnotized slave of the market.'¹²

Weber's assertion that modern society was 'disenchanted' by rationalism was probably unfamiliar to Webb, but his definition of the impact of a secularised, industrialised society was precisely what she repulsed in her affirmation of the power of nature over mankind's very soul. James Homer Thrall considers Webb (along with May Sinclair and Evelyn Underhill) as respondents to a post-Enlightenment shift towards science in relation to Weber's 'process of disenchantment.'¹³ In relating the ideas of the three writers to Weber's claim that scientific rationalism had disenchanted the modern world he points to Weber's argument that in a technological age 'there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather [...] one can in principle, master all things by calculation.'¹⁴ Weber's lecture, delivered in 1913 and later published, illustrates that the modernity of the time was concerned with 'intellectualist rationalization, created by science and scientifically oriented technology.'¹⁵ He connected these processes directly with the rise of capitalism in a modernized Western society where scientific knowledge became more highly prized than spiritual belief and where only rational goals were recognised as valuable. Considering these factors in a practical sense, he states that we do not necessarily increase knowledge about the conditions of life which govern our existence, for we learn only what we need to know: 'the savage knows what

¹¹ Coles, p. 223.

¹² Grey, p. 86.

¹³ Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, op. cit.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

he does in order to get his daily food [but] knowledge can be gained at any time if one wishes to learn it.¹⁶ Therefore, 'the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service.'¹⁷

Webb's re-sacralisation of nature refutes a culture based on reason and the elevation of the empirical over the spiritual. Her work presents a rejection of the 'disenchanted' new world Weber describes which, through its emphasis on rationality, undermined 'metaphysical speculation, mystical contemplation and [...] religious asceticism.'¹⁸ Belief in science, through its advancements in knowledge, medicine and technology, has predominated modern thought, but, as Gunter Abramowski et al. suggest 'science is no substitute for faith, nor for a worldview.'¹⁹ Rationalization tends to make one see 'oneself as an individual [...] in total freedom and self-responsibility,²⁰ creating meaning out of 'the highest values that confer sense and meaning.'²¹ In an age of scientific knowledge and technological progress these became the highest values. But, Abramowski points out that 'science has limitations,²² since 'the value of scientific truth cannot be "demonstrated"²³ any more than any other aspect of human endeavour. And science can be seen as losing a sense of the essence of being, human nature, so becomes 'a falsely presented [...] worldview.'²⁴ Webb understood the validity of 'reason', of a biological scientific view at the same time as retaining a passionate faith in what was intuitively felt or sensed rather

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Anthony J. Carroll, 'Disenchantment, Rationality and the Modernity of Max Weber', *Forum Philosophical Special Issue*, 16 (2011) 117-137 <<http://www.publicationsheythrop.ac.uk>> [accessed 05.12.14] (p. 117).

¹⁹ Gunter Abramowski et al., 'Meaningful Life In a Disenchanted World: Rational Science and Ethical Responsibility: (An Interpretation of Max Weber)', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 10 (1982), 121-134 (p. 124).

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 126.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 128.

²² *ibid.*, p. 123.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 124.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 124.

than cognized. These are apparently contradictory aspects in her outlook for which there is no rational answer, for her vision, which encompassed both the pragmatic and the spiritual, cannot be rationalised. In her capacity to embrace both these aspects she avoided the 'emptying of meaning'²⁵ forged by an emphasis on science alone, knowing that humanity 'can so easily create that which becomes a god of terror' (*HDF*, 174), forgetting in its obsession, 'the mysterious creatures of space – stars, clouds, light' (*ibid.*, 233).

In *The House in Dormer Forest* an ecstatic state of spiritual ecstasy, a fusing of body, soul and spirit, of being at one with the world of 'stars' and 'light', is also contrasted with a bitter attack upon conventional and unimaginative religion, furthering criticisms she had made earlier in *The Golden Arrow*. Webb uses forceful language to emphasise her frustrated and cynical view of the Church and this gives the novel an overly didactic tone. Dormer House is 'overspread with a spider's web of rules, legends and customs so complex as to render the individual soul almost helpless' (11). Her metaphor of the 'web' is implicit of her view of the insidious effect of convention and she endorses freedom from conformity in this work, averring that 'the whole effort of evolution is to the development of individual souls who will dare to be free of the architecture of crowd-morality' (*ibid.*). And Webb condemns what was for her, as for Blake, the stifling effect of the established church. She had suggested this in earlier novels but in *The House in Dormer Forest* her use of ironic humour to parody religion adds further weight to her criticism. In this novel Ernest Swyndle, a boisterous, young curate brimming with biblical quotes which he uses for 'bland bullying' (*ibid.*, 72), claims devoutness when, in fact his ebullience and apparent generosity of spirit veil his greed and self-serving intentions. Webb has deliberately fashioned his character as ridiculous, his 'dome-shaped' (*ibid.*, 65) head leading to the epithet of "An egg-cup!" [a] joke [...] always greatly appreciated [...] in an agony of laughter' (*ibid.*). He is also bombastically unable to see anything outside his own viewpoint or creed: 'Ernest [...] wished to do right and he wished others to do right in his way' (*ibid.*, 91). He attempts to re-Christianize Amber's brother, Jasper, after he has lost his faith, wanting 'to put a straw into his mind and blow until he was inflated with all

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 133.

the orthodox views that Ernest held' (ibid., 169). Webb chastises such views as the 'narrow mentality' of 'the fleshpots of orthodoxy', the 'drug' of 'tradition' (ibid., 38, 40, 44 respectively) and the 'stronghold of received opinion' (ibid., 170) belonging to 'the gelatinous mass' (ibid., 35).

As for the rest of the family, they are mockingly described as spiritual 'cannibals' (ibid., 174), for whom 'faith was generally an effervescent froth rising out of the bubbling contentment of the more comfortable classes' (ibid., 181-182). Webb's overt cynicism towards the Church in this novel recalls Blake's 'mind-forg'd manacles'²⁶ and 'Priests in black gowns [...] binding with briars my joys and desires.'²⁷ The 'binding' effect of religion is depicted in Webb's characters who use it to gain mastery and social kudos, the complacent conservative religiosity of the Darkes mockingly embodying a microcosm of society in which religion is about anything but personal faith. Grandmother Velindre is a ludicrous old woman who utilises her supposed piety to serve her own interests, peppering her speech with scriptural texts in order to excuse her own cruelty. She exploits religion with neither 'intellect or intuition' (ibid., 18) as a means of wielding power over others, warning 'in her most sepulchral voice' of the intolerance of "'a jealous God!'" (ibid., 21). The connotations of the tomb metaphor associate the Church with gloom and death and Grandmother Velindre's fear of a vengeful God has sharpened her cruelty. She would refuse a dying man 'without a qualm' if 'he disagreed with her religious views' (ibid., 18). For Amber's father, Solomon, the extent of spiritual sagacity is that 'a good stout stick'll find God'. And Catherine Velindre, a live-in relative, enacts a pious devotion as a means of enhancing her value on the marriage market. Her room is a shrine to her faith but her marble figures of Christ mean nothing to her and Webb's narrator conveys her own demoralised view of Christianity, which 'beautiful as it was in its precarious early days, is now too often simply a ticket of respectability that is credited by the mob' (ibid., 255). Webb's condemnatory tone portrays the Church negatively, refusing religious and social convention.

²⁶ William Blake, 'London', *William Blake*, ed. by Butter, op. cit. pp. 37-38 (poem originally published in 1794 in *Songs of Experience*).

²⁷ William Blake, 'The Garden of Love', *ibid.*, p. 36 (poem originally published in 1794 in *Songs of Experience*).

The declarative voice in this work illustrates Webb's determined assertion and emphasises her anti-conventional view 'of the way in which outworn creeds and customs stifle aspiration, and strangle the soul.'²⁸ How very outré Webb and her non-conformist ideas were in her own society is implicit in Shepherd's review in which he regrets that 'it is a pity she closed her Bible, for I believe that she had the gift of sympathetic interpretation, and a strain of mysticism.'²⁹ Since Webb, he suggests, abandoned her Christianity she was 'unable to meet the doubts which Darwin and others implanted'. Shepherd is mistaken here as Webb emerged through these difficulties, accepting into her vision the absence of God's salvation and absorbing Darwin's revolutionary concept of evolution and his disruption of traditional concepts of humanity's place in the world. Shepherd's comment that 'the Church seemed to offer no answer to Nature's enigmas,'³⁰ however, is fitting and this is precisely why Webb forsook the Church, finding answers to 'Nature's enigmas' in nature itself.

In turning her back on organised religion interpreted and mediated by priests Webb returned in some ways to the 'savage' whom Frazer claimed responded to the mysterious processes of nature as magical and who preceded Weber's disenchanted world which eradicated any need for a belief in mysterious powers. Amber Darke endeavours to explain her experience of glimpsing the mystery of the numinous to her wholly prosaic sister:

It's something deep down [...] far down, like a pool in a mountain hollow
[...] I see things pass there, faces looking up, hands beckoning. It's as if
the things other people have felt come and lean over me. And I see them
far down and faint. (*HDF*, 106).

Amber attempts to describe the depths of the subconscious here, the mysterious realm of which is connoted in the simile of the deep, inaccessible 'pool' which only briefly and 'faintly' reflects the outer world. The hidden water may be an image of the soul deep within the mountain, perhaps metaphorically the body. When Amber revels in nature, unified in body, thought and spirit and

²⁸ Shepherd, p. 307.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 311.

³⁰ *ibid.*

absorbed into the forest itself, Webb elucidates this experience with a growing maturity in which her use of imagery and lexis vividly evoke its intensity:

The forest slumbers; its green walls are the walls of a palace enchanted [...] So, when in this spell-bound place the soul wakes, a conscious entity, it is afraid in its loneliness. But as it stands under the frescoed arches, a creature small but vital, the spell is broken; all nature wakes with it, rises with it. The flower's eye is no more vacant; the trees stretch their arms in the luxury of waking; the forest sings with multiple voices; the supine earth finds a soul (*HDF*, 276).

There is a repetition here of sibilant sounds throughout the paragraph creating a soft tone which helps to evoke a mood of quiet, spell-bound reverence. The language is high-flown and extravagant but its intensity also clearly portrays a moment in which the individual finds oneness with nature. Webb's sentence structure follows a pattern of layered short clauses which form a rhythmic effect, contributing to the overall effectiveness in lyrically conveying a moment of rhapsody. Webb's repeated emphasis on 'waking' is metaphorical and demonstrative of Amber's emergence through the borderland threshold of spiritual wisdom into a sort of rebirth, a regenerative renewal in the revitalising of the soul in which there is an intense awareness of self and the becoming of 'a conscious entity'. Again, Webb employs a musical metaphor to portray spiritual epiphany as the forest joyfully 'sings'. Through a state of conscious experience of the world Amber's spirit rises to an apprehension of complete unity of being in which she is aware of her whole self within the forest and it is 'a palace enchanted' (*ibid.*). Her metaphor luminously illustrates an instance in which she is bewitched with delight, utterly absorbed into the world around her and the winsome quality of her writing invites her reader to experience this themselves.

Webb's sense of energy and creativity pulses through this novel, her voice and vitality permeating the narrative in her renewed attempt to further elucidate a 'joyous apprehension of the Absolute [in which] the self perceives an added significance and reality in all natural things,'³¹ an epiphanic vision of 'the self's perception of Reality in the eternal and temporal worlds.'³² Through

³¹ Underhill, p. 240.

³² *ibid.*, p. 241.

Amber we perceive Webb's apprehension at this stage, a refreshed 'sense of intimacy – as if she were beginning to know not only the face of beauty, but her essence' (*HDF*, 262). As Amber recognises in the forest world 'something' (*ibid.*) active, numinous and wise she understands her own connection to this environment. It is there in 'the belated silver owl [...] wistful, immortal, kind [...] the long vermilion clouds [...] a vast, all-hushing peace' (*ibid.*) into which she is absorbed. Through this individual experience of immanence she forms a conviction of unity with the world in which she assimilates some deep truth:

It was not personal; but it enfolded personality. It enfolded everything [...] she only knew that every tree and leaf and meadow shared with her in a stupendous quietude where only the miraculous seemed possible (*ibid.*).

Webb's language here is emphatic, as the pronoun 'everything', the syndetic phrasing of 'every tree and leaf and meadow' and the heightened emotive qualities of the lexical choices in 'stupendous' and 'miraculous' suggest. There is a clear knowledge that 'there was more here, on this airy hill, than could be seen or touched or heard' (*ibid.*, 263), illustrating an intangible spirituality within nature and this suggests a deeper, joyous stage of pantheism at this point in Webb's life, which followed on from the initial awakening depicted in *A Little Book of Healing* and *The Golden Arrow*, and the dark doubts of *Gone to Earth*. In this novel Amber almost assumes a ministerial role in an alternative religion, for 'the understanding of beauty is a priesthood' (*ibid.*, 277) and Webb is the one to guide us in understanding the ecstatic awareness this brings: 'The mist slowly ascended in lilac wreaths and veils. The hilltops flowered like purple pansies, and the serene sky seemed to soothe the earth' (*HDF*, 263). The poetic patterning of sound and syntax here, through carefully placed sibilant and consonant strands, heighten the dream-like effect of this visionary moment of perfection deep within an absorption into the natural world. The metaphor of 'flowering' again emphasises a sense of renewal, a moment in which the soul emerges through the everyday into the sublime. This is a vision for humanity, a 'clean breath of truth [which] will help to a balanced judgment of the world's conflicts' (*SJ: Healing*, 54-5). This is an ambitious claim but demonstrates Webb's desire to offer her personal vision to a wider audience through her work.

And in this work Webb's portrayal of pantheistic intuition particularly connects with Richard Jefferies' depictions of mystic experience, of 'a deep,

strong and sensuous enjoyment of the beautiful green earth' and the desire to find through this 'the inner meaning [...] translated into some growth of excellence in myself.'³³ Jefferies speaks of a deeply satisfying personal experience, 'a sense of "ecstatic dwelling" [...] in a process that takes place in "the open region which poetry lets happen."³⁴ Roger Ebbatson cites Jefferies' description of a moment of immediate and intense spiritual awareness: "It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it, as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air [...] Now is eternity; now is the immortal life."³⁵ Here, as Ebbatson elucidates, Jefferies 'encounters the wholly other that is nature in a moment that mediates the rhetoric of the sublime through the attempt to articulate experience of the numinous.'³⁶ Ebbatson examines Jefferies's 'insistence upon the sheer thisness of nature [...] "a sense of existence – a consciousness of being."³⁷ For Amber this 'consciousness' is also created through abandonment to the natural world in which 'arms stretched forth in welcome [...] the eyes of bird and insect, the dewy gaze of a few late flowers, peered on them with new meanings' (*HDF*, 275-6). Amber shares this experience of revelling in nature with Michael but Webb's focus is on her female character as her esoteric language explores the revelatory moment. In Underhill's terms this 'illumination of the self' comes after the mystic has undergone the awakening of the self and the realisation of its imperfections. It is in this third phase of contemplation that the mystic experiences the 'outpourings of love and rapture belonging to this state,'³⁸ which leads to completeness.

And Webb was deeply concerned with wholeness, a key concept in her vision of nature from its first inception: 'in all these shapes there is nothing extraneous, nothing unfinished. The flower has no unnecessary petal; the birds' homes are wholly complete' (*SJ: Healing*, 41). In *The House in Dormer Forest*

³³ Richard Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart* (London: Longman, 1883), p. 60.

³⁴ Roger Ebbatson, *An Imaginary England: Nation, Landscape and Literature, 1840-1920* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 71.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 70.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ Ebbatson, p. 69.

³⁸ Underhill, p. 239.

she returns to this idea of completeness and, after denying this conclusive state to Hazel in *Gone to Earth*, she grants to Amber:

a gradual awakening to natural beauty [...] a perception of beauty peculiar to herself [...] Nature became for her, not a fortuitous assemblage of pretty things, but a harmony, a poem solemn and austere' (185).

This 'harmony' is a further link to Webb's musical metaphor and expresses the idea of Amber 'awakening', finding in 'every petal, every leaf [...] some memory of profundities' (ibid., pp. 188-189). The notion of nature as a harmony successfully conveys its complexity yet congruity in forming a consistent whole. Her metaphor may not be the most original yet it is apt. She is probably not the first person to describe nature as 'a poem' either, but, again her metaphor suggests a work which is complete in its intensity, images, rhythm and sound. And Amber's realisation that she is part of this allows her to achieve oneness with her surroundings and a fuller sense of self. Interestingly, it has been suggested, both by Coles and Barbara Hannah, that in this theme of wholeness there are many Jungian parallels in *The House in Dormer Forest*, which is full of a 'symbolic utterance of what is deeply known and can never be adequately or exhaustively told'³⁹ and an 'unconscious attempt to return to a condition of psychic totality.'⁴⁰ However, there is not scope in this study to properly consider this comparison, although this may be an aspect which would repay further research and could further develop interest in Webb.

When Amber experiences 'a kind of terror [...] when the soul perceives simultaneously the life of man [...] and the infinite' (*HDF*, 257) her unconscious self is ignited and 'she felt in her fingers the stalks of all the flowers she had ever picked [...] she heard in her heart the individual leaf-song of every tree. These things were of her essence now' (ibid.). Amber's name, a precious natural gem, may emphasise that she too is of this 'essence.' And the intense sensibilities here convey a moment in which the conscious and the unconscious are integrated into wholeness whilst conscious autonomy is retained. In

³⁹ Coles, p. 192.

⁴⁰ Hannah, p. 72.

Precious Bane Webb would further this idea even more powerfully, evoking Prue's completeness through the epiphany of 'the other side of silence' (60).

A wise observation is that Webb 'played a greater part than she knew in the gradual advance of mankind towards the Ultimate belief.'⁴¹ And in *The House in Dormer Forest* we can read Webb's 'Ultimate belief' in the novel's ecological perspective because she presents an anti-anthropocentric view in tones that demand an audience for her message that nature must be protected from the harmful activities of humankind. There is an insistent tone in this work, suggesting she felt a greater increase in the need for her advocacy of an intuitive understanding of the green world and its global importance. It has been said that 'an ecological spirituality should be one that shows friendliness to the earth, envisaged as a place of positive, intrinsic value.'⁴² This is precisely what Webb was striving to articulate a century ago. In *The House in Dormer Forest* she furthers her assertion of nature's symbiotic and pivotal role, that, in the progress and process of civilization, we have become distanced from. And she anticipates modern ecological concepts, such as Plumwood's proposition that 'a place-sensitive society would [...] nurture relationships to place structurally as the normal case.'⁴³ In the novel Amber thinks of:

the subtle changes of the seasons, breathlessly fair, not one to be spared. She remembered dawns that bloomed like a hedge of roses above the amethyst hills, and the bank of white violets which had never missed her yet in April. These things were her home, not Dormer (281).

Amber's sensitivity to the natural world enables a close relationship with every 'subtle' aspect in which each season has its value. And, true to form, Webb packs metaphor, hyperbolic phrasing and colour imagery into her expression, portraying nature as wholly dependable, for the violets never fail to appear, and every image suggests a repetition of opportunity to experience beauty and renewal. The short, emphatic clause 'these things were her home' is declarative and conclusive, disallowing any doubt or negativity to interfere with the image of perfection but this embellished style vocalises Webb's profound understanding

⁴¹ Marshall, p. 327.

⁴² Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, p. 229.

⁴³ *ibid*, p. 233.

of 'relationships to place', as Plumwood advocates above. And in her notes for her unpublished essay, 'Anon' (written around 1940-1941), Virginia Woolf also expressed a prescient concern with human society's relationship with the natural world and the role of literature in expressing this connection. In her essay, the character of Anon, a wandering minstrel, is:

sometimes man; sometimes woman. He is the common voice singing out of doors. He has no house. He lives a roaming life crossing the fields, mounting the hills, lying under the hawthorn to listen to the nightingale.⁴⁴

Woolf begins with a description of pre-historic Britain as thickly forested and filled with innumerable singing birds, and Webb also recalls ancient times, 'days when the little bruit of man was drowned by the infinite grave forest murmur' (*HDF*, 187). Woolf then charts a timeline through history, showing how the anonymity of early creators of literature, when literature was oral rather than written, was lost with the advent of Caxton's printing press. Anon's first, unwritten, song-literature is an instinctive response to nature, a world in which "the untamed forest is king. Its moist and mossy floor was hidden from Heaven's eye by a close drawn curtain of innumerable tree tops"⁴⁵ and Anon sings 'because Spring has come, or winter's gone.'⁴⁶ The tone here is redolent of a deeply felt pleasure in nature and Brenda R. Silver suggests that there is an idea of overcoming darkness and destruction in the essay. It is thus indicative of the promise of a hopeful new beginning, although by this point Woolf was already affected by the lack of a sense of any future, which would subsequently lead to her suicide in 1941.⁴⁷

This tone of bleakness is reflected in the death of Anon at the end of the essay because the revolution of printing meant that literature became fixed, its authors were named and Anon's 'freedom to "say out loud what we feel"'⁴⁸ is lost. This loss of an instinctive openness of expression about the world around us led, in consequence, to an increasing view of ourselves as detached from

⁴⁴ Brenda R. Silver, "'Anon' and 'The Reader': Virginia Woolf's Last Essays," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 25 (1979), 356-441, (p. 382).

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, see p. 359.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 380.

the natural world. This sense of detachment can be said to have continued to increase since Woolf's day into our own era, so this highlights the prescience of Webb's concern for humanity's increasing isolation from nature and forges a connection with Woolf, despite the great differences in their writings.

Bate states that 'what makes a literary text "classic" is its ability to speak both to its own time and to later ages; the best readings of classic texts are accordingly those which have both historical and contemporary force.'⁴⁹ He makes this point in connection with William Wordsworth, but this summary is equally applicable to both Woolf and Webb. Bate argues that a green reading of Wordsworth clearly fulfils the criteria above because of his 'respect for the earth [and] scepticism as to the orthodoxy that economic growth and material production are the be-all and end-all of human society.'⁵⁰ Wordsworth is of contemporary relevance to us because his Romanticism draws attention to modern political issues, such as 'the greenhouse effect and the depletion of the ozone layer, the destruction of the tropical rainforest, acid rain, the pollution of the sea, and more locally, the concreting of England's green and pleasant land.'⁵¹ In opposition to 'the "alienation" of the human spirit'⁵² caused by the migration to cities as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution Wordsworth offered an alternative view, that even 'the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears'.⁵³ Webb also found 'new revelations,' where the 'long-lashed daisies crowd' ('In April,' *SJ: Poems*, 8) and both she and Woolf, are amongst others who, in different ways, also depict this 'alienation' from nature and express a keen environmental consciousness.

For Webb, as for Wordsworth, this emerges in their psychological need for nature, 'a way of connecting the self to the environment.'⁵⁴ In the poem, 'Presences', Webb recounts an acute awareness of this connection, sensing 'a

⁴⁹ Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 13.

⁵³ William Wordsworth, 'Intimations of Immortality', *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919) <<http://www.bartleby.com>> [accessed 12 March 2017] (original work published in 1807 in *Recollections of Early Childhood and Other Poems*).

⁵⁴ Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p. 115.

presence on the lonely hill / Lovely and chill: [...] an emanation in the wood / Half understood' (*SJ: Poems*, 21). This recalls Wordsworth's 'presence that disturbs me with the joy / Of elevated thoughts'.⁵⁵ Webb's oxymoronic phrase 'lovely and chill' has a similarity with Wordsworth's 'disturbing joy'. The power of poetic imagination makes such awareness possible and Webb sees in her artistic mind's eye the 'secret' 'gaze' of this 'presence' ('Presences', see above) in every atom of the 'tremulous pollen-worlds' ('Little Things', *SJ: Poems*, 78) indicating the significance of nature's minutiae. To be in such close contact with nature is to understand its value in moments of 'presencing'⁵⁶ or 'being there' – experiencing it with all the senses rather than cognitively, just as Wordsworth's 'spirit drank the spectacle; sensation, soul and form, / All melted into him.'⁵⁷ The 'tremulous' frailty of this ethereal quality suggests the fragility of nature itself and the indefinable nature of this elusive but realisable knowledge. This is reminiscent of the early poetry of Coleridge, as he considers 'what if all of animated nature / Be but organic harps diversely framed / That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze.'⁵⁸ However, Coleridge later developed 'an elaborate philosophy of nature [...] near to vitalism or panpsychism'⁵⁹ so his views were not the same as Webb's. Equally Wordsworth's views cannot be too easily categorised as his ideas were not fixed, but he did form a view, in which landscape becomes the language of the infinite, 'like workings of one mind, the features / Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree; / Characters of the great Apocalypse [...] of Eternity.'⁶⁰ Bate suggests that *The Excursion* (1814) is summative of Wordsworth's nature

⁵⁵ William Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey', *William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by Michael Schmidt (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 109-114 (original work published in 1798).

⁵⁶ Bate comments on the scientific view of nature as 'representational rather than presencing,' *The Song of the Earth*, pp. 230-231.

⁵⁷ William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, I, 219-220 and 227-229 <<http://www.humanities-ebooks.co.uk>> [accessed 12 October 2015] (original work published in 1814 – 'The Recluse').

⁵⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Eolian Harp', <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org>> [accessed 26.08.15] (original work published in 1797 in *Poems 1797*).

⁵⁹ Wellek, p. 329.

⁶⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York and London: Norton, 1979), 1805, VI, 568-571.

philosophy: ‘the “one life” and the “active universe” [...] animation in and unity between all things’⁶¹ and this is an ecological view, reminding us of the ways in which the Romantics and writers such as Webb who have followed on from them, have helped shape our view of nature today as inherently fragile.

Our environmental view is now more likely to acknowledge that nature ‘takes no account of man’ (*HDF*, 12). And having depicted nature’s dispassion in *Gone to Earth* as a bleak abandonment, Webb returns to nature’s indifference to our survival in *The House in Dormer Forest* with a view similar to Wordsworth’s in ‘The Ruined Cottage’ that ‘nature’s very indifference seems to guarantee humanity’s survival.’⁶² As Bate suggests, the poet conveys the idea that ‘humanity only survives in *nature*. Human survival and the survival of nature are therefore co-ordinate with one another.’⁶³ In what he terms ‘the speargrass redemption’ Graham Davidson draws attention to Wordsworth’s re-imaging of the weeds and spear-grass in an addendum to ‘The Ruined Cottage’: ‘the weeds are now plumes, the spear-grass is high, not rank and is “By mist and silent rain-drops silver’d o’er.”’⁶⁴ This meditative moment depicts a state of tranquillity in which the “spirit of humanity” survives ‘the silent overgrowing and oblivious tendencies of nature.’⁶⁵ And Webb insists upon the concomitance between humanity and the life of nature:

Leaning against a wild pear tree, she was aware, by her inward hearing, of the tidal wave of sap that rose so full and strong [...] Every petal, every leaf, seemed to be conning some memory of profundities whence it had come. Every curving flower seemed full of echoes [...] That which had form, and knew the mortality which is in form, trembled [...] It was this that struck her now into a kind of ecstasy (*ibid.*, 187-189).

Here Webb depicts an intimate understanding, comparable with Anon’s, in which Amber hears more than can be heard and senses more than can be seen or felt as her ‘inward hearing’ conveys a soulful response to the life of the tree,

⁶¹ Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p. 66.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Graham Davidson, ‘Wordsworth’s Wasteland or The Speargrass Redemption’, *Romanticism*, 20 (2014) 73-83 (p 77).

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 76.

its palpable ‘trembling’ creating an empathetic effect. Webb’s language is typically hyperbolic in the anaphoric reiteration of ‘every’ but the layering of these syntactic units adds to an intense emotional effect aided by the pattering effects of intonation in stressed final syllables in ‘every’, ‘memory’, ‘mortality’ and ‘ecstasy’. The pear tree elicits no concern with Amber herself yet for her it is a relationship in which human consciousness is completely in tune with the natural world and this is identifiable with ecology, ‘a holistic science, concerned in the largest sense with the relationship between living beings and their environment.’⁶⁶ Following Darwin’s groundbreaking work of 1859, the biologist Ernst Haeckel’s first defined ecology in terms grounded in Darwin’s theories, but the modern understanding of ‘ecology’ has become much more complex, with an ever-deepening awareness that nature’s delicate infrastructure depends upon our understanding of the world as a shared home.

Webb had recognised this years earlier in her first writings, saying that ‘if we love the creatures of earth, who are so gaily irresponsible, so full of zest, we shall share with them the large-hearted merriment of comradeship’ (*SJ: Healing*, 34). This aim of ‘large-hearted [...] comradeship’ goes against an ongoing problem ‘of humanist hubris: a reiteration of the presumption that we humans have the right to remake the world in ways we preconceive.’⁶⁷ And Webb clearly anticipated the ecological concept which Ynestra King has described as a concern with ‘harmoniz[ing] nature, human and nonhuman [...] an integrative science in an age of fragmentation and specialization,’ which aims to ‘reconstruct [...] human society in harmony with the natural environment’.⁶⁸ An understanding of this harmony means we now know we must reconsider our relationship, not just with animals, but with plants too. And Donovan draws attention to a recent scientific study on plant responses to stress and the conclusion that a plant is “not only a *what* but also a *who*” [...] that some sort of

⁶⁶ Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p. 36.

⁶⁷ Josephine Donovan, ‘Participatory Epistemology, Sympathy, And Animal Ethics’ in *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals & The Earth* (see Adams & Gruen above), pp. 75-90, (p. 88).

⁶⁸ Ynestra King, ‘The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology’, in *Healing the Wounds*, ed. by Judith Plant (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989), pp.18-28 (pp. 18-19).

sympathetic communicative continuum exists in which cells, microorganisms, plants, animals, and humans operate.⁶⁹

Such issues have both moral and governmental implications as Greg Garrard stipulates, since ‘ecocriticism is an avowedly political mode of analysis.’⁷⁰ It was Bate who, famously, first identified this shift in attitudes towards nature (and conceived the term ‘ecocriticism’) and he makes clear that the artist’s occupation of writing about nature was not the practice of an escapist avoiding political issues but an activity which promoted the importance of nature to humanity, so was broadly political in nature, a ‘move from red to green.’⁷¹ Webb can also be said to be political, for she was keenly aware of how ephemeral, and thus how vulnerable, nature is and by the time of writing *The House in Dormer Forest* her concern for nature had turned to anger at its destruction, her ecopoetics urging this in her focus on the subject of trees.

Webb had written before about trees, comparing the life of a suffering person to be like that ‘of a stricken tree, colourless and silent’ (*SJ: Healing*, 5); she depicts nature spirits as ancient gods, personified trees such as ‘the catkin-covered willow’ (‘The Ancient Gods’, *SJ: Poems*, 90-91) who roam their earth kingdom; and in *Gone to Earth* she describes Hazel in tree-like terms. In another tree-like image in the poem ‘The Happy Life’, she appears to be dressed in leaves: ‘No silks have I, no furs nor feathers [...] Yet the soft, crinkled leaves are mine’ (*SJ: Poems*, 9). Her preference for the ‘soft’ leaves over ‘fur’, the product of animal exploitation, again highlights her valuing of nature. And there is a metric pattern in this poem, falling from alternating double stresses to unstressed syllables, adding an emphatic rhythm which underscores her sense of being rhythmically attuned with nature through all its ‘weathers’ and seasons. Webb also mourns the loss of a favourite tree in the poem ‘The Fallen Poplar’: ‘Never any more shall the golden sun / Make of your leaves, my dainty one, / Ardent shields of silver-green [...] you, the friend of my heart, lie still’ (*SJ: Poems*, 38). Her concern here recalls John Clare’s similar respect for nature: ‘Old favourite tree, thou’st seen time’s changes lour / Though change till

⁶⁹ Donovan, pp. 84-85.

⁷⁰ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 3.

⁷¹ Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, pp. 8-9.

now did never injure thee, / For time beheld thee as her sacred dower.⁷² Garrard claims John Clare as ‘the true poet of nature,’⁷³ citing John Middleton Murry’s contention that “‘the intensity with which [Clare] adored the country which he knew is without a parallel in English literature; of him it seems hardly a metaphor to say he was an actual part of the countryside.’”⁷⁴ These endorsements of Clare are just, for he defended rural Northamptonshire in the face of the damaging effects of enclosure and the loss of rural traditions and he is far more than a ‘versifying naturalist’.⁷⁵ However, Garrard’s advocacy of Clare as ‘the true poet of nature’ highlights the mystifying neglect of Webb as a fellow ‘true poet of nature’, whose work makes clear that the finely-balanced and fragile world of insects, animals and forests must be protected.

The House in Dormer Forest is almost entirely set within the forest where the experience of ‘going into the green world’ (*HDF*, 185) produces the realisation that there is more there ‘than could be seen or touched or heard’ (*ibid.*, 263). The forest is ‘a primeval woodland’ (*HDF*, 9) of generations of trees which stand ‘austerely aloof (11) and seem ‘to peer [...] over one another’s shoulders [...] like people looking at something grotesque [...] in a kind of disdainful indifference’ (12). To be part of this forest is to be part of the “‘majestic, measured, rhythmic beauty’”⁷⁶ of nature rather than its ‘enemy’ or master and so to be part of the ‘total web of life.’⁷⁷ In his consideration of the effect of forests on the human psyche, Lewis reports a study in which participants expressed their feelings amongst trees: “‘being in the woods is a place where your spirit can fly free,’”⁷⁸ echoing Amber’s ‘mystical exaltation’ (*HDF*, 281) in Dormer Forest. But ‘successive Darkes had threatened to fell the forest’ (*ibid.*) and Webb clearly shows how appalled she is by the ‘mass-ego’

⁷² John Clare, ‘The Fallen Elm’, *John Clare*, ed. by R.K.R. Thornton (Dent: London, 1997), p. 80 (unpublished in Clare’s lifetime – see John Clare, *The Midsummer Cushion*, ed. by Anne Tibble (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1990)).

⁷³ Garrard, p. 49.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ R.K.R. Thornton, ed., *John Clare*, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

⁷⁶ Lewis, p. 35.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 35.

(ibid., 11) of humanity as it destroys nature, illustrating something akin to Plumwood's later concern that 'contemporary processes of ecological destruction [...] seem to give clear warning of these blindspots in our economic rationalist course.'⁷⁹ And Webb condemns humanity's exploitative relationship with trees, asserting a warning 'that green nature and all it represents is neither an enemy or a servant to be subjugated.'⁸⁰

Colin Tudge wisely observes that 'the human debt to trees is absolute'⁸¹ and goes on to detail the way that human civilization has developed through its dependence on trees, even stating that 'without trees our species would not have come into being at all.'⁸² But there has always been more than this practical need, for 'trees are innately holy'⁸³ and Tudge gives examples of trees' religious connections. The central focus in his book is his reverence for trees, for, increasingly, they seem 'more and more like the world's appointed governors, ultimately controlling all life on land [...] and 'the key to its survival'.⁸⁴ And Webb's novel clearly utters her fear of the annihilation of our forests:

the shuddering horror of the axe, the bitter and incurable destruction of the day when gnomes of ugly aspect are let loose with flashing weapons among the haughty sons and daughters of the gods, hacking and tearing at the steadfast forms of beauty, until beauty itself seems to have crashed earthwards (*HDF*, 11).

Webb's tone here is one of indignation as she saw the peril ahead, of 'incurable destruction', anticipating the loss of such 'steadfast' 'beauty' forever as her use of the violent, dynamic verbs 'hacking' and 'tearing' suggests here. Didactic she may be in this novel, but she was right, for the 'flashing weapons' wielded by generations have destroyed rainforests and untold numbers of species and damaged the delicate balance of the natural world. The complexity of sentence

⁷⁹ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, p. 25.

⁸⁰ Charles A. Lewis, *Green Nature / Human Nature* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 9.

⁸¹ Colin Tudge, *The Secret Life of Trees: How They Live and Why They Matter* (London: Penguin, 2006) p. 5.

⁸² ibid., p. 7.

⁸³ ibid.

⁸⁴ ibid.

structure is used as a rhetorical device to reflect the narrator's inner turmoil as clauses are heaped one after another in a succession of breathless, angry declaratives. This evokes a fury at the constant threat of thoughtless destruction by the 'ugly gnomes' of humanity, 'the mass mind [...] driven by vague, wandering aims; conscious in a dim fashion, of its own weakness' (ibid., 11). At the end of *The House in Dormer Forest*, however, the forest remains intact with its 'dreams of bronze and copper and clear gold' (ibid., 291), so is in hope of living into another autumn, ablaze with colour, and still a 'governor' of the world. This suggests the supremacy of nature, as the indestructible Devil's Chair in *The Golden Arrow* also conveys, and Webb's belief in the rights of nature. However, the term 'dreams' implies only possibility, not certainty, indicating a fear that it may not survive. Humanity, Webb says, has constructed 'round itself a grotesque structure in the everlastingness of which it implicitly believes', but within this 'structure' 'man is herded', humanity 'loses its bearings' (ibid., 11) and nature is jeopardised. She makes this point prominently in a poem entitled 'To the World', using the second person, in a voice which is strongly accusatory:

You took the rare blue from my cloudy sky;
 You shot the one bird in my silent wood;
 You crushed my rose – one rose alone had I.
 You have not known. You have not understood.
 I would have shown you pictures I have seen
 Of unimagined mountains, plains and seas;
 I would have made you songs of leafy green,
 If you had left me some small ecstasies.
 Now let the one dear field be only field,
 That was a garden for the mighty gods.
 Take you its corn. I keep its better yield –
 The glory that I found within its clods (*SJ: Poems*, 48).

Here, Webb decries the destructive power of humanity, which kills its wildlife, destroys its beauty and thinks only of the land for its agricultural value. She could not have envisaged the greenhouse effect, but her accusation that even the skies are ruined by humanity's 'grotesque' practices almost prefigures this disastrous feature of global warming. She mourns the loss of her Eden, the

'garden for the mighty gods' and pleads with the world to leave 'one dear field' to be left unravaged. Her repeated use of the modal form 'I would have' utters a deeply-felt grief for the loss of a now 'unimagined' world of ecstatically spiritual loveliness. And each line begins with a spondee, 'you took', 'you shot' etc. This use of double-stressing adds an emphatic force and the rhythmic patterning of the pentameter lines and abab rhyme scheme further her insistence. In her emphasis on the destructive egoism of human society she pre-echoes modern-day ecocritics who criticise 'the destructive Anthropocene of human arrogance and hubris [...] current climate change and species extinction are driven by human activities and the very large ecological footprint of our species'.⁸⁵ *The House in Dormer Forest*, is thus deeply perceptive, even at its most didactic, and Webb's emphatic statements about the absolute worth of nature, particularly symbolized by trees, along with the strong criticisms she makes of human society in this novel, reflect her determination to elucidate her view with ever greater precision. It is true that Webb 'had a definite understanding of life which demanded expression [and which] she persistently sought to make concrete.'⁸⁶ This comment reinforces Webb's conviction in this novel and draws attention to the way this eloquent voice has been so neglected.

And the eloquence of her work, whatever its flaws and weaknesses, is always present, for Webb was fundamentally a poet. Her prose is as richly lyrical as her poetry for, 'it is rhythm in its widest sense which at the same time distinguishes and unites her verse and prose.'⁸⁷ Rhythm is a tricky abstract concept but it has been suggested that 'there can be no poise without a right and a left, no balance without the pull of the scales.'⁸⁸ This idea of 'balance' is useful in explaining the poetic qualities of Webb's prose, as in this example from *The House in Dormer Forest*:

A scent came up, so keen that it made the heart ache, as did the fresh, amazing colours – the flushed flowers, the blanched flowers, the empurpled swallows, tinted like the thunder-clouds that haunted the horizons of Dormer (191).

⁸⁵ Mies and Shiva, p. xix.

⁸⁶ Marshall, p. 316.

⁸⁷ Lorna Collard, 'Mary Webb', *Contemporary Review*, 143 (1933), 455-464, p. 458.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

In one complex sentence Webb fits clauses together in a way which fulfils this idea of 'right' and 'left' as the phrases seem to work together in pairs. For example, the phrase, 'a scent came up' is, say, on the left hand side and is balanced by the phrase 'so keen that it made the heart ache' on the right hand side so that together they form a set. This patterning feels very natural to us, mirroring the way we walk – left leg, right leg, rhythmically. The two sets of our limbs, hands, ears, eyes etc and even the two sides of our brains means that the concept of balance is elemental to our every action and possibly thought. The rest of the sentence can be matched up in this way: on the one side, 'fresh, amazing colours', on the other, the tripled phrase, 'the flushed flowers, the blanched flowers, the empurpled swallows'; and the first half of the final clause 'tinted like the thunder-clouds' on one side with 'that haunted the horizons of Dormer' on the other. In addition to this sense of patterning there are the vivid images which appeal to several different senses – the aroma of the 'keen' scent, the colourful visual pictures of flowers, 'flushed' pink and 'blanched' white and the deep purple swallows; whilst the reference to 'thunder-clouds' is implicit of an auditory experience. Through the use of metaphors as vehicles to convey these images the overall effect is of a strikingly painted word-picture, adding to its poetic qualities. Webb's first published critical essay, 'The Core of Poetry', appeared in 1920 (the same year that *The House in Dormer Forest* was first published) in *The English Review* and its topic was this very subject, indicating that she was perhaps thinking about the poetic qualities of her work at this time:

Poetry is the subconscious self breaking from its prison of silence and finding its way through the mazes of the written word. Very often it frees itself from the tyranny of the word, expressing itself, not through the thing said, nor even through the idea, but through a rhythm, a cadence, or a chiming of sounds (reprinted in *CPP*, 37).

Her finely-drawn impressions of the rural Shropshire of her day are full of such 'chiming of sound' and express her conscious and subconscious desires to capture and preserve, in verse and prose, the changing seasons of her world. There are phonological qualities to her writing, such as the long, soft sibilant sounds in 'A Summer Day': 'Long aisles of larches stretch away, / Mysterious, dim [...] Across the glades the larches fling / Their shadows, stirred / [...] The flecks of sunlight shift and crowd / So goldenly' (*SJ: Poems*, 40). Elongated

vowel sounds in lexical choices such as ‘long’ and ‘stretch’ add to the slowing of pace, aiding a contemplative tone of quiet admiration. She captures, too, the departure in autumn of swallows, who ‘pass in restless companies. / Against the pink-flowered may, one shining breast / Throbs momentary music – then possessed with motion, sweeps on some new enterprise’ (‘Swallows’, *SJ: Poems*, 32). And here the sibilant and syllabic sounds are carefully chosen to create a quickening effect, mirroring the fleet motion of the migrating birds. Once again she refers to the ‘music’ of nature, treasuring its numinous beauty in every ‘fleck’ of detail. Vita Sackville-West also articulated in her poem, ‘The Land’ (1926), a vivid appreciation of the seasons in her beloved Kentish Wealds, writing lyrically of the country which ‘has me by the heart.’⁸⁹ In spring, ‘skies are gentle, breezes bland [...] when the full midsummer comes, on scented clumps the bees will hum.’⁹⁰ Even in winter, she writes, ‘I sing once more the mild continuous epic of the soil’⁹¹ linking to Webb’s frequent references to music and the ever-changing permanence of nature. And she speaks of the freedom to express one’s deepest sentiments in poetry, for ‘poets are free of winds and alien lands.’⁹² Daringly modern and unconventional, Sackville-West led a very different life to Webb, but they can be linked in their shared belief in the power of poetry to elicit a deep awareness of the profound beauty of their surroundings and to preserve an understanding of its transience.

By the time of writing *The House in Dormer Forest* Webb’s awareness of this had been honed upon the whetstone of experience, and the energy with which she writes conveys her ardency. Webb had great hopes for this novel and her fervent belief in its message, especially as her literary craft was developing strongly. However, disappointment and disillusionment awaited for the reviews were largely unenthusiastic and the book was described as ‘hurrie[d] over [and] very gloomy.’⁹³ At times it does have a rushed feel and

⁸⁹ Vita Sackville-West, ‘The Land’, citation transcribed from, ‘Vita Sackville-West reads from her poem “The Land,”’ <<http://youtube.com>> [accessed 12 November 2017].

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ Colles, 1920, p. 471.

lapses into vagueness and verbosity, as if Webb did not stop to edit her work. For example, towards the end of the novel, she writes:

There are times, especially under moonlight, when the human face takes the look of white flowers, and when the personality is effaced, leaving simply human pathos (*HDF*, 239).

Webb uses the image of white flowers to suggest a sort of innocence or blankness, but the comparison does not appear wholly apt, the implicit meanings seem vague and the whole sentence could be pared back to make a more precise point. Elsewhere in the novel, Webb writes one continuous paragraph lasting for three pages (see *HDF*, pp. 187-190). This is an important passage as it conveys Amber's acute realisation of the numinous amongst the woods and much of the writing is poignant. Yet, it is rather overlong and could be refined, giving the whole episode a sharper clarity. Webb 'was so distressed by the reviews that she became ill, and during the early autumn of 1920 suffered the first serious attack of Graves' Disease since before her marriage.'⁹⁴ As 1920 came to a close, Webb was again recovering from illness, increasingly frail and depressed and her doctor advised a complete change. Henry believed that London would facilitate Webb's absorption into the chief literary scene and he was also keen to securing a teaching role at a progressive London school so the move was speedily arranged. Quite what Webb felt about this drastic shift is unknown but she must have quailed at the prospect of once more leaving her beloved Shropshire and the move would instigate the most difficult and damaging stage of her life.

⁹⁴ Coles, p. 214.

Chapter Four

A Dyad: *Seven for A Secret* and *Precious Bane*

1921-1926

By the spring of 1921 Mary and Henry Webb had settled down in a flat in Bayswater, London, and Webb strove to make the best of it, endeavouring to adapt to her new surroundings, actively attempting to engage with various literary groups and gaining work as a book reviewer. Here, though, she was sensitive to the suffering she saw all around her in a large, crowded city at the end of the post-war boom in which unemployment and poverty were now sharply on the rise. This had a depressing effect upon her and she was also becoming increasingly physically frail. Crucially, she was again separated from the one place which was essential to her well-being so her health did not improve. Nevertheless, over the ensuing six years the couple would continue to be based in London and her last two completed novels would be largely written from her memories of Shropshire. These two works form a dyad because they form a pair of contrasting, yet complementary, novels, reflecting some of Webb's darkest days, yet also her triumph through these into the jubilation which she depicts in *Precious Bane* as 'the other side of silence'. The quality of the writing in the two novels perhaps mirrors these states, parts of *Seven for a Secret* containing her poorest work and *Precious Bane* illustrating the height of her talent. *Seven for a Secret* suggests a frustration with patriarchy but Gillian Lovekin, Webb's protagonist, seems to end in submitting to this. Whereas, in *Precious Bane*, Webb's creation of Prue Sarn as a strong, independent female character rewards a feminist analysis. Comparisons with other women writers, such as Sylvia Townsend Warner, Winifred Holtby, Dorothy Richardson, and a further comparison with Virginia Woolf will extend this discussion.

Seven for a Secret is less didactic than *The House in Dormer Forest* in its exploration of themes of mysticism, romance, and the relationship between humanity and landscape, but it also lacks the true lyrical power and subtlety of *Precious Bane*. And although there are sections of fine writing within it, there is also 'some of her worst [...] the closing chapter, for example, is clumsy and

makeshift.¹ The last chapter fails because Webb seems to hastily pull the final threads of the story together, but this in itself suggests her struggle to reconcile her further suffering with her absolute spiritual faith in nature. Although the Webbs returned to Spring Cottage during holidays, the long months in London were difficult, the otherness of the city an antithesis to the world of hills, heaths and meres that Webb dwelt in within her imagination. London represented everything that she was not and the urban landscape could not succour her spirit. Her attempts to infiltrate fashionable society were a failure as she found herself so inexperienced in this urbane atmosphere and ‘a pathos surrounds those first hopeful ventures [...] she was now mixing in a world the sophisticated callousness of which she was unable to gauge or protect herself against’.²

Now forty years of age Webb was a small, thin figure, unfashionably dressed in clothes of her own making, scarves shrouding the enlarged goitre on her neck and her strangely prominent eyes giving her an odd look. Even her appearance suggested her otherness and she continued to exist outside a borderland, discouraged by failure and lack of money. She did meet with some support, admiration and encouragement from Martin Armstrong and Edwin Pugh, whom she met in London, but opportunities for oneness with nature were few for the city was an alien environment. Her dejection is evident in a poem, ‘To A Blackbird Singing in London’, written during this period as she yearned for her native countryside: ‘Sing on, dear bird! Bring the old rapturous pain, / In this great town, where I no welcome find / Show me the murmuring forest in your mind, / O sing me far away’ (*SJ: Poems*, 59).

What we hear poignantly in the tone of these lines is despair, enabling our understanding of the poem as deeply personal. The voice of nature is elusively absent, just ‘murmuring’ through the bird’s presence, but the memory of it sustains her and writing about it is a therapy. Like John Keats she explores the possibility that only in art and nature was it possible to share in the immortal consciousness of the world, to express something of both nature and human experience. When Keats envisages himself in the world of the nightingale, its ‘soft incense’, ‘embalmed darkness’ scented by the ‘dewy wine’ of ‘the coming

¹ Coles, pp. 230-1.

² *ibid.*, p. 220.

musk-rose' as it 'pour[s] forth [its] soul abroad in such an ecstasy'³ it comforts him. For Webb, in the midst of the unhappiness of her London life a blackbird's song brings the same intense awareness as Keats's moment of exquisite beauty in the nightingale's harmony. Her oxymoron, 'rapturous pain', in the poem above, echoes Keats's complex emotional conflict in 'Nightingale', which hovers between joy and morbid realisation. Keats's theory of 'Negative Capability',⁴ proposed the idea of perfection in beauty and truth⁵ and for Webb this perfection is realisable in the natural world, however fleeting the experience. In her early experience of mystic oneness with nature, after her first illness, she had written of 'the realization of a perfect thing, the fear that we may never see it again, and the instinct that urges us to ascend through the known beauty to the unknown which is both the veil and the voice that summons beyond it' (*SJ: Healing*, 50). This 'unknown', the great mystery of life within the boundaries of the unfathomable world and the search to regain that 'perfect thing' lies behind all her work, but *Seven For a Secret* appears to be haunted by a sense of frustration at the difficulties of attaining this.

The title of *Seven for a Secret* is taken from an old rhyme, 'I saw seven magpies in a tree', in which the speaker counts out traditional meanings attributed to the number of magpies gathered together: 'One for sorrow, two for joy ... seven for a secret that's never been told' (see flyleaf to *SFS*). The elusive nature of this secret could link with Webb's search at this time to regain the spiritual security she had previously secured and the novel really centres on a

³ John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale', *The Nation's Favourite Poems*, op. cit., p. 21 (poem first published in *Annals of the Fine Arts*, 1819).

⁴ Keats' Theory of Negative Capability was explained in a letter to his brother in December 1817: 'The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeable evaporate, from their being in close relationship with beauty and truth [...] I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason [...] with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.' (*The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*, Boston, NY: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1899, p. 277) <<http://www.archive.org/details/completopoetical100keat>> [accessed 14.02.13].

⁵ John Keats, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" ('Ode on a Grecian Urn', *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*, op. cit. Poem first published in *Annals of the Fine Arts*, 1820).

search for freedom, an opportunity to be oneself in a society which demanded the abrogation of the female to marriage and motherhood. It has been said that the novel is concerned with ‘the lost Eden [...] the universal female experience in which the girl child learns that she is “other” and “alien” and that her desires and self-value are denied validity by the world beyond Eden’s gates.’⁶

In London, Webb was absorbed by her longing for her own ‘Eden’, which represented the source of her sense of self and her spirituality. This longing allowed her to achieve a transformation from her outward life in London to the inner Shropshire in her memory. As she wrote, she transported herself back to her borderland betwixt and between England and Wales, a land of magic and mystery for her, as the opening to *Seven for a Secret* suggests:

On a certain cold winter evening in the country that lies between the dimpled lands of England and the gaunt purple steeps of Wales – half in Faery and half out of it – [stood] the old farm-house [...] in the midst of the folds and billows of Dysgwlfas-on-the-wild-Moors (6).

Webb’s emphasis here on being ‘half in’ and ‘half out’ suggests the tension between being ‘half in’ Shropshire in her memory and imagination and ‘half out’ of it in the reality of urban life. There are magical elements to this almost ‘Faery’ land and the farmhouse is set deep within a remote ‘wild’ place, adding a romantic turn to the description. Her language conveys a mood of enchantment as if she is trying to recapture a spellbound experience and the story is a fable about the powers of good and evil with ‘a pervading sense of the onward sweep of the natural cycle, its beauty, terror and mystery; of dark elemental forces both within man and without in the ancient untamed places.’⁷ The characters struggle between love and hate, right and wrong and these battles may reflect Webb’s personal unhappiness and a concern with freedom. By this point, there were problems in the marriage too and Webb was spending considerable amounts of time alone, struggling against illness, depression and isolation. She was torn between her love for Henry (who wanted to be in London full-time) and her desperate love for Shropshire (for which she longed). Her spiritual life suffered as a result and there are parallels in this story with Underhill’s next mystic

⁶ Barale, p. 138.

⁷ Coles, pp. 231-2.

stage, the sacrifice of self, ‘the dark night of the soul [...] this dark fire of purification’⁸ and a ‘painful effort towards negation.’⁹

In the bleaker tone which permeates *Seven for a Secret*, Webb demonstrates that for the sake of love, the mystic’s ultimate goal and the key to the unitive life, the self must struggle to surrender individuality and will. Her portrayal of a powerful, hidden force of evil, embodied in selfish desire, may have stemmed from her Christian upbringing but she does not connect this with the Devil. This darkness is part of nature and part of the human soul, symbolically represented in a gloomy woodland overhung with malevolence, which is hauntingly (and rather heavy-handedly) described as a place of ‘stunted larches and birches [...] “where summat’ll come to pass. Summat unket”’ (*SFS*, 62). Here ‘good’s thin’ (*ibid.*) and ‘prophecy lower[s] [...] so strangely’ (*ibid.*, 149) foreshadowing a struggle ‘with something stupendous’ (*ibid.*, 92). This darker phase in Webb’s writing reflects an attempt to overcome ‘the divisive dualities of good/evil, nature/culture, spirit/flesh, I/Not-I’ which are features of ‘old theological categories’ and which feminist spirituality attempts to surpass.¹⁰ According to Melissa Raphael, ‘the Goddess overcomes these dualities because she is the dynamic interconnection, interaction and interdependence.’¹¹ This fits with Webb’s repeated emphasis on nature as interconnecting male/female, body/soul, and environment/self. And in *Precious Bane* Webb would most successfully depict the feminist experience that Carol P. Christ describes as ‘find[ing] the Goddess “in” nature and “in” myself.’¹²

As well as pantheistic, mystical and pagan elements in Webb’s spirituality, there are also theological (a term coined by Raphael) aspects, forming a kind of eclectic and personal fusion, founded in her experience of nature and religion. In her rejection of a distinct and anthropomorphic God and the patriarchy of the Church, Webb’s ideas can be described as theological as

⁸ Underhill, p. 381.

⁹ Bastide, p. 83.

¹⁰ Melissa Raphael, *Introducing Theology: Discourse on the Goddess* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 60.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Carol P. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 104.

her work incorporates ideas in Goddess theory, understood as 'thealogy'. Thealogy denotes a feminist discourse on the divine¹³ and highlights a central issue in which women have struggled to find meaning in male dominated theology. Webb does not refer to 'the Goddess' directly, but clearly her concept of the divine in nature links with this feminist idea. She repudiates masculine theology and anticipates modern feminist spirituality, whilst also emphasising the unification of male / female as universal. Webb rejects anthropocentric and theocentric views of the world and while she does not censure an androcentric attitude in which man is superior over woman she does present an outlook in which the female view is the lens through which her ideas are posited. Her work can be considered as gynocentric because the perceptions and desires of women have primacy, although her vision is universal, embracing both genders.

The importance of nature in women's spirituality has been noted: 'the power of the Goddess is present in the earth and in all beings in the universe.'¹⁴ Christ describes a life-affirming moment, a first awareness of 'female power as creative and vital [...] images of the Goddess tell us that we participate in the mysteries of nature, in the cycles of birth, death and renewal.'¹⁵ Some feminists state that women are seen, theologically, in terms of the body, whereas men are viewed as the soul.¹⁶ This duality has also been studied by Val Plumwood, who draws attention to the polarisation of reason and nature that has led to a devaluation of nature, suggesting that a recognition of the differences between men/women, mind/body, human/animal is needed and a unified understanding of this 'otherness' and 'our community in the earth.'¹⁷ Hence, Webb's relevance to discourses on women's writing and feminist spirituality can now be fully recognised as she illuminates the patriarchy of society and the masculine core of theology which denied equality to women. And she anticipates the realisation of an androcentric devaluation of nature. Raphael tells us that 'thealogy invites a sense that the world might be other than it is.'¹⁸ Webb helps towards this

¹³ See Raphael, p. 9.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁵ Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁷ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 137.

¹⁸ Raphael, p. 166.

notion in her positive presentation of women's respect for nature and in offering spiritual alternatives for women, reinforcing her interest in the social 'injustice that lies at the heart of the first feminist criticisms of religion.'¹⁹

Both novels in our dyad are interesting in terms of their portrayal of women's lives and social roles, their desires, their sexuality, their search for freedom and their spirituality. In *Seven for a Secret* Webb attempts to further her exploration of the idea of spiritual 'otherness' but the novel is puzzling and, ultimately, rather unsatisfactory since Gillian is not a true mystic, unlike Webb's other female characters. And this makes a striking contrast with *Precious Bane* in which Prue is Webb's most self-possessed and articulate female character who expresses pantheism with the most eloquent sense of a personal truth, furthering her depictions of epiphany in earlier novels. Gillian's lack of mysticism may reflect Webb's isolation from nature at this time and thus a loss of spirituality. By the time of writing *Precious Bane* she seems to have recovered from this as the surety of her views and the quality of her craft suggest.

Webb's presentation of Gillian in *Seven for A Secret* is problematic, though, for Gillian has no awareness of her spirituality and is absorbed by self-interest, having been reared to a 'philosophy of self' (*SFS*, 275). She traps rabbits to make money for music lessons with which to pursue her dream of fame; she kills a slate-gray drake because she desires his feathers for her outfit; she plays with Robert Rideout's feelings for her, then decides to try and tempt her aunt's meek lover to seduce her: 'she would make him fall in love with her [...] to victimize him' (*ibid.*, 86). Like Prue in *Precious Bane*, Gillian is physically marred, carrying a scar from an early childhood accident. This cicatrix, 'which seamed one side of her forehead' (*ibid.*, 11) is said to represent her sin, meaning that 'she mun sup salt tears afore she's raught free of evil. Her life mun be wounded' (*ibid.*, 80). The scar could be suggestive of stigmata in a Christ-like image and so represents her suffering, but, as with Prue's hare-lip, it more redolently represents Gillian's borderland position in which she is physically and emotionally cut off from where she wants to be. Acts of suffering also further the idea that the mystic must endure a painful, self-reflexive process in order to purify the soul and, through attaining spiritual insight, form a

¹⁹ Christ, *Womanspirit Rising*, p. 3.

realisation of the true, whole self. For Prue it is through the isolation of this 'otherness' that she crosses into wholeness but, although Gillian finds some resolution through the realisation of love, she does not attain Prue's mystic truth and the novel is marred by its weak ending. This incomplete solution could also exemplify Webb's struggle to balance her own needs with the self-sacrifice that marriage seemed to require and the difficulty of resolving these issues.

Webb was searching for her own version of independence: artistically, financially, and spiritually. Gillian is far from spiritual realisation but she is on a quest for personal freedom. Although the novel appears to be typical of romantic fiction it is actually attempting to explore the lack of freedom and opportunity in women's lives, traditionally centred in the home. Webb's presentation of the domestic is interesting, as she repeatedly suggests a rejection of this in her novels: Hazel has no interest in the home, longing, instead to be outdoors; Amber seeks escape from the stifling atmosphere of family life; and Gillian yearns for excitement, experience, and to live life: 'Take me out in the world and learn me to sing' (ibid., 28-29). Webb herself has been described as 'wander[ing] about the fields or garden [...] too indolent to tackle her housekeeping [...] no meal prepared, the fire gone out, and the sink full of the previous day's dishes.'²⁰ For her the outdoor world heralded freedom and the indoors was for writing, not domesticity. Alison Light suggests that 'writings by women in the inter-war years played a crucial part in bringing buried anxieties and desires [...] to the surface [...] voicing just how much the women of the middle classes had suffered from being identified with, and shut up in, the home.'²¹ And Gillian does not want a future which consists only of housekeeping for her widowed father, but longs to explore the world:

And if you'll let me go, I'll come back when you're aged and old [...] I'll come in a carriage, with silver shoes and a purse of money, and maybe a husband or maybe not, and I'll walk in with a sighing of silk and pour money on the table, and bring you oranges and candied peel and sparkly wine' (ibid., 29).

²⁰ Wrenn, pp. 70-71.

²¹ Light, p. 219.

The numerous, layered clauses of Gillian's speech indicate her eagerness and energy and, although she considers the possibility of marriage, she does not see it as essential in order to gain what she wants. She is materialistic, desiring glamour, status and wealth and she longs for independence. As Gillian's imagination runs into the language of fairytale, the future seems to hold so many possibilities. She is reminiscent of Cinderella as she longs to exchange dull domestic oppression for 'a carriage', 'silver shoes' and a rustling 'silk' dress. She sees herself empowered by independence for it is she who will be the gift-giver – she will 'pour money on the table' and it will be her money, her life, her future. And her father's agreement to her leaving the remoteness of farm-life to live in the town of Silverton with her aunts is the first step towards this. However, small-town Silverton's limitations quickly bring disappointment and the town's lack of prospects are represented by Aunt Emily, an ageing spinster with 'a wistful mouth and eyes that always seemed to have just stopped crying' (ibid., 73), who for countless years has fostered an unfulfilled relationship with her 'gentleman friend' (ibid., 77). Aunt Emily's quiet acceptance of this contrasts with Gillian who 'wanted everything! She would take milk and sugar and all the rest of life' (ibid., 74). There are features of the Bildungsroman in *Seven for a Secret* and Gillian's eager, youthful energy has a similarity with Elizabeth Bowen's protagonist, Lois, in *The Last September* (1929). Lois has recently left school and is yearning for freedom but her story is set against a backdrop of the Irish Troubles of 1920, linking her sense of discord in her own life with the political scenario. Lois's encounters with young English army officers are elemental in her maturation, bringing a deep desire for more from life: "She thought of love with its gift of importance. I must break in on all this."²² Bowen's novel charts Lois's struggles to do this, to find identity and escape from the intense family life of a country mansion house where she is exiled from real life. In Webb's novel Silverton becomes another prison, where she feels as if 'she was in her grave, and had a flagstone over her' (ibid., 75). Her lack of future is evident in this morbid image of entrapment and, as for Hazel in *Gone to Earth*, there seems no possibility of escape from the strictures of society:

²² Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 23.

She knew that if she married the curate or anyone else her aunt should choose for her, she would be in a cage even if he took her to London.

There was, then, no choice. (ibid., 78-79)

The metaphor of 'a cage' clearly represents the imprisonment of marriage and all the domestic responsibilities this would entail and that was precisely what she had been trying to escape from in her father's home. The punctuation in the final sentence above is well-chosen as the simple technique of the addition of the emphatic 'then' embedded with commas slows the reading pace and underscores the finality of the phrase 'no choice.' Gillian is struggling against patriarchy, tricked into bed by her suitor, Ralph Elmer, demonstrating, as with Hazel, the male misuse of the female body, and pressed into marriage by her father. Even then she is bargained over as if she is a piece of marketable property. 'A thousand pound? For my girl's good name? Marry her. I'll settle ten thousand on her' (ibid., 211). In fact, Ralph is already secretly married so cannot marry Gillian but, nevertheless, agrees to the contract.

Looking at Webb's novels from a historicist perspective it is clear that in her world women were raised to become wives and mothers; to find a husband was, as in Jane Austen's sphere, an economic and social requirement. Marriage is a monetary tool in a male dominated society, for Gillian is driven into a marriage which economically benefits her father. Hazel, too, is promised in marriage to the first man that offers in order to get her off her father's hands and although Edward, her husband, is kind he seeks to tame her into a neat little curate's wife, reflecting entrenched social expectations for women to be 'The Angel in the House,'²³ idealized paragons of domesticity and virtue. These concepts were 'embedded'²⁴ in middle-class Victorian families, so Webb is reflecting women's issues of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, when life-choices for most women were limited. Webb wrote about romance and marriage because she lived in a world in which men held economic power and a woman's status was identified through her husband. And she reflects social and familial expectations of women. Prue and Deborah are portrayed in

²³ 'The Angel in the House', a popular poem by Coventry Patmore, first published in 1854 and expanded until 1862, charting his courtship to his wife and depicting women in idealized terms.

²⁴ Barale, p. 60.

the domestic sphere of washing, cooking and cleaning whilst wealthier characters with servants, such as Amber, have to find roles for themselves in other ways, especially if unmarried. The limits of possibility for women in Webb's society are evident in depictions of spinsterhood: Amber is considered unmarriageable and Prue has no marriage prospects because of her 'flawed' appearance, as her brother reminds her: 'nobody'll ask you, Prue' (*PB*, 41).

As Heather Ingman points out, 'The 1920s have been described as the era of the spinster,'²⁵ owing to imbalance in the population of men and women due to the loss of so many men in war. Expectations for women to marry were still strong in post war society, though, and spinsterhood was often equated with failure. It took bravery and independence to be able to declare, as Sarah Burton in Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* (1936) does, "I was born to be a spinster, and by God, I'm going to spin."²⁶ Sarah Burton is the newly appointed headmistress of a girls' school and gains self-esteem and confidence by having a career, which for an increasing number of women became a possibility during the inter-war years. Such women benefitted from the opportunities women gained during the war to work in a variety of roles (although these quickly fell away once the men returned). In Holtby's *The Crowded Street* Muriel Hammond has a much greater struggle to find a role other than the marriage she has been groomed for and for which her mother longs. To Mrs Hammond's despair, no one asks for Muriel in marriage and when she eventually does receive a proposal it is too late, for Muriel, inspired by the politically active Delia, has found she has 'tastes and inclinations and a personality [...] if I married [...] I'd have to give up every new thing that has made me a person.'²⁷ Muriel has found the confidence to turn down the offer and to ignore the taint of failure attached to being unmarried because she has found her identity. There are shades of Muriel's earlier diffidence and lack of confidence in the shy, plain, and unnamed narrator of Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) who is overwhelmed by an unexpected proposal of marriage by Max de Winter and the brooding grandeur of his home, Manderley, in which everything still seems to belong to his former beautiful, and

²⁵ Ingman, p. 9.

²⁶ Winifred Holtby, *South Riding* (London: Virago, 2010), p. 51.

²⁷ Holtby, *The Crowded Street*, p. 305.

now dead, wife, Rebecca. The narrator has married de Winter out of gratitude, to escape her life as a lady's companion, a dreaded 'career', for the single, impoverished woman. But she is haunted by Rebecca's indelible presence and faces a long struggle to attempt to find her own identity. This she never really does, and Sally Beauman makes an interesting point about this: as 'our pale, ghostly and timid narrator, fades from our view; it is *she* who is the dying woman. By extension [...] her obedient beliefs, her unquestioning subservience to the male, are dying with her.'²⁸ And she makes a dramatic contrast to 'that Other Woman, fearless, wild and immoral, the epitome of female licentiousness [...] Rebecca, "did what she liked" and "lived as she liked".'²⁹

Rebecca is a selfish, powerful woman who exploits men as far as she needs them – the antithesis of the meek, obedient, subordinate and thoroughly domesticated wife. But she does not emerge, radiant, into our literary imagination until over ten years after Webb's Gillian and Prue, who are not quite so bold, though in Gillian's selfishness and Prue's courage there are elements of the daring Rebecca. Prue, though shy and disfigured, discovers she has 'no bashfulness at all (*PB*, 141) and Gillian is thrilled by the idea of being 'wicked, deliciously wicked' (*SFS*, 89) as she is 'bent on adventure' (48) not drudgery. And it is fortunate for us that Webb was selfish and courageous enough to pursue her independent ideas in her writing rather than tackle her dirty dishes, but, clearly she wanted love and romance too. Like Amber, Webb was over thirty when she married, an 'old-maid' by the social standards of the day, and her physically plain and damaged heroines suggest something of Webb's own perception of herself as unattractive, her looks impaired by illness. Jean Rhys expertly depicts the bleak hopelessness of a woman, past her prime, who has failed in love in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930). It is in fact Mr Mackenzie who has rejected the protagonist, Julia, who then retreats to a dismal, cheap hotel room in Paris, 'a good sort of place to hide in.'³⁰ Here she drinks away her days and reflects upon her painful memories and there do seem to be reflected elements of Rhys's own life experiences of disastrous affairs, failed marriage,

²⁸ Introduction by Sally Beauman to Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* (London: Virago, 2004), p. xv.

²⁹ Light, p. 157.

³⁰ Jean Rhys, *Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 9.

alcoholism and loneliness. Julia seems really to want only one thing – love – and Webb portrays women’s desire to love and be loved, but this does not mean her stories were all about female subordination. Webb conformed by marrying but her ‘writing and her need for an audience were at least equally important as her marriage.’³¹ And her work concerns hers and other women’s autonomy, the conflict between this and romance, and the desire for both.

As women desired greater opportunities for freedom, this was also reflected in attitudes towards their sexuality. This is initially reflected in Gillian’s maturation, in which sexual awareness brings power:

Robert had not, previously seemed worth captivating [...] Now, as she watched his sturdy and independent figure cross the fold, she became conscious of him as a young man to be enslaved (*SFS*, 41).

Gillian’s appreciation of Robert’s ‘sturdy’ physical form connotes her desire for him. This is an awakening for her, as the phrase ‘she became conscious’ denotes. Webb’s vocabulary choices, clearly indicate that Gillian wants to ‘captivate’ and ‘enslave’ Robert, making her the possessor as she surveys him at work, and this creates a gender reversal as it is usually the male gaze which seeks to possess the female body. However, when Gillian loses her virginity with Ralph, she is ‘angry and ashamed and scornful’ at what ‘lay behind the locked and guarded door that the matrons kept so carefully!’ (*ibid.*, 205). In this, Webb is frank in her criticism of mythologized attitudes towards female sexuality, as Gillian is disappointed in her first experience for ‘there was no love in it, and so it was a lamp unlit’ (*ibid.*). Webb’s metaphorical imagery reinforces notions of sexual awakening as an enlightenment, ‘a lamp’. For Gillian this is ‘unlit’ and desire is thus worthless without love. Webb’s frankness in exploring female sexual maturation as an awakening confronts patriarchy and illustrates her modernity in her openness about a hitherto taboo subject – female desire. Heather Ingman notes the influence of Marie Stopes’s *Married Love* (1918) so that, ‘women during the inter-war period had new expectations about their right to sexual satisfaction and demonstrated a willingness to speak openly on these issues.’³² Webb’s interest in this topic was exhibited by other writers, such as

³¹ Barale, p. 4.

³² Ingman, p. 17.

Elizabeth Bowen, who portrays awakening sexuality in *The Last September* and Sylvia Townsend Warner in *Lolly Willowses* (1926). In *Lolly Willowses*, Laura is older, an unmarried spinster aunt, but the liberation of her sexual desire is also clearly linked to the liberation of womanhood and self.

The inter-war years were a time in which gender roles and identities were being re-evaluated and Radclyffe's Hall's openly explicit novel about lesbianism, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), expressed one facet of this. The novel centres upon the (female) Stephen's quest for identity, precipitated by 'an urgent necessity to love [...] to touch'³³ and culminates in a rather ambiguous answer to her question, 'Why am I as I am – and what am I?'³⁴ as she finally realises that she is an 'inverted' woman. Ingman notes that even Vita Sackville-West, who had a sexual relationship with Virginia Woolf, referred 'to her lesbian side as her "perverted nature."³⁵ Despite an increased transparency about same-sex relationships, homosexuality was still viewed as an abnormality or illness.

Webb depicts only heterosexual relationships but she does portray sexuality naturalistically, as a normal part of women's lives and she was modern enough to believe that this did not necessarily have to take place within marriage. In fact she challenges attitudes towards female sexuality outside marriage in Deborah's willingness to live with Stephen without wedlock in *The Golden Arrow*. As Ingham notes, in the inter-war period 'Single women were now more likely to embark on an affair.'³⁶ And in a short story, 'Caer Cariad: A Story of the Marches', one of several stories included in a volume with *Armour Wherein He Trusted*, Webb openly criticises conventional attitudes towards marriage and fidelity in a tale about Dinah, locked in a union to a husband who does not care for her and tells her: 'It's not as I want you [...] it's what the neighbours 'ud say' (*AWHT*, 229). Hence she is drawn irrevocably towards David, in her genuine love for whom she believes she 'would attain holiness' (*ibid.*, 228). She has an intuitive certainty that 'the fire of physical love must leap up' (*ibid.*, 229) between them but it is not until old age that she eventually forsakes her husband to go to him and in doing so is transformed by 'the

³³ Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (Ware, Herts.: Wordsworth, 2014), p. 10.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 137.

³⁵ Ingman, p. 11.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 10.

sudden white flowering of her spirit' (ibid., 235). The blossom imagery here is suggestive of Dinah's physical and spiritual fulfilment into ecstatic state.

Anne Cranny-Francis discusses the role of female desire in fiction, suggesting that 'the objectification of the male is often read as an articulation of female desire, and it probably is' but then questions to what extent this is 'constructed by patriarchal ideology' and, furthermore, 'how much is the articulation of that desire used to coerce readers into an acceptance of patriarchal ideology?'³⁷ She notes that this is not necessarily a passive acceptance but a 'bitter resignation to a system which seems unchangeable'.³⁸ Siegel also makes this case, commenting that 'Tess and Hazel are claimed both according to the laws of nature and the old gods and according to the Judeo-Christian tradition and the social laws it has created.'³⁹ What Cranny-Francis argues, though, is that romantic fiction can challenge patriarchal assumptions, that by 'stating female sexual desire as a reality [and] reconstituting women as sexual beings [...] romantic fiction might then be read as part of the process of renegotiating female subjectivity.'⁴⁰ Although, this does not emerge successfully in *Seven for a Secret*, Webb re-explores this theme much more powerfully in *Precious Bane*, evidencing Webb's questioning of patriarchal assumptions.

Prue's first realisation of her sexuality is integral to her experience of being re-born to a different vision of herself. She agrees to replace her friend, Jancis, in her father's show of raising Venus, in which she is raised naked through a trap-door for the entertainment of the local young squire, whom he hopes to attract as a bridegroom, an event also witnessed by Michael, 'him that was the world and all to me' (*PB*, 118). In this experience Prue realises:

for the first time that, whatever my face might be, my body was fair enough. From foot to shoulder I was as passable as any woman could be [...] my flesh was like rose petals, and the shape of me was such as the water-fairies were said to have, lissom and lovesome' (ibid., 116).

³⁷ Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Use of Generic Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 187.

³⁸ ibid.

³⁹ Siegel, p. 144.

⁴⁰ Cranny-Francis, p. 187.

In this moment Prue attains a new confidence as she becomes aware of her bodily beauty, 'like rose petals', and reflects that 'two men would have been my lovers that night if I'd willed it so' (ibid.). Her use of the verb 'willed' indicates her sense of empowerment and suggests Prue's growth in personal identity. Sexuality can be 'a powerful expression of our connection to others and to all beings in the web of life'⁴¹ but also a strong expression of self. Webb had attempted to show this before in her candid assertion of female sexuality. Amber Darke revels in Michael's 'long, eager gaze' upon her which is 'disquieting and delicious' as it speaks to her of a desire which is both physical and spiritual, a look which demands 'that her spirit should reveal itself to his completely, and without any shadow of reserve' for it betokens 'passion – pure, crude and vital' and 'is a gift that comes to very few' (*HDF*, 195). 'Pure, crude and vital' – this flowering of sexual desire and the bloom of passion, which together culminate in an intense awakening. The triadic phrase reflects a three-fold idea: passion for nature for its 'pure' beauty, within nature for its 'crude' sexual impetus, and the spiritual 'vital' fervour found beyond the actual. Thus, Barale is right to admire Webb's 'unblushing acknowledgement of sexuality's role in human lives.'⁴² In *Seven for a Secret* Gillian admits to a 'sudden agony of desire' (205) but Webb's candid portrayal of sexual desire is marred by her description of Gillian as 'like a doe pursued through a dark forest'; her simile suggests a meek female creature who is hunted and overcome by male desire.

Even before her unhappy marriage to Ralph, Gillian realises that it is Robert whom she wants, but is afraid to admit this to him for fear that he will kill Ralph in vengeance. This point furthers the extent to which Gillian is entrapped by a male-dominated society since Robert's apparent aggression means she has to submit to male desire and it can be argued that this extends Webb's attempt to use Gillian symbolically as a victim of masculine ego and power. However, this is also a weak aspect of the novel for, whilst it 'depicts the horror, despair, and brutality of male oppression'⁴³ it also 'affirms female submission.'⁴⁴ Because her heroines place so much emphasis on loving men Webb has been

⁴¹ Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 147.

⁴² Barale, p. 1.

⁴³ ibid., p. 125.

⁴⁴ ibid., p. 126.

problematic for those who have feared that she is endorsing patriarchal attitudes rather than criticising them and she has been ‘read all too frequently as yet another woman writer of women’s love stories’.⁴⁵ Feminist critics have, as Barale summarises, seen Webb as equating female value with a male evaluator because she appears to depict ‘female identity as a male creation [and] her heroines’ most womanly act is submission to her lover [so] of course, this [...] characterises Webb, in this sense, as a distinctly non-feminist author.’⁴⁶ Siegel, who employs an extended metaphor of male colonisation of women, concurs, saying Webb’s books are ‘unlikely to be a source of immediate delight to feminist readers [since Webb] dramatizes masochistic female behaviour, while her narrators assert its naturalness’.⁴⁷

Gillian’s submission to Ralph, her father, and to Robert’s aggressiveness can certainly be read as a flaw in the book and Webb lapses into the language of romantic fiction which reinforces male superiority:

She saw where curiosity and youth and vitality had brought her, and she stood like a drooping flower [...] when he kissed her feet, her ankles, her knees, held her close against him by the waist and pressed back her head to kiss her beneath the chin till she felt as if her back would break – faintly and palely she suffered it (*SFS*, 214-215).

Here Gillian is indeed colonised by Ralph, who, by force, possesses every part of her and literally bends her to his will as she passively endures this. The simile of the ‘drooping flower’ is archetypal in suggesting female weakness and the adverbs ‘faintly’ and ‘palely’ reinforce stereotypical images of femininity. Hence, if Webb wanted to criticise patriarchy she fails to achieve this and seems to further establish it. The other important female character in the book, Ailse, is even more oppressed, having been rendered dumb after the trauma of seeing Ralph murder her mother and having then been forced to become his mute, obedient wife. Ralph eventually murders Ailse too and absconds, which then frees Gillian who also discovers that she is not legally married to Ralph. At last,

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁷ Siegel, pp. 131-2.

she admits her love to Robert and so finds personal happiness. Unfortunately, this is represented as another act of submission:

She flung herself at Robert's feet. She laid her wet cheek on the coarse hand-knitted sock of her father's shepherd, and clasped his ankles with her hands. Her damp hair lay along the floor; sobs tore her; the tears came at last (ibid., 280)

In reducing Gillian to floor level Webb probably intended to illustrate that Gillian had reformed from her selfish, materialistic, thoughtless self, renouncing the principle of 'I' in order to become one with the loved one. But it also reinforces images of inequality in which Gillian's desire for Robert makes her literally 'fling' herself at his feet. There appear to be echoes in this description of the sinful woman who washes Christ's feet with her tears and dries them with her hair (see Luke 7:38 NIV). In the Gospel version this is an act of redemption, as it is, too, for Gillian, but in making Robert a Christ-figure Gillian is more redolently a submissive sinner who helps bear Eve's sinful burden of blame.

In images such as these, in which Webb furthers convention, she weakens her attempts to challenge social and religious patriarchy. However, Webb also acknowledges that female submission can be considered as inevitable since desire is part of nature's reproductive scheme, enforcing both men and women into the roles it demands. As Ralph seduces Gillian 'they could no more help themselves than slaves bound for sacrifice on Druidical altars' (ibid., 204). Here she describes the instinct within nature as something unstoppable and they are controlled by a will greater than their own. Nevertheless, the 'sacrifice' is far greater for the female who is, by nature's law, the bearer of the children that this instinct insists upon. Human beings are part of a pattern of seed to death which 'reigns in fold and field, in town and village' (SFS, 204). Webb had explored this idea earlier in *Gone to Earth* as Hazel and Reddin become part of the reproductive animal kingdom, the air full of 'bleatings and lowing [...] [and] a horse neighed, aggressively male' (189). This recalls D.H. Lawrence's 'pulse and body of the soil, that [...] clung to their feet with a

weight that pulled like desire'⁴⁸ in *The Rainbow* (1915) and similarly, Hardy's portrayal of 'the rush of juices [...] below the hiss of fertilization.'⁴⁹

As for Tess and Hazel motherhood is the inevitable result of this pattern and is evinced by Webb as necessary and ineluctable: 'that a woman should, in the evolution of life, cease to be a virgin and become a mother is a thing so natural and so purely physical as hardly to need comment' (*GE*, 256). For Gillian this is also the case in the conclusion of the novel, although Webb describes this positively as 'the tremulous yet triumphant beauty of wifedom and motherhood' (*SFS*, 286). However, elsewhere Webb touches upon the issue of women losing their sense of identity and freedom in maternal experience and begins to anticipate the freedom of choice that sexual revolution will bring. Lily, Deborah's sister-in-law in *The Golden Arrow*, is fearful in her pregnancy and seeks choice in obtaining the necessary medicines for an abortion. Hazel also does not want a child and wishes to be free of this curse of womanhood, preferring to "'mother the bees and foxes'" (*GE*, 245). But 'woman is biologically destined to submit her freedom to the demands of wifedom and maternity'⁵⁰ and Hazel, weighed down by a child, cannot outrun the hunt, indicating that she is destroyed by oppression and by her lack of choice. When, in 1921, Marie Stopes opened a birth-control clinic in London this was an elemental step in giving women choice, although abortion continued to be illegal throughout the inter-war period and remained so until the Abortion Act of 1967. However, by 1939 an estimated number of abortions carried out annually was between '110,000 and 150,000,'⁵¹ suggesting women were extremely anxious to free themselves of unwanted maternal responsibilities.

Possibly, Webb's own mother tried to escape further pregnancies and domestic ties in her long retreat into her bedroom and Webb herself sought freedom in her writing. In her novels she proposes freedom of choice for women, both spiritually and bodily, including whether to marry or not or to abort rather than bear a child. For Webb, the children she would have chosen to have never arrived. Her anguish at her childlessness was increased on visits back to

⁴⁸ D.H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, London: Penguin, 1976, p. 8.

⁴⁹ Hardy, *Tess*, p. 192.

⁵⁰ Barale, p. 126.

⁵¹ Ingman, p. 17.

Spring Cottage, where she greeted neighbouring children: 'With a wild unrest / And sobbing of a strange, fierce tenderness, / I snatch them to my breast. / But my baby, ah! my baby / Weepeth – weepeth / In the far loneliness of nonentity' ('The Neighbour's Children', *SJ: Poems*, 50). Her plaintive tone is underscored by the italicised repetition, evoking deep sorrow, whilst the broken rhythm and oxymoronic 'fierce tenderness' reinforce her deep 'sobbing' emotional conflict.

Back in London, Webb made elaborate plans for the country children's Christmas presents, depriving herself in order to buy each one a special gift. Barale believes that this excessive giving was a means for Webb of staying in touch with her own childhood self or even that Webb was trying 'to become her mother via surrogate maternity, and become, as well, her own child/daughter through her identification with the neighbourhood children.'⁵² I suggest that her fondness for the local children was more to do with the biology she herself recognised as inevitable and which naturally made her desire children, particularly in an era when a married woman was expected to produce offspring. In addition, her lavish present-buying was part of her natural generosity and her longing to create an ideal and happy world.

This longing is also reflected in the ending of *Seven for a Secret* as Webb attempts to make everything perfect. In finding fulfilment with Robert Gillian finally experiences mystic insight and spiritual union with the earth:

Everything had melted away [...] as if the cottage and the farm, the moor [...] were all part of the thaw, were all flowing, flowing down to the sea. And she? She was melting away too' (*SFS*, 280).

The name 'Gillian' is said to mean youthful, so Webb may have chosen this to relate to Gillian's re-birth. Webb's imagery is too 'flowing' here, with a lack of subtlety caused by an excess of repetition but she is suggesting that the ego must be sacrificed to enter a re-birth in which the spirit becomes at one with the world. Susan Griffin describes this process of becoming one with the earth: 'As I go into her [...] I am transformed [...] Her renewal washes over me endlessly [...] I become aware of all that has come between us.'⁵³ In this process there is

⁵² Barale, p. 103.

⁵³ Susan Griffin, 'This Earth Is My Sister', in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), ed. by Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, pp. 105-110 (p. 105).

suffering: 'I feel her pain and my own pain comes into me, and my own pain grows large and I grasp this [...] I open my mouth [...] I taste, I know.'⁵⁴ Gillian has realised that 'to suffer is to be sensitized to the cosmos and everything within it' (*SFS*, 215) and this anti-anthropocentric view insists upon the abandonment of ego: 'What matters it? Trouble not your midget lives with midget griefs! See! Even now my tide rolls on, like the tide of Time' (*ibid.*, 260). Here it is the voice of nature which speaks in a reminder of the smallness of individual human lives and its own vast power. And in Robert's experience there is also a merging with the universe in an exaggerated moment of romantic bliss as 'Ages upon ages went by. There was time in that kiss for the world to depart itself from a blazing meteor, and cool, and gather moisture, and bring forth grass and trees, and deck itself with orchards and gardens (*ibid.*, 282).

Webb portrays an image of an Eden and her desire here may have been to reinforce her pantheism and to re-address the possibility of being absorbed into nature in a state of oneness. However, this point is lost amongst such stylistic weaknesses in the closing chapters. As the novel draws to its close the narratorial voice becomes too evident, not with the didacticism of *The House in Dormer Forest*, but with an omniscient, questioning narrator who is attempting to anticipate the reader's responses. The penultimate chapter is punctuated by interrogative and exclamatory phrases which creates a forced effect and becomes rather distracting and irksome to the reader. For example:

Was the heart blind and deaf that she did not see and hear afar the agony of the man who loved her? [...] Hark, oh! hark how the hours toll! [...] Poor child, are you still asleep while the best of life goes by? [...] Gillian! (*ibid.*, 274-275).

Hester Janet Colles makes a fair point in reviewing the novel when she states that 'these emotions are upon the paper rather than in the air'⁵⁵ as this style tends to estrange rather than engage the reader. The narrator continues in this vein, calling to the character in this insistent way until Gillian awakes and, in a rather poor imitation of Jane Eyre's experience in which she hears Rochester summon her, Gillian hears 'Robert's voice quite clearly' (*SFS*, 276) calling her.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Colles, *TLS*, 1922, p. 726.

As the novel builds to a close, the narrative pace increases too quickly in Webb's hurry to bring Gillian to Robert and thus resolve everything, and she persists in using an excess of question marks and exclamations. In the final chapter Webb slips even further into an intrusive narratorial style, as the first paragraph consists of an entire sequence of rhetorical questions, which the narrator imagines are now bothering the reader:

But the reader must by this time be indignant. What is the explanation of the title? Why has everything gone to pieces like this? [...] Who has, in this uncalled-for manner, let eternity into the cottage and spoilt the plot? Reader, that is how things happen! When Love, the scarlet-mantled, comes in, can the author help being dazzled? (ibid., 284).

Webb again seems to imitate Charlotte Brontë in this attempt to address the reader directly as she wraps everything up, endeavouring to draw together the loose threads and provide an ending she imagines the reader will enjoy. But Webb is unsuccessful in this as she seems to have run out of the energy and imagination necessary to bring this about with more deftness. It seems that 'a feeling of tiredness creeps into the story [...] as though the writing had been done with much effort.'⁵⁶ The final few pages slide into stereotypical fairy tale mode as the novel slips into a future image in which we see that Gillian and Robert are happily married and now have several flourishing children gambolling amongst summer flowers. This literal 'happy-ever-after' ending fulfils Webb's desire for an image of perfect love and in its unreality, perhaps, stands as a stark contrast to the reality of her own situation. Hence, she writes the fantasy that gratifies her own deep desires in the failure of her own happiness.

Yet, despite these failings the novel contains flashes of quality writing in which the poetry of her work often outweighs other flaws. Although she was suffering from a lack of spiritual and emotional security, to a large extent due to her absence from rural Shropshire, memories sustained her. And however bitter the days her writing promises the comfort of nature:

Beneath the dark-leaved sloes and the dog-berry bushes were to be found here and there among the pine-needles small neat plants of sanicle, with its gracious ivy-shaped leaves and its tall buds that flower in

⁵⁶ Moulton, p. 212.

foaming white in May - the sanicle that, so the old books say, heals all outward hurts and inward wounds, and is the emblem, lovely, ephemeral, hardy, of love (*SFS*, 187).

This almost connubial image of the bride-like plant draws upon myth and suggests Webb's hopeful view of nature's capacity to renew. The antithesis between the 'dark-leaved sloes' and the white sanicle suggests a symbolic image of a pure truth to be found 'beneath' the darkness of suffering. Here she again harnesses her skill in layering phrases in one complex sentence which draws the eye downwards to the small detail of the tiny plant. Despite the length of the sentence, it is not cumbersome or clumsy but flows with each punctuated pause in exactly the right place to allow each image its full poignancy. The use of multiple adjectives in the final image, 'lovely, ephemeral, hardy' reinforces both the beauty and transience as well as the strength and endurance of love and, again, the simple yet powerful device of separating the concluding phrase by a comma shows how thoughtfully this writing is crafted. Another example of such poeticism in this work can be seen in this extract:

And the plovers, glancing in the light, answered him between their silver wings with silver cries, and alighting here and there on bright green patches amid the heather, uplifted their crests and ran gleefully, hearing afar the step of the old magician. Spring, who sent green fire through the darkest places, and inebriated them with vitality and drove them to love, and gave them for a little while the freedom of the house of life (*ibid.*, 93).

The vivid imagery in this passage conveys a moment of purest appreciation of nature by harnessing the attitude of the plovers. Many of the various species in this bird group are long-distance migrants and in this carefully observed depiction there is a sense of the birds' relief at finding a suitable breeding ground. Their joy in the 'green fire' of spring intoxicates them and the renewal of life which comes with spring ushers in 'freedom'. The birds' experiences proffer a similar reassurance to the reader that even in 'the darkest places' of existence there is always this hopefulness. The hopeful expectation that suffering will end is a key point in *Seven for a Secret* for at the novel's conclusion Gillian is no longer 'so drugged with self' (275) and her scar almost disappears ('it seemed [...] that there was no scar there at all' - 283). She has emerged through her otherness and relinquished individuality to achieve wholeness, uniting the self

with the divine, in which ‘the stripping off of the I, the Me, the Mine, utter renouncement, or “self-naughting” [...] an imperative condition of the unitive life.’⁵⁷ And Christ concurs with the need for ‘humility [for] the first truth about human beings is that we are part of nature.’⁵⁸

To be ‘part of nature’, deep within Shropshire, was Webb’s greatest need but she could not have both this and her marriage. *Seven for a Secret’s* emphasis on self-sacrifice could connect with the expectation in her society that a woman should put her husband first and herself second. The choice for Webb seemed to be between love and the spirit, an impossible decision, which caused her much further suffering, exacerbated by further bouts of Graves’ Disease. She could not resolve the difficulties in her own life as easily as her story, but she appeared to know that whatever her individual struggles, the answers to life’s mysteries lay, as ever for her, in the world around her. In the final paragraphs of *Seven for a Secret* Webb suggests the ongoing nature of the spiritual quest; the pursuit of a mystery which can never be wholly understood since its endpoint cannot be finally determined:

Is there more? Out in the early summer morning, listening to the silence, you know that there is more, that in and beyond the purple earth and silver sky there is a mystery so great that the knowledge of it would be intolerable, so sweet that the very intuition of its nearness brings tears [...] such is its glory and piercing beauty (*SFS*, 285-6).

Here Webb regains more of her lyricism and literary skill. The use of the second person pronoun is less intrusive, inviting the reader to share the narrator’s thoughts of the inexplicable and the impalpable. She encourages us to pause, ‘listening to the silence,’ and the present participle here indicates a continuous action, an active engagement with a mysterious experience of the unknown. Her imagery sweeps the reader beyond the minutiae of daily existence, further than the reaches of physical boundaries of time and space, ‘beyond the purple earth’ and ‘silver sky’ where we release our clutch upon the temporal and cognitive and drop effortlessly into realms of ‘intuition,’ dazzled by ‘sweet,’ ‘glorious’ ‘beauty’ as we stand poised upon the threshold of a deep spiritual

⁵⁷ Underhill, p. 425.

⁵⁸ Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, pp. 134-5.

understanding of the world. And such thoughts and images must have spiritually nourished Webb herself, even in the Metropolis. The defects of this novel suggest Webb's struggle to hold onto this vision, yet she does not fail entirely and as a further house-move was undertaken, to Hampstead in 1923, a new opportunity arose. Hampstead was not Shropshire by any means, but its large heath and more open aspect suited her better. Living in a cottage with a small garden was an improvement on the Bayswater flat, although, sadly, thieves stole the flowers she grew.⁵⁹ Edwin Pugh also lived close by - in Pugh Webb found a great admirer and supporter and his praise and encouragement must have been a boon to her, especially as he introduced her to other, more empathetic, literary figures through membership of the Dickens Fellowship.⁶⁰

Hence, in these more favourable circumstances when Webb began work on her fifth novel, *Precious Bane*, a renewed energy and positivity informed its creation. She and Henry had spent the long weeks of the summer break at Lyth Hill and this time in her beloved Shropshire refreshed her bodily, mentally and spiritually. In the autumn of 1923, back in London, but nourished by her intense inner life and deep well of memories, she wrote swiftly and surely. As a result, *Precious Bane* vividly depicts both the nadir of suffering and the triumphant zenith of an ecstatic spiritual joy but these are expressed with control and artistry in a setting which evokes the very essence of the land she loved.

In an introduction to later editions of *Precious Bane* Stanley Baldwin was to observe of this novel that Webb's 'sensitivity is so acute and her power over words so sure and swift that one who reads some passage in Whitehall has almost the physical sense of being in Shropshire cornfields' (*PB*, op. cit., 5). In Hampstead Webb was able to recall the hours she had spent simply looking at her rural surroundings, studying the fields, hills and lakes, absorbing the intricacies of the insects, the flowers and the sounds of the birds, enabling her to give this 'physical sense' of the Shropshire landscape in her writing. To recall and redact with crystalline clarity moments of unification with 'the web of life or nature'⁶¹ allowed Webb to recapture the sublime: 'It was so quiet that I could hear the sheep cropping across the corner of the mere in the glebe' (*PB*, 54). In

⁵⁹ See Coles, p. 246.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, see p. 248.

⁶¹ Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 44.

another example she links back to the idea of sacred springs (a focal point in Celtic / Welsh religious ideas) in her description of the lake, connecting to the idea of the water as the spring of life and a source of spiritual renewal:

That was the best time of year for our lake, when in the still, hot noons the water looked so kind, being of a calm, pale blue, that you would never think it could drown anybody. All round stood the tall trees, thick-leaved with rich summer green, unstirring, caught in a spell, sending down their coloured shadows into the mere, so that the tree tops almost met in the middle [...] so quiet it was that though there were only such thin songs as those of willow wrens and robins, you could hear them all across the mere. Even on a burning day as this, when I pulled the honeysuckle wrathes, there was a sweet cool air from the water, very heady and full of life (ibid., 189).

Webb's own sense of absorption in nature and her process of internalising the landscape is evident in the sensory detail in this description of Prue's experience as she is 'caught in a spell', watching so quietly that she becomes a part of this still, serene landscape which is yet 'full of life'. Webb's ability to appeal to multiple senses and feelings makes this a powerful piece of writing. The visual images capture a moment with absolute clarity and the ear almost strains to hear the soft sounds of the birds' songs. Added to this are the sensations of summer heat and the relief of the cooler air near the water so that the reader experiences this 'heady', almost intoxicating moment most vividly. Prue speaks in *Precious Bane* of the power of words to make 'such a murmuration' (112) and to be 'so piercing-sweet' (ibid.) and this novel is filled with the poetry of Webb's writing which enchants her reader:

It was not religious [...] It was beyond that. It was as if some creature made all of light had come on a sudden from a great way off, and nestled in my bosom. On all things there came a fair, lovely look, as if a different air stood over them' (*PB*, 58).

Here Webb writes dexterously, the short, powerful sentence, 'It was beyond that', creating impact and a pause which heightens the reader's awareness and anticipation. Her imagery depicts the merging of the corporeal form with a supernatural presence, perhaps the soul, in an inversion of Tess's experience when she describes the separation of the soul from the body. The

transformative nature of this experience is clear from the change this produces in Prue's perception, as 'all' things are refreshed with beauty and it is almost as if the atmosphere has actually been renewed with 'a different air'. Webb's sentence structure creates reflective pauses, as the commas slow the pace of the narrative and there is a rhythmic flow to the writing, heightened by the anaphoric phrasing and alliterative adjectives. It would not be difficult to separate the lines of the extract into a poetic form:

It was not religious,
 Like the goodness of a text heard at a preaching.
 It was beyond that.
 It was as if some creature made all of light
 Had come on a sudden from a great way off,
 And nestled in my bosom.
 On all things there came a fair, lovely look,
 As if a different air stood over them.

Reconstructing the extract in this form illustrates the poetic timbre of Webb's writing and demonstrates its lyrical flow in which there is a patterned effect made up of shorter and longer phrases. Some use of consonance can also be identified in phrases such as 'bosom' / 'them' and assonance in 'look' / 'stood' which adds to this patterning and helps to create lyricism in the writing. Her use of symbolism is also now more refined than the rather clumsy attempts in *Gone to Earth*. The 'creature of light' suggests an ethereal representation of hope and epiphany and later in the novel there is a delicate metaphorical image of Prue's spiritual freedom in a dragon-fly emerging from its chrysalis:

I found one just beginning to come out of its body, and I leaned near, pretty well holding my breath, to see the miracle. Then began the wrestling and the travail to get free, first its legs then its shoulders, and soft wrinkled wings [...] "Well," I says, with a bit of a laugh and a bit of a sob, "well, you've done it! It cost you summat, but you've won free (191).

The transition is a long, difficult process during which the creature comes out of its body 'with great labour and pain, and a torment like the torment of childbirth, and a rending like the rending of the tomb' (ibid., 188). This metamorphosis mirrors Prue's experience of endurance and there is a sense of pantheistic re-birth, as she experiences an emotional empathy with the dragon-fly. The

analogy to biblical accounts of Christ's resurrection are clear as the insect emerges into new life from 'the rending of the tomb' and this implies the sacred value of this moment to Prue. Webb's repetition of the abstract noun 'torment' and the dynamic verb 'rending' reinforces the idea of intense pain, furthering the concept of great suffering which culminates in epiphanic revelation, mirroring Webb's own experience of mystic awakening, painful suffering, the black faithless night, the struggle to reconcile the material world with the spiritual and the final threshold-crossing to unity and regeneration. Webb draws out this moment of everyday biology into an instance of exquisite and fascinating intensity. Tension is successfully created through the detail of Prue's actions as she 'lean[s] near' and holds her breath. The time connectives 'then' and 'first' add to the structuring of events, increasing our attention as the reader 'watches' the episode in the mind's eye. And the word 'miracle' does not seem trite or hyperbolic, since our appreciation of this simple experience becomes thoughtful and intense, further illustrating the quality of writing in this novel.

Prue describes her experience of mysticism as 'enough to shake your soul' (*ibid.*, 190). And whereas William James notes the ineffability and transience of the numinous in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), the difficulty of adequately accounting for in words its 'vague and vast and sentimental'⁶² qualities, Webb successfully conveys such experiences with skill and profundity. In *Precious Bane* the clarity of her ideas had crystallized and the rounding of her pantheistic belief is reflected in the surety of her style with less of the over-assertion she had earlier employed in *The House in Dormer Forest*. The novel contains Webb's most compelling account of mystic experience, emanating 'more fully and directly than any of the preceding novels from the centre of Mary Webb's experience.'⁶³ The oxymoronic meaning of the title of *Precious Bane* comes from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'Let none admire / That riches grow in Hell; that soyle may best / Deserve the precious bane.'⁶⁴ And it refers to Prue's hare-lip, a 'bane' because of the negative effects this has upon her life, but also 'precious' as it leads her to true mystic insight as she relates:

⁶² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London and New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 379.

⁶³ Coles, p. 258.

⁶⁴ See citation in McNeil, p. 132.

I fell to thinking how all this blessedness of the attic came through me being curst. For if I hadna had a hare lip to frighten me away into my own lonesome soul, this would never have come to me. The apples would have crowded all in vain to see a marvel, for I should never have known the glory that came from the other side of silence (ibid., 60).

Webb articulates Prue's experience here with deft control. She appropriates a style of language to Prue which is apt in conveying her contextually as a rural working woman in early nineteenth-century England who, despite the limits in her education, has a keen intelligence and insight. Webb uses accent and dialect convincingly and the lexis is sufficiently simple to be plausible for the character but also expressive enough to illustrate Prue's spiritual perception, powerfully conveyed in the key phrase 'the glory that came from the other side of silence'. The abstract noun 'glory' expresses a moment of absolute exaltation and the metaphor of 'the other side of silence' describes a depth of feeling which reaches past intellectual thought or physical being into a borderland which enables a re-birth into ecstatic wholeness. This mystic inspiration is 'a most powerful sweetness' (ibid., 58), 'a marvel' (see extract above) which 'though it was so quiet, it was a great miracle, and it changed my life' (ibid., p. 59). Webb's description recalls George Eliot's warning that, 'if we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence'.⁶⁵ Eliot spoke of 'the inward life of poetry – that is, of emotion blending with thought?'⁶⁶ and in *Silas Marner* (1861), she uses images of light symbolically to represent this insight as spiritual faith and also does this through a common man, the weaver Marner. Webb uses silence in a similarly symbolic way (whether or not she took the phrase 'the other side of silence' from Eliot is unknown) and a common woman to articulate spiritual insight.

The concept of 'absolute silence' (*SJ: Healing*, 37) is a central motif in her work. From her first writings she thought that 'Few things bring such healing to a worn spirit as this silence' (ibid., 21). Through listening to nothing more than

⁶⁵ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.182 (original work published in 1871).

⁶⁶ Cited by Q.D. Leavis in appendix to *Silas Marner* by George Eliot (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 208-239, p. 208.

a quiet 'breathing' ('The Vagrant, *SJ: Poems*, 84) or a 'mysterious whisper [in the] dark, still dawns' ('Spring in the West', *ibid.*, 57) a numinous peace is enabled on 'the other side of silence' and even death is 'everlasting silence' (*GE*, 287). Matthew Fox elucidates this concept of 'silence' as 'not just about oral silence.'⁶⁷ It is the 'radical letting go of language. A letting language go. A concentration on what is non-language, non-music, non-self, non-God. It is being. A being still.'⁶⁸ Fox notes that this profundity of being can be found by some in 'following ecstatic experiences in nature,'⁶⁹ but his focus is not nature mysticism specifically. For Webb, of course, nature was central to experiencing the 'glory' (*PB*, 60) of spiritual reality, the borderland threshold of mystic silence and for her there is a profound fluency, an articulation, in this soundlessness. She contrasts this with the endless busyness and noise of humankind, for even 'if he desires a silver cup for sacraments, there must go to its fashioning the sound of hammering, the scratch of a chisel, the roar of a furnace' (*SJ: Healing*, 37). Whereas 'a crocus achieves her end [...] in spite of [...] inanimate matter pressing on her from all sides [...] she comes through scathless and silent' (*ibid.*). The struggle for the crocus to reach through and beyond the borderland of heavy earth into light and air is a metaphorical evocation of the mystic experience of profound spiritual revelation through silence.

And in Webb's depictions of such ecstatic subliminal experiences there are commonalities with the pinnacle of mystic experience described by other writers, such as 'the unitive life,'⁷⁰ 'the final triumph of the spirit, the flower of mysticism, humanity's top note.'⁷¹ Graef depicts a similar state in Sufi mysticism as a certainty, in which one 'feels neither his own body nor anything happening around him, nor his own thoughts, but is overwhelmed solely by the divine glory.'⁷² For the Christian mystic, this epiphany is 'an endless progress to the transcendent God [concluding in] the full restoration of man to his paradisaal

⁶⁷ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1983), p. 136.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 136-7.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 137.

⁷⁰ Underhill, p. 425.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 413.

⁷² Graef, p. 19.

state of winged innocence.⁷³ Bastide also describes an ecstatic condition which 'it is impossible to understand [...] intellectually, just as it is impossible to give an account of it afterwards.'⁷⁴ Webb, however, does precisely that in her musical, lyrical writing, her 'great prose of genuine experience, the intuition of peace "beyond religion," [which] makes clear for us the truth to which she wished above all to bear witness.'⁷⁵ She offers her readers the harmonious blending of soul and sense in which both the simplicity of pleasure and the complexity of endurance are understood and attuned, as she encourages 'the autonomy, self-actualization and self-transcendence'⁷⁶ of her readers. She proffers a sort of spiritual mindfulness and a therapeutic philosophy, for even though 'everyday life will continue'⁷⁷ and 'the visitation came but seldom' (*PB*, 59), the experience can be recaptured: 'when I was lost for something to turn to [...] I had but to [...] hear the bees making their murmur, and smell the woody o'er sweet scent of kept apples and I'd remember it and forget all else' (*ibid.*).

There is a sense in this novel that the problem created by Webb's refusal of the Christian explanation for suffering is now more fully assimilated into her feminist spirituality. Her focus, through characters such as Prue, on women's need for spiritual wholeness transcended the boundaries of conventional religion and asserted the right to her own views. As has been suggested, Webb 'created a world in which woman, free from society, had the means to achieve her own happiness [thereby making] woman mistress of her own destiny.'⁷⁸ Webb's insistence on the importance of spiritual life is reiterated by Carol Ochs, for whom, this 'domain of freedom, creativity and wholeness [is] where we should bring together our most basic commitments. It is also where we would suffer the greatest loss if we ignored or denied important parts of ourselves.'⁷⁹ Ochs's work is centred on female experience and she recognises that

⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 100.

⁷⁴ Bastide, p. 94.

⁷⁵ Marshall, pp. 318-9.

⁷⁶ Carr, pp. 54-5.

⁷⁷ Bastide, p. 95.

⁷⁸ Barale, p. 57.

⁷⁹ Carol Ochs, *Women and Spirituality* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), p. 27.

‘traditional spirituality is based on a pronounced dualism’⁸⁰ at the pinnacle of which is male versus female. This is usually the crux for the spiritual feminist, since ‘the White Male System is the dominant one in our culture,’⁸¹ as Anne Carr observes. Dorothy Riddle addresses crucial issues at the core of:

our underlying belief structure regarding the nature of reality, our relationship to a larger cosmos or deity, and our purpose on this planet [...] These beliefs form a critical portion of our worldview and are communicated to us from birth, even before we are able to speak. As with our cultural assumptions, these spiritual beliefs typically go unquestioned.⁸²

And Carr refers to Anne Wilson Schaef’s research in which participants were asked to list characteristics of God and of humankind, followed by male and female characteristics. The results indicate that ‘male is to female as God is to humankind,’⁸³ a factor at the root of ‘the mythology of the White Male System, whose basic hierarchical structure is God – men – women – children – animals – earth.’⁸⁴ It may be that there are ‘differences in women’s and men’s spiritualities,’⁸⁵ that ‘women’s spirituality might be described as more related to nature and natural processes than to culture [...] more emotional than intellectual.’⁸⁶ It is not the focus of this study to determine the nature of women’s spirituality or feminist spirituality but Webb is important in this context because she enabled women of her time to think differently about religion, showing that you could reject the male-dominated Church without rejecting a spiritual life.

Webb’s philosophy overturns the ‘White Male System’ by placing earth at the top of the hierarchy, thus rejecting the basic principle of a male dominated system. Her feminist spirituality rejects patriarchal religion, replacing it with the re-creative power of sacred nature. Her focus on rebirth connects with former

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 122.

⁸¹ Anne Carr, ‘On Feminist Spirituality’, in *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. by Joan Wolski (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), pp. 49-58 (p. 51).

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 53.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. 51.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 53.

ideas in many myths and religions (including Wicca as mentioned above) about nature goddesses as symbolic of life and creativity. And her spiritual view requires a reshaping of a hierarchical and patriarchal God. Hence, we can now appreciate the relevance and modernity of her spiritual faith in Mother Nature,⁸⁷ and to address the lacuna of her neglect. The currency of her ideas is evident in recent enquiries into ‘what is assumed about the nature of the Transcendent.’⁸⁸ Riddle questions religious and socially negative views of women (temptress, chattel, childlike, other) and emphasises the need for ‘gender-neutral nouns and pronouns [and] parallel language’ (“women and men”, not “girls and men”⁸⁹) in spiritual teaching. This connects with the need for the neologism ‘thealogy’ which Raphael discusses, as mentioned above. Riddle places spirituality at the root of all feminist concerns, arguing that it is the fixed position of the ‘attitudes and assumptions’⁹⁰ at the root of belief structure which need to be examined.

Webb’s concern with this root is evident in her early rejection of established religion, ‘Churches and Creeds are nothing to me’ (*CPP*, 100) in which she began to refuse the mediation of a male-dominated religion, although she still saw God in nature (indicated by name or capitalised male pronouns, ‘He that created them, there is He,’ *ibid.*) But she soon replaced this language with non-gendered terms such as ‘a presence’ (‘Presences’, *SJ: Poems*, 21) and by images of equality in male and female god-like tree-spirits (see ‘The Ancient Gods’, *ibid.*, 90-91). She also went on to consider social and religious constructs of women (Hazel, for example, is temptress, chattel, childlike and other) and her evocation of women’s spirituality links to a central concern with ‘our personal understanding of ourselves.’⁹¹ And feminist spirituality ‘encourage[s] the autonomy, self-actualization, and self-transcendence of all women (and men) [...] free[ing] itself from ideologies in favor of the authentic

⁸⁷ Webb uses feminine pronouns to refer to nature: ‘Her spirit stirs the flowers [...] we may pry into her daily life, but her innermost secrets are [...] inviolable’ (*SJ: Healing*, 2). Many modern feminists find this feminization of nature problematic.

⁸⁸ Riddle, p. 7.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p. 4

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 1.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

freedom of the individual'.⁹² Such 'freedom of the individual' is clearly portrayed in *Precious Bane*, in which Webb 'finally allowed a daughter to grow. And she enabled that daughter to achieve both love and autonomy – union and selfhood.'⁹³ And Webb powerfully portrays Prue's self-realisation:

It was strange to think that while I went about my house-work and outdoor-work [...] slaving like a man, at men's jobs, I should be in my own soul the bride of the weaver [...] Though my hands were hard and chapped and my face red and coarsened [...] I should be, while I thought upon him I loved, a flower and the petal of a flower (*PB*, 118).

Prue's appearance does not conform to conventional images of female beauty or delicacy, but she transcends this for she knows she possesses a far greater beauty in her spiritual capacity to love and be loved, as the image of the 'flowering' of her spirit confirms. She is strong as she works 'like a man' and implicit here is a sense of equality – she is tough enough to do a man's work. But she also has the sensitivity of soul to love. The insight into Prue's deepest thoughts means that we see the importance of the redundancy 'own', for this is indeed her 'own soul', the realisation of self and worth. She may look 'more like a man [...] more like a mawkin than a man' (*ibid.*) but she is 'woman to him' (*ibid.*) whom she loves and this empowers her further than the physical.

The theme of love forms a cornerstone in each novel: the love of a father for a daughter in *The Golden Arrow* creates 'a light which shone [...] wakening her to life' (*GA*, 286); love for the animal kingdom, in *Gone to Earth*, which opens up 'the pageantry of life [...] all that was of the spirit' (*GT*, 189-90); the growth of self-realisation through love in *The House in Dormer Forest* and the abnegation of selfishness in order for romantic love to exist in *Seven for a Secret*. In *Precious Bane*, Webb extends this theme in the completeness of love as a spiritual apex; Prue is made whole through mystic epiphany and love, giving 'her peace for his, her soul to his keeping' (151). The 'fulfilment of love',⁹⁴ is the crowning experience of pantheism and forms a further link with Goddess theory. Her idea of a 'deathless seed of love' ('Roseberries', *SJ: Poems*, 13)

⁹² Carr, pp. 54-55.

⁹³ Barale, p. 164.

⁹⁴ Underhill, p. 437.

chimes with the definition of love as ‘the gift of the abundant earth [...] truly [...] the power of all being, the power I know as a Goddess.’⁹⁵ Webb saw the possibility for women of being whole, beautiful, independent, ethical and to love and be loved. And she makes her female characters Goddess-figures: ‘the simplest and most basic meaning of the symbol of the Goddess is the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of female power.’⁹⁶ And Prue, more than any of Webb’s female characters, is powerful, a Goddess-figure, because she is a force for love. Christ proposes: ‘The power of the Goddess is the intelligent embodied love that is the ground of all being. This [...] undergirds every individual being, including plants, animals, and humans, as we participate in the physical and spiritual processes of birth, death, and renewal.’⁹⁷ This idea links to the borderland trope in Webb’s work as it is through the threshold of mystic love that this ‘renewal’ occurs as the self is triumphantly recreated and her work needs to be seen more fully to affirmatively re-frame her emphasis on love.

In a review, ‘Knowest Thou the Land’, Webb claims that love is ‘the most tremendous force in the world’ (*CPP*, 62). Love is unashamedly the goal of Webb’s characters and she certainly idealised love as a ‘water-lily [...] pure and unrewarded’ (*SFS*, 286). The ‘water-lily’ metaphor is a motif in this novel, suggesting a rebirth into exquisite and perfect beauty and unselfish purity of soul. The lily demands nothing, but in established matrices of criticism Webb’s emphasis on unselfish love appears only as a submissive acceptance of predominant patriarchal society in which women are physically and emotionally dependent on men. This is certainly the impression which *Seven for a Secret* creates and Webb’s other women can also appear wholly submissive, as Amber’s consuming passion for Michael suggests: ‘Might he have the keys of her life, of her heaven and hell? Might he take her and all she was or hoped to be? Oh yes! Oh yes!’ (*HDF*, 109). But to understand Webb’s meaning we must consider her in ways which have been previously dismissed. Amber is not meek, for she ‘neither flushed nor trembled [...] She was not consciously a thing

⁹⁵ Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 106.

⁹⁶ Carol P. Christ, ‘Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections’, in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. by Carol P. Christ & Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), pp. 273-288 (p. 277).

⁹⁷ Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 106.

of sex or of physical existence at that moment. That Michael should come to Dormer to find her was to Amber as inevitable as the fusion of colours or the pull of stars one upon another (*ibid.*, 108). This indicates that the physical and the spiritual are closely interlinked and love is as elemental in nature as the symmetry of the flowers and the gravitational fields of the cosmos. What the feminist critic sees as subjugation is the perfect understanding of love as a spiritual dimension beyond 'physical existence' and Webb's images of colours and stars draw our senses heavenwards to appreciate this numinous symbiosis.

But the dualistic forces of love and power cannot co-exist, for the desire for power is egotistic. Hence, the renouncing of 'I' is necessary in order to become 'we' and when Prue saves Kester's life, as he, in turn, saves hers, this extends the view that spiritual awakening involves 'unselfing [...] the boundaries of the self are changed, and love is one way in which this change frequently occurs.'⁹⁸ There is a parallel with 'self-naughting [to attain] the complete and conscious fulfilment here and now of this Perfect Love.'⁹⁹ And Prue demonstrates such love when she rescues Kester from a dog fight, seizing a knife and, 'as the great beast stood reared with his teeth in my master's throat, I ran him through the heart' (*PB*, 153). Her actions recall the woman in the Biblical Song of Songs, who declares that 'love is as powerful as death; [...] It bursts into flame / and burns like a raging fire' (Song of Songs 8: 6 NIV). The Bible is Prue's only reading material and she delights in the Songs, a series of love poems celebrating human love as sacred; Webb uses this text to illustrate her own interpretation of the superiority of true spiritual love. 'There's none so fierce as a loving woman' (*PB*, 150), Prue muses, and she is fierce and courageous, an independent woman with remarkable insight and mettle, an example of 'modern womanhood capable of both strength and passion.'¹⁰⁰ Hence, Prue's love is portrayed as self-abnegating but also fulfilling and this illustrates love as the ultimate experience of the sublime in the mystic's journey, the fulfilment of Webb's first intuition that 'beyond the beauty of earth, like light in a flower [is] Beauty or Love [...] not only above all things, but in them,

⁹⁸ Ochs, pp. 125-6.

⁹⁹ Underhill, p. 427.

¹⁰⁰ Thrall, p. 364.

permeating them' (*SJ: Healing*, 57-58). Webb's capitalised abstract nouns, 'Beauty' and 'Love' indicate supreme, divine presences, personified images of the holy within nature, 'permeating' all things. And love heals and renews, as Prue experiences 'such a rushing happiness [...] as seemed to make all the blood in my veins new (*PB*, 213). From this moment Prue's 'lip never did look quite so bad' (*ibid.*), indicating her amelioration and linking to Gillian's healed state at the end of *Seven for a Secret*. However, Prue's 'cure' is more convincing as it could be that her new-found self-belief makes her impairment 'look' better whereas Gillian's scar seems to magically disappear.

As with *Seven for a Secret*, Webb's portrayal of love in *Precious Bane* has been seen as problematic. Prue refers to Kester as her 'maister', seeming to suggest Kester's patriarchal superiority. The romantic intensity between Prue and Kester also appears to fit the criteria of that limiting categorisation, the 'romance genre', for in Webb's novels 'women could choose love and marriage and be utterly content, totally fulfilled, needing nothing more.'¹⁰¹ And Webb's personal desire for romance can often be glimpsed in her work. She loved her husband intensely, 'instantly, rapturously, totally; for ever,'¹⁰² and this is redacted in the novel, for 'Kester Woodseaves [...] is a faithful portrait of Henry Webb'¹⁰³; similarly, Amber's relationship with Michael in *The House in Dormer Forest* is 'directly autobiographical.'¹⁰⁴ Such details add to the romantic qualities of Webb's stories, but the term 'maister', above, is linked to Prue's experience of mysticism in which a harmonious blending of different bird songs suggests to her 'a weaving of many threads, with one maister-thread of clear gold' (*PB*, 58). In this musical and synaesthetic image the pure strand of gold is a metaphor for love as a unifying spiritual bond, for love is not just about romance for Webb. It is an integral branch in her holistic concept of self-regeneration in which 'the other side of silence' opens up an ecstatic realisation: an apogee of love.

Alison Light gives some useful context to 'romance' in the inter-war period, that this term became 'more narrowly specialised [...] coming to signify only those love-stories, aimed ostensibly at a female readership [...] cheap,

¹⁰¹ Barale, p. 3.

¹⁰² Steff, p. 10.

¹⁰³ Wrenn, p. 88.

¹⁰⁴ Coles, p. 99.

easy fiction,¹⁰⁵ which was fuelled by Hollywood cinema and film magazines of the late 1920s and 30s. Readers will certainly find features of the genre in Webb's work, since 'the romantic novel is structured by two central thoughts or aims: the characterization of a strong male figure, the hero, and the romance and marriage between him and the heroine.'¹⁰⁶ Webb's masculine figures are stereotypically heroic: Kester Woodseaves and Michael Hallowses, strong yet gentle lovers; Jack Reddin a virile male figure, for whom Hazel has an uncomfortable attraction for 'he was stronger than her fugitive impulses' (*GE*, 174) and Gilbert Polrebec, a knight and Crusader. Webb's stories also contain typical features of the romance genre – threats of violence, rape and class inequality. Of Webb's five completed novels, four have happy endings, another feature of conventional romance, although these are muted, tempered by suffering: 'trouble and [...] struggling' (*PB*, 16) and 'the starless cwms of pain and death' (*GA*, 286). It has been said that Webb's depiction of Prue is too weak, that she fails to achieve "new spiritual dignity"¹⁰⁷ and the ending of the novel is too 'fairy tale lived-happily-ever-after.'¹⁰⁸ And the conclusion of *Precious Bane* is unquestionably romantic as, in a dreamlike sequence Prue is saved from persecution: 'He set his arms about me [...] All sank, all faded in the quiet air. There was only the evening wind lifting the boughs, like a lover lifting his maid's long hair' (*ibid.*, 288). But, it is a much more convincing and skilfully written ending than in *Seven for a Secret*, with no intrusive authorial voice. The retrospective first person narrative creates an authentic intimacy with Prue's thoughts and feelings and the chronological structure, beginning, 'It was at a love-spinning that I saw Kester first' (*PB*, 13) and ending with the epigraphic final sentence 'Here ends the story of Prudence Sarn' (*ibid.*, 288), creates a sense of completeness. And the fact that Prue relates her story to us as an old woman gives a reflective tone to her story in which her wisdom (indicated by her name, Prudence) informs her tale, making it plausible, underscoring that Webb's stories are tales of and for humanity, not just love stories for women.

¹⁰⁵ Light, p. 160.

¹⁰⁶ Cranny-Francis, p. 178.

¹⁰⁷ Hannah, p. 98.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 103.

Viewing Webb's work as 'romance' limits analysis by seeing it, superficially, as a group of novels about women in love and it is unfortunate that 'even critics interested in popular fiction have treated genres read by women with contempt'¹⁰⁹ for 'women's experience was devalued.'¹¹⁰ Webb is speaking for women, their ideas and spirituality in a world still dominated by men in which urbanisation had devalued the rural. And writers and critics in the early and mid-twentieth century 'map[ped] out the place of the feminine in society and culture, as that which is devalued, inferior, even depraved, disruptive, and potentially violent or revolutionary.'¹¹¹ Hence, if nature and love can be characterised as feminine and interlinked then the concept of a devalued place for the feminine links to the disrespect for nature which Webb identified. By rejecting the domination of nature by *mankind* and purposefully articulating mystic experience and love, she re-establishes feminine values. Webb should have shone as a beacon of hope to a battered post-war world, if only more readers and critics had recognised her worth. Her books 'confirm female lives'¹¹² and they are far more than rural romances, for 'she knew that only through universal love can we make contact with the life which moves unseen through the world [...] the source of life [...] for the true mystic can see the reflection of his star in the eyes of all mankind.'¹¹³ Hence, Webb's concept of love is part of her vision of a better world and the feminist writer, Carter Heyward, forges a link between love and justice, saying that 'to really love is to topple unjust structures, bringing down the principalities and powers of domination and control.'¹¹⁴

Victorian women were increasingly aware of the need for a realignment of the dominating powers in their society. For many women 'the act of writing itself had special meanings for women, given their situation.'¹¹⁵ And Webb's novels are 'filled with deflected insights into the nature of women's conflicts,

¹⁰⁹ Cranny-Francis, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 5.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² Barale, p. 11.

¹¹³ Marshall, pp. 319-320.

¹¹⁴ Carter Heyward, 'Sexuality, Love, and Justice', in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (see Griffin above), pp. 293-301 (p. 300).

¹¹⁵ Light, p. 5.

women's oppression.¹¹⁶ In *Precious Bane*, Prue's father is tyrannical: 'He shouted at Mother, saying she'd done very poorly with her children, for the girl had the devil's mark on her' (20). But Prue refuses to be bound by her deformity, later chastising her mother:

"Give over crying for what we canna mend [...] I dinna mind at all. There, there now, my lamb!" (I was used to call her that because she seemed so little and so lost). "There dunna take it to heart [...] *I'd as lief have a hare-shotten lip as not!*" (ibid., 48).

Prue takes the place of her mother here, refusing to accept her meekness or the role of 'otherness' she herself has been cast in. She will not be a 'lamb' like her mother, subdued by an autocratic husband or to become 'little' and 'lost' because of the hierarchical judgments of society. Clothing herself in bold bravado, she claims she does not mind her appearance (although this is not wholly true), refusing social constructs of female beauty. And her rejection of subservience is clear in her admission that 'My heart was rebellious within me' (ibid., 50). Thus it is clear that Webb's novels criticise social patterns and roles, advocate the power of the individual to break away from convention, and highlight the importance of women's needs.

Like Virginia Woolf, Webb was a Victorian daughter and, despite the differences in their work, they both explored the experience of being a woman in ways which elevated female consciousness. Woolf observed that that 'it would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men,¹¹⁷ for a man's writing, she says, is 'so direct, so straightforward [...] such freedom of mind, such liberty of person [...] a sense of physical well-being in the presence of this well-nourished, well-educated, free mind.'¹¹⁸ Woolf makes clear that the education and freedom enjoyed by men up to this point, as she writes in 1928, indicate a condition which 'had had full liberty from birth to stretch itself'¹¹⁹ making such writing possible. Women, had not enjoyed such benefits so had not had the opportunity to produce fine works. Elsewhere in the essay Woolf considers the unfortunate

¹¹⁶ Barale, p. 166.

¹¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 1945), p. 87 (original work published in 1929).

¹¹⁸ ibid., p. 98.

¹¹⁹ ibid.

fate of Shakespeare's imaginary but equally gifted sister. But she detects a problem in men's writing, 'a shadow [...] a straight dark bar [...] shaped something like the letter "I."'120 This "I" is too masculine, too dominant, and Woolf maintains that 'it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex,'121 or to 'speak consciously as a woman'122 as one should strive for literary androgyny. And she experimented in depth with ideas of gender in, for example, *Orlando* (1928) and 'Anon'. Woolf's Anon seems to further reject the egoism of 'I', as Webb also does in her emphasis on unity and universality, for her concern was with the deepest level of consciousness, being human.

Dorothy Richardson, another of Webb's contemporaries, was also concerned with consciousness – in particular, the 'contemporary interest in the unconscious'123 during the inter-war period which was significant in the development of a new style of writing, known as the stream of consciousness. Richardson saw her style as "a feminine equivalent of the current masculine *realism*"124 so was actively attempting to write in a different way to men. Richardson's major work, *Pilgrimage* (published in thirteen volumes between 1915-1967, the last posthumously) has been considered rather amorphous, but Heather Ingman identifies a central plot which concerns the 'daughter of a powerless mother who never succeeded in finding a satisfactory role for herself. Miriam is on a quest'125 for self expression within a patriarchal society in which gender dictates one's role. Richardson's emphasis is thus on female experience and Miriam's quest recalls that of Muriel in Holtby's *The Crowded Street* as she struggles to free herself from her mother's, and society's, expectations, but also Prue, who is searching for her own identity. As Miriam gazes into a mirror she too seeks this understanding: "There's something about my expression [...] It isn't vain to like it. It's something. [...] It's something I am somehow, Oh, *do* stay

120 *ibid.*

121 *ibid.*, p. 102.

122 *ibid.*

123 Ingman, p. 29.

124 Cited in Ingman, italics hers, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

125 *ibid.*

[...] do be like that always.”¹²⁶ Prue sees pictures of herself and her family in the mirrored surface of Sarn Mere: ‘I looked into the water and saw us there [...] we had our shapes, like the shadows of fish gliding in the deep’ (*PB*, 33). This is a troubled image, the shadowy forms suggesting Prue’s uncertainty about the future and herself. But later in the novel Prue again regards her mirror-image and Webb re-uses the motif of ‘a water-lily [...] not still, but in ripples [...] even the reflection is all distraught and is not wholly yours’ (*PB*, 118-119). Prue’s growing confidence and self-belief is implicit here as she now sees herself possessed of physical grace and beauty, a ‘water-lily’, albeit a distorted version, connoting her still marred appearance.

Whilst Webb explores and confirms women’s lives as Richardson does, Webb’s view can be seen as more universal. Miriam disparages men, negating romantic love as unnecessary and her dislike and alienation from them is overt – ‘standing there in their overcoats ... Why were they there? What were they doing? What were their thoughts?’¹²⁷ Her inner turmoil is completely subjective; her egocentric quest is for self-love and self worth and denies mental, emotional and spiritual contact with others – ‘There’s something in me that can’t be touched or altered. Me.’¹²⁸ In contrast, Webb considers men’s feelings in her novels, showing Robert’s desire for the spiritual fulfilment of love in *Seven for a Secret* and even evincing sympathy for Reddin’s predicament, in his fierce desire for Hazel, for he too is ‘trapped by something’ (*GE*, 193). To today’s reader, therefore, Webb’s writing appears, in fact, more modern, rather than less, because she understood that a focus on female experience is a focus on human experience and the search for meaning and love. When Olive Schreiner concluded her seminal work *Woman and Labour* (1911) with the ‘dream that woman shall eat of the tree of knowledge together with man, and that side by side and hand close to hand [...] they shall together raise about them an Eden [...] made beautiful by their own fellowship,’¹²⁹ she was expressing a vision of

¹²⁶ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage Volume 1: Pointed Roofs* (London: Dent, 1967), p. 151 (original work published in 1915).

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 70.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 246.

¹²⁹ Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour*, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/1/4/4/1440/>> [accessed 11 November 2017].

absolute equality. Although Schreiner's forthright work is very different to anything of Webb's, there is a trace of something akin to Webb's universal idealism in this image of perfect love and 'fellowship'. In *Precious Bane* Prue recognises that her love for Kester is matched by his own:

Those eyes so live and bright, dwelt on me, and smiled at me and pled with me [...] the eyes of a man when he looks long upon his dear acquaintance, who has given her peace for his (*PB*, 151).

Kester's need for Prue is as evident as Prue's for him. There is a sense of equality in their tacit understanding of each other as the archaic past participle of 'plead' connotes his deep-felt request for her affection and her willingness to 'give' her 'peace' to him evokes her eagerness to offer it. The phrase 'dear acquaintance' utilises interesting linguistic choices, suggestive of both close familiarity, yet also an as yet unknown but budding intimacy. Prue is emotionally united with Kester whilst still fully aware and in control of her own self. Women, Elaine Showalter states, have tended to be deeply aware of their individual experiences but 'have very infrequently considered whether these experiences might transcend the personal and local.'¹³⁰ A re-reading of Webb recognises her as a writer who has helped to go beyond the personal, furthering ideas about female identity and contributing to literary innovations such as the so-called 'New Woman', whose creation has been attributed to Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and subsequently developed by numerous other writers, including Richardson. The idea of the New Woman was an important development at the crux of social change, although, as Lyn Pykett notes, the New Woman was 'equally considered a cause or a symptom of cultural disintegration and social decline',¹³¹ suggesting a fear of this change. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927) Woolf replaces Mrs Ramsay, the Victorian ideal of fulfilled wife and mother, with the independent 'new woman' Lily Briscoe, illustrating a transitional period in which traditional ideas vied with contemporary re-evaluations of gender roles. Anja Benthin considers that, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf was recording her own experiences, for she 'not only reveals problems of women during the early twentieth century and the changes

¹³⁰ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 4.

¹³¹ Lyn Pykett, *Engendering Fictions* (London: Hodder, 1995), p.17.

happening in society, but [...] these problems are identified by a woman writer, from a woman's perspective'.¹³² In *To the Lighthouse* Lily's final completion of her painting has been interpreted as a finding of selfhood, but Webb, too, was a 'woman writer' writing 'from a woman's perspective' and her novels are also about women's quest for identity and freedom and the constraining effects of social constructs of gender, as her presentation of Prue demonstrates.

Several studies have highlighted the focus on identity by women writers during Webb's lifetime. Judith Kegan Gardiner summarises Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's view that women's quest for self-definition underlies nineteenth-century women's writing and Showalter's view that the main themes in women's literature since 1920 are "self-discovery," "a search for identity" and "self-definition."¹³³ Webb draws considerable attention to women in the 1920s, although she also uses different historical periods, indicating women's ongoing struggle for freedom. She depicts the harshness of farm life in the early nineteenth century and the isolation of an unmarried daughter of a well-to-do Victorian family as well as concepts of female 'otherness' in various eras, including the medieval. She presents women as daughters, wives and mothers and illustrates everyday experience: domesticity, work, sexuality, love, marriage, childbearing and social status. She features women in different social classes, suggesting the universality of women's concerns, and in this way she gives a broader view than Woolf does. And she gives her most intense revelatory experience to a working woman 'who spent her days in sacking, cleaning sties and beast-housen' (*PB*, 59), constrained by patriarchy and marginalised by prejudice, and thus Webb gives a voice to the oppressed.

Rejected by society because of her disfigurement, Prue is seen as an 'ugly, hare-shotten witch [...] Her'll put the evil eye on you' (*ibid.*, 74-75). She is aware of 'black looks cast at me, side-glances [...] some would draw away a bit as I passed' (*ibid.*, 278-279). Webb is continuing a theme here, for, in *The Golden Arrow*, Nancy Corra is both feared and revered for her knowledge – she provides 'cures' but her secrecy and her difference create suspicion amongst

¹³² Anja Benthin, *Redefining Gender Roles: The Image of Women in Virginia Woolf's 'To the Lighthouse'* (Munich: Grin Verlag, 2009), p. 2.

¹³³ Judith Kegan Gardiner, 'On Female Identity and Writing by Women', in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 177-191 (p. 177).

her neighbours: “‘There be a curse on the place,” people would say [...] and they would shiver and hurry on’ (176). Nancy Corra’s advice and medicines are often sought for she has potions for ‘most everything’ and is considered to have ‘an authoritative opinion’ (ibid., 175), yet she is also viewed with suspicion as a witch. Hazel is also viewed ‘suspiciously’ (*GE*, 72) and as a ‘fairy in a dream’ (ibid., 60), just as Nesta in *Armour Wherein He Trusted* is seen as ‘a faery’.¹³⁴ These views can be connected with a residual pagan faith in nature and in goddesses yet also a fear of their inexplicable forces. This reflects a prevailing view towards women condemned as witches, embedded through centuries since the medieval English church associated sorcery with devil worship,¹³⁵ overturning earlier pagan views of wise women who came to be seen as heretical and evil.¹³⁶ Since Prue is ostracised by society she becomes subjugated to her brother’s patriarchal control and must serve him: “‘until all that he wills be done. And I’ll be as biddable as a prentice, a wife, and a dog’” (ibid., 42). Hence, accusations of witchcraft provided a pretext for domestic slavery and Gideon treats her with imperious disdain: “‘Husht now, girl [...] Laugh quiet’” (ibid., 70). Gideon’s use of imperative verbs shows his authority, reinforced by his diminutive term, ‘girl’. His embarrassment of her because she is ‘a queer outlandish creature’ (ibid., 74) is also conveyed here as they are in public view.

¹³⁴ Mary Webb, *Armour Wherein He Trusted: A Novel and Some Stories* (New York, Dutton, 1929), p. 22.

¹³⁵ Burne notes that the rapid growth of witch-hunting in England was prompted firstly by the Catholic Church’s classification of witchcraft as heresy and furthered by the Protestant Calvinists campaign to hunt and destroy all witches. This was reinforced by James I’s 1604 Act which made witchcraft an offence and his work, *Demonologie* (1597), advocated the punishment of the crime with the utmost severity. Webb demonstrates the persecution of innocent women in an intense and prolonged campaign and even in *Precious Bane*’s Napoleonic period the effects of centuries of superstition and fear still held good.

¹³⁶ Likewise images of witches changed also to wrinkled old hags, a view famously reflected by Martin Luther in the time of the Reformation when he characterized witches as ‘whores of the Devil’. This idea, Mary Lynn Macree et al. show, emanated from a belief that witches copulated with the devil, a concept that was rooted in the misogynistic fear of women as creatures of unbridled sexuality and power (see Macree, *The Selected Papers of Jane Addams* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 361.

And Prue becomes the scapegoat for superstitious antipathy: 'So the talk got fixed on me [...] it seemed to them that I must be the one that called down the curse [...] I was the witch of Sarn [...] cursed of God [...] as good as damned' (ibid., 279-280). Like Hazel, Prue does not fit into her society and there are parallels here with Webb's own life and peripheral position. Just as Hazel and her creator were ahead of their time in their ecocentric awareness, Prue is too modern for her superstitious community and she queries why she should be so cursed because of 'what a silly hare had put crooked' (ibid., 49). In some ways Prue is similar to Sylvia Townsend Warner's central character in the novel *Lolly Willowes*. Like Webb, Warner rejected Christianity and the novel's focus on witches seems to suggest a concern with the search for an alternative spirituality and a bid for freedom from the constraints of a male-led society. Unlike Prue, Lolly chooses to be a witch and the experience liberates her. For Prue, accusations of witchery constrain her, but literacy liberates her and both she and Lolly become free to be the women they choose to make themselves.

Prue's ability to read and write differentiates her from others and, importantly, gives her the power of self-expression. In this, too, she reflects Webb herself who found freedom and independence of thought in her writing. The development of Prue's literacy continues a theme begun in *Seven for a Secret* in which Ailse, whose oppression is symbolised by her voicelessness, overcomes muteness by learning to read and write. Education literally enlightens Prue, 'it being like a big window opening. And out of that window who knows what you metna see?' (ibid., 45). Her simile redolently suggests fresh opportunity, the symbolism of light and air accessed via the window indicating new hope to a woman who can now begin to cast off oppression. Literacy enables Prue's mysticism as it is by secluding herself away in the attic to be alone and read that she experiences the numinous. Her intelligence and modernity are evident in her literate articulacy and in her questioning of 'a criss-cross sort of world' (ibid., 42) which is driven by superstition and prejudice. But Prue, like Hazel, is hunted down and persecuted because of this bias. Warner also uses a hunting metaphor to depict Lolly Willowes's experience of other people's demands and their desire to bend her to their conventional

expectations: 'She stood at bay, trembling before them [...] They had come to recapture her, they had tracked her down.'¹³⁷

Michele Wandor, in a preface to the 1978 Virago edition of *Precious Bane*, suggests that underlying the horror of witches was a fear of women's sexuality.¹³⁸ Interestingly, both Prue and Lolly Willowses find empowerment in the realisation of their sexuality. Prue discovers the physical beauty of her body and that this potentially gives her power over men; Lolly's experience of dancing with the witches' coven as they celebrate the Sabbath has obvious sexual implications as she dances firstly with the other witches and then with the devil, who 'with a fine tongue like a serpent's [...] licked her right cheek, close to her ear.'¹³⁹ Parallels with Satan's temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden are clear here, but Townsend Warner subverts this image because Lolly's experience is liberating, rather than being the cause of her downfall. After Lolly has satiated herself upon music and dance she 'stretched herself out on the turf'¹⁴⁰ – the phrasing of 'stretching out' not only suggests a relaxed state but also hints at an image of Lolly expanding herself confidently, mentally as well as physically. Beattie also draws attention to 'Lolly's emerging sexuality which has previously been stifled'.¹⁴¹ Lolly's physical attraction to the devil is a facet of the ways in which Townsend Warner 'blurred boundaries about what was socially acceptable [...] [writing] a novel about a spinster who defied the male members of her family.'¹⁴² Becoming a witch for Lolly is about 'hav[ing] a life of one's own, not an existence doled out by others'¹⁴³ and in the novel's final pages Lolly experiences a sense of complete freedom. Her pact with the devil is an inversion of conventional Christianity and as such can be seen as a redefinition of female spiritual needs. Although the devil is male, crucially, Lolly, once freed

¹³⁷ Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowses* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951), p. 163 (original work published in 1926).

¹³⁸ Wandor notes that 'the classic fifteenth-century handbook *Malleus Maleficarum* on witch-hunting is quite unequivocal on the matter: "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable"' (Introduction, *PB*, p. 11).

¹³⁹ Townsend Warner, p. 200.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁴¹ Beattie, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner', pp. 45-54 (p. 50).

¹⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

¹⁴³ Townsend Warner, p. 239.

from constraint, no longer needs him and knows he will no longer bother her, for she is free to 'live at [her] own sweet will.'¹⁴⁴ Prue also forms her own spiritual view in the 'most powerful sweetness' (*PB*, p. 58) of her mysticism and the hope and belief this gives her enables her to withstand Gideon's oppression. It is Prue who survives in the novel, not Gideon, and her strong determination allows her to break out of the confines of her constrictive world. At the end of the novel she, like Lolly, is free to choose: 'My vow that I took to Gideon was cancelled now. I'd no more to do here. What should I stay for, with nobody to ask a hand's turn of me? I was for the road' (*PB*, 277). Hence, both Webb and Townsend Warner use themes of women as witches to defy convention and to present women as witches positively, as women striving to lead fuller lives.

Their portrayals go against traditional stereotyping. In *Whores of the Devil: Witch-hunts and Witch-trials* (2005) Erik Durschmied posits an archetypal but misogynistic image of a witch as an old grey-haired woman, 'A hag with fingernails sharp as a tiger's claw, wrapped in clothes tattered and torn, she rides the air on her broomstick and devours little children for lunch.'¹⁴⁵ This stereotypical imagery is the stuff of fairy tale yet women throughout history have been stigmatized because of physical deformities or unconventional behaviour and branded as witches. However, the pre-eighth century pagan image of witches was of beautiful, powerful goddesses,¹⁴⁶ indicating that a misogynistic fear of women developed as civilisation progressed. Lolly Willowes, with her deep black eyes, is considered 'remarkable looking'¹⁴⁷ and she roams the countryside creating curative potions made from herbs, even writing a book about this. The writer Starhawk affirms that pre-Christian witchcraft was 'the time of women's strength and power [...] an earth-centred, nature-oriented worship that venerated the Goddess, the source of life'.¹⁴⁸ And Beattie also points to the view that witchcraft represented 'the survival of a Pre-Christian

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 246.

¹⁴⁵ Erik Durschmied, *Whores of the Devil: Witch-hunts and Witch-trials* (Stroud: Sutton, 2005), p.1.

¹⁴⁶ See Mary Lynn Macree et al., *The Selected Papers of Jane Addams*, op. cit., p. 361.

¹⁴⁷ Townsend Warner, p. 25.

¹⁴⁸ Starhawk, 'Witchcraft and Women's Culture', in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (see Christ above), pp. 259-268 (p. 261).

matriarchal nature-worshipping tradition.¹⁴⁹ Durschmied, however, makes a false syllogism in his claim that witches were not always women: ‘since witch-hunters made no distinction when it came to sex.’¹⁵⁰ Anne Llewellyn Barstow corrects this, and is surprised that most historians have interpreted the witch-hunts as ‘*not* a matter of gender’¹⁵¹ as over eighty percent of the victims were women. She suggests that reading documentation about the witch-hunts is like reading ‘accounts of the Nazi holocaust in which everyone agrees that the majority of victims were Jewish but no one mentions anti-Semitism.’¹⁵² Webb’s depiction of women who were ‘different’ emphasises that this was ‘a matter of gender’ in a male-dominated world.

Prue is no witch with extraordinary powers, but she possesses an innate knowledge of nature and the supernatural and Webb connects here, although probably unconsciously, with early twentieth-century Wicca. Interestingly, the original meaning of ‘witchery’ was actually the ‘art of knowing nature (the root of the word indicates knowledge obtained from nature) and used for prophecy or soothsaying, particularly in regard to agriculture.’¹⁵³ ‘Knowing’ nature meant that women were revered for their skills but this respect evolved into mistrust and abhorrence. And Prue’s social rejection becomes absolute as her community come upon her, ‘like the rising of a winter flood [...] I knew no more, till I felt the chill water, and came up gasping, feeling the ropes that tied me to the ducking-stool and hearing the roaring [...] like the roaring of some great demon (*PB*, 284). Here the community is mythologised as demonic, conveying a destructive negative force. And in her conscious, purposeful use of the theme of persecution of women marginalised as witches, Webb is refusing oppression and this is part of her presentation of class-prejudice as a concern.

¹⁴⁹ Beattie, p. 52.

¹⁵⁰ Durschmied, p. 2.

¹⁵¹ Anne Llewellyn Barstow, ‘On studying witchcraft as women’s history: a historiography of the European witch persecutions’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 4 (1988), p. 7. Barstow points to a long tradition of misogyny including Heinrich Kramer’s witch-hunting manual *Malleus Maleficarum* (1480) and an essay by H. R. Trevor-Roper (1967) which described witches as “‘hysterical women in a harsh rural world’” (cited in Barstow p. 11).

¹⁵² *ibid.* p. 13.

¹⁵³ Chappell, p. 52.

Many of Webb's characters are working-class people and the tension between higher and lower orders in a hierarchical society is evident in some of her stories. Webb's lifetime saw the founding and rapid rise of the Labour Party and by the early 1920s, when Webb was working on *Seven for a Secret* and *Precious Bane*, it had become the main opposition to the Conservatives. Although Webb expressed no direct concern with political policy the context in which she lived was of a growing socialist movement in Britain and therefore this may have influenced her awareness of class issues. In *The Golden Arrow* Deborah and her farming family are working-class and Stephen is a miner. In *Gone to Earth* Hazel is a working-class character who is exploited by the socially superior Reddin and looked down upon by her snobbish mother-in-law. Amber's family, however, in *The House in Dormer Forest*, are of a higher middle-class, having a large house and servants, who are depicted comically but also positively – Enoch has more wisdom than the whole Darke family and when Marigold is ousted by the family for becoming pregnant by Peter Darke, Webb defies class-prejudice by having Peter run away with Marigold to marry her. In *Seven for a Secret* Gillian overcomes class boundaries in loving the lower-class cowman-shepherd, Robert. Also in this novel, Ailse is maltreated and abused by her husband, Ralph, who does not acknowledge her as wife and thinks of her as 'a worthless, soulless creature' (SFS, 264) because she comes from a gypsy family. In *Precious Bane* Kester, who is presented as an opposite to Gideon's patriarchy, disregards everything that is 'wrong' with Prue. As a travelling weaver he is a skilled worker, not a labouring man, and he cares nothing for her disfigurement, the prejudice of others or her lowliness, emitting a message against class and gender prejudice and demonstrating equality.

Other features of Webb's presentation of class are through dialogue and minor characters. In *Seven for a Secret*, for example, the accident-prone Jonathan Makepeace is portrayed as a Hardyean comic figure, being rather reminiscent of the hapless William Worm in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and Thomas Leaf in *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872). Webb makes a dedicated attempt to match accent and dialect to her characters to indicate their social status but with differing levels of success. In *Seven for a Secret* this is rather overdone at times and lapses into stereotype. Robert, for example, frequently makes statements such as: "if you wanna, you wanna" (SFS, 124), "if I amna maying along with

Gillian, I be maying” (ibid., 188), and “Dear ‘eart [...] It met ha’ bin my own” (ibid., 189). This appears to be somewhat at odds with his private, poetically expressed thoughts: “Only the blazing sun of midsummer can crack the granite, / Only love can find the way into a young gallus heart” (ibid., 80). In *Precious Bane*, however, there is not this discord as Prue’s dialogue matches her inner thoughts expressed in free indirect style as both convey her articulacy and her sensitive intellect. Recording her thoughts, she writes, ‘I seemed to hear and see, on this side and on that, in the dark woods, a sound and a gleam of the gathering of spring’ (*PB*, 119). Speaking aloud she states, “But it do seem so queer to spend every bit of time and strength on the land, like a mother with a child, and then not love it” (ibid., 120). Both examples suggest Prue’s reflective consideration for the natural world and, although the novel has been criticised for its ‘highly poeticized Shropshire dialect’¹⁵⁴ and Webb has been accused of ‘an excess of countrification’¹⁵⁵ the writing has a unified completeness which makes it cogent, persuasive and satisfying to read.

Webb herself came from a comfortable middle-class background but her concern with the suffering of others was a constant throughout her life. Hence, her sympathy was with the oppressed and it is interesting that in *Precious Bane* she created a protagonist who was working-class, female and tyrannized. Prue is thus representative of many ordinary women whose stories of prejudice and oppression have not been heard. Jennifer Munroe and Rebecca Laroche seek to ‘unearth[...] the presence of women in the archive [...] by thinking about texts and materials that have been largely neglected’¹⁵⁶ and so include diverse sources, including sixteenth and seventeenth century recipe books and household books, by women from various backgrounds. In doing so they demonstrate that women have found ways to resist domination and to “speak powerfully”¹⁵⁷ and the wide bank of texts they refer to illustrate that neither gender nor class prohibits this. In *Precious Bane* Webb fashioned a woman who is more than capable of speaking powerfully and convincingly.

¹⁵⁴ Williams, p. 448.

¹⁵⁵ Craig, p. 19.

¹⁵⁶ Munroe and Laroche, pp. 6-7.

¹⁵⁷ ibid., p. 1.

Webb's characterisation of Prue again recalls Jane Eyre as she is a woman without looks or status who, nevertheless, through her independence of thought attains personal liberty and also, ultimately, love. Prue is also reminiscent of Webb herself in her strength of character and determination, illustrating the strong connective link between Webb's life and work. It is remarkable that this shy, awkward woman from a quiet, rural backwater, whose middle-class Victorian family background should have suggested little more than an ordinary, domestic future as a wife and mother, has evinced, with such poetic insight, a profound universal vision. Webb never seemed to fit into the norm but her work rises above it. Her view emerged from "the truths of naturalism and the holistic proclivities of women"¹⁵⁸ and in her exploration of 'women's spirituality in female biology and acculturation'¹⁵⁹ and her articulation of concerns with class, injustice and oppression her voice is important.

Webb's own life was often filled with pain, disappointment and sorrow. She and Henry were leading increasingly separate lives and there was 'a state of tension between [them] [...] He had to admit that he had married a woman older than himself, tiresomely subject to depressing symptoms of her illness'.¹⁶⁰ Whilst Henry thrived in London, Webb could 'only endure a limit in time in Hampstead and London before feeling compelled to return to the peace and calm of Spring Cottage';¹⁶¹ Henry sought 'freedom of action [...] their marriage had started on its positive, inevitable disintegration.'¹⁶² Webb's frequent, desperate, lonely journeys left her isolated at the cottage, exacerbating her need for Henry and her fear of losing him. It has been suggested that 'Mary's sense of threat intensified as she felt that Henry's need for her was diminishing. Much of the strain on their relationship was caused by her acute insecurity.'¹⁶³ When Henry brought a teenage student, whom he was coaching, to stay with them over the summer holidays Webb must have felt rejected. He claimed Webb would find the girl, Kathleen Mary Wilson, a support but she is unlikely to

¹⁵⁸ Charlene Spretnak, cited in Garrard, p. 27.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Steff, pp. 15-16.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁶² *ibid.*

¹⁶³ Coles, p. 244.

have derived any comfort from her presence and expunged her grief in her work, depicting love with increasing passion. Webb's jealousy may have been well-founded as Henry married Kathleen within two years of Webb's death.

This fear of separation is, perhaps, articulated in *Armour Wherein He Trusted*, in which Webb most deeply explores recurring subjects of passion and suffering. In this last work, Webb draws together all her key themes, finding a new vehicle for expressing them and it further highlights her talents and vision. She was 'most simply and most complexly, a woman who wrote'¹⁶⁴ and her work 'necessarily mirrors mind and desire,'¹⁶⁵ and, perhaps, as she approached this final novel, she also knew that her time would soon pass. Like Tess, who knows that each year the unmarked anniversary of death passes unnoticed,¹⁶⁶ Webb was unblinking in the light of her own mortality, writing in 'The Birds Will Sing': 'The birds will sing when I am gone / To stranger folk with stranger ways / Without a break they'll whistle on / In close and flowery orchard deeps' (*SJ: Poems*, 41). The regular tetrameter and abab rhyme scheme here suggest an ongoing natural rhythm and the poem continues: 'the bud that slept within the bark / When I was there, will break her bars' and will not 'miss my bent, attentive head.' Here she is comforted by the continuation of the green world, imagining an eternal re-birthing which is of more value than her own small life.

A leitmotif in the study of Webb is that she should receive more recognition but never does, that she is good but not good enough. Elaine Showalter does include Webb in an index of prominent literary women but, regrettably, makes no actual comment on her work in *A Literature of Their Own* (1982). Presumably, this suggests that Webb is worth mentioning but does not merit further attention and this disappointing omission highlights Webb's peripheral position in the borderland of literary studies which she still inhabits. It is time to find a proper place for Mary Webb and to value her lasting message.

¹⁶⁴ Barale, p. 168.

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 168.

¹⁶⁶ 'She suddenly thought [...] that there was yet another date [...] that of her own death [...] a day which lay sly and unseen among all the other days of the year', Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, p. 98.

Chapter Five

A Medieval Message: *Armour Wherein He Trusted*

1926-1927

Having published *Precious Bane* in 1924, Webb was exhausted by the effort this novel had taken to produce whilst coping with her failing health and marriage. Webb's mother also died during the summer of this year, a loss which may have renewed 'sorrowful memories of her father's death'¹ and reminded her of 'the early Eden of inner totality she had lost, and for which she was homesick all her life.'² Amongst such sorrows she must have been encouraged by some very enthusiastic reviews for *Precious Bane*. Webb was described as 'one of the most brilliant among the younger generation of novelists'³ and the work featured in *T.P.'s and Cassell's Weekly* as 'The Book of The Week' with front cover status. However, other reviews were less flattering, such as the criticism of the 'figment' that Prue could possibly have such 'a cultivated mind and a power of expressing it.'⁴ Sales of the novel were also poor (less than fifteen hundred copies by the end of its first year of publication) and Webb was again struggling financially (although well-off her mother left little for her in her will). By this time Webb's first two novels were already out of print and she was still deeply frustrated by her lack of success. Webb sought work reviewing and writing articles in order to plug the financial gap and did not have the energy to begin another novel. Throughout 1925 her health was worsening and her relationship with Henry was now irreparably damaged. In addition Webb must have been aware of the country's economic depression during this period and the employment problems which would culminate in the General Strike in May 1926. Perhaps personal and national difficulties led her to seek solace by escaping deeper into her imagination, her memories and her spiritual faith.

It was not until the early part of 1926 that she began *Armour Wherein He Trusted*, summoning what would prove to be the last of her strength and resolve. Although unfinished there is a completeness in the novel's central

¹ Coles, p. 272.

² *ibid.*

³ O'Connor, pp. 487-488.

⁴ Williams, p. 448.

theme of the superiority of the spiritual over all else. Martin Armstrong comments in his introduction to the novel that it is 'a curiously complete fragment' (*AWHT*, op. cit., 13) which leaves a lasting message in its mysterious mystical mood and its sense of penetrating to the depths of the human spirit. Webb embarked on a new experiment in this work, with great subtlety and skill, and this is a work to admire, for in reading the fragment, 'we experience another kind of reality.'⁵ The strain she was under, and her physical and emotional fragility at this point, make the quality of this work all the more remarkable.

This struggle is reflected in Lord Gilbert of Polrebec's battle between his desire to stay with his strange, ethereal wife, Nesta, and the bodily comforts of home, and his spiritual calling to leave and fight in the Christian Crusades, as he 'can no longer resist the intimations of Christ which haunt him and so, yielding to the urgings of mystical love, he leaves wife, parents and castle to join Peter the Hermit in the First Crusade.'⁶ Once again Webb seems to have named her character with care, as the etymological roots of the name 'Gilbert' denote 'bright pledge' – 'brightness' could imply holy light and the idea of a 'pledge' links to Polrebec's commitment to the Crusade. Webb's choice of a male narrator is unusual but reveals her 'acting out her own insights'⁷ as Polrebec's voice clearly speaks for Webb: his 'voice is her own.'⁸ This use of a male persona marks a further experimental stage in her writing. And, although this novel has been viewed as a strange development, it makes an interesting and significant contribution to the body of her work because of its unusual qualities.

The novel is set in the Middle Ages and is written in archaic medieval style with 'something of the unreality of a tapestry and something of the thrilling mysteriousness of an old saga'.⁹ Coles also describes the work as a 'gossamer tapestry'¹⁰ suggesting the intricacy and artistry with which Webb crafted the writing. In the work's haunting beauty the sense of the sacred within the material world is so artfully evoked it is, as Armstrong also comments, 'as if a

⁵ Coles, p. 290.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 291.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 292.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 293.

⁹ Chapman, p. 371.

¹⁰ Coles, p. 290.

modern painter of the country [...] were to have devoted himself for once to the illumination of a missal' (*AWHT*, Introduction, p. 13). Again this shows the painterly quality of Webb's vivid writing. Armstrong, however, felt that the novel's style 'very seriously limit[s] the rich and profound sense of the country which gives to all her other books their unforgettable atmosphere' (*ibid.*, 12). The work is very different, yet it continues to elaborate Webb's key themes – the central notions of sacred nature and the spirituality redolent within it. Here these are illustrated by comparing mystic apprehension with the birth of Christ:

All was so still – still as a dewpond. The great oaken boughs were a little leafy with young red leaves, and they spread and towered in the quiet, minding them of the centuries, aye, minding them of the centuries, aye, minding them of the hour that was so still, a thousand years gone and more, when the midnight grew sudden-sweet and small flowers were where had been none, and bells spoke in the meady, golden air, and the thin echo of voices came upon the land –

“Pax vobiscum! Christus natus est.” (*AWHT*, 21).

Webb's motifs of stillness and silence are once again used here to create a setting in which the perception of the numinous beyond the physical is glimpsed. Webb depicts a moment of timelessness in which an image of eternal peace recaptures Webb's lost Eden where sweetness and beauty suffuse the senses and, returning to a musical metaphor, she depicts a dreamlike enchantment as celebratory bells ring in the 'golden' air. Webb's mastery of sentence structure is again clearly evident as she juxtaposes a short emphatic sentence punctuated with a dramatic dash to instil a mood of suspense. She then layers the numerous clauses of a complex sentence with as much skill as Dickens, forming a cumulative effect which fashions a state of passionate joy.

Webb's medieval style of language in this work met with some criticism, however, an early reviewer finding that 'no adornment can undo the effect of deliberate artificiality of diction.'¹¹ Webb had, in fact, carefully researched the late eleventh-century period of the First Crusade in which she sets the work, recreating a depiction of a densely forested medieval Shropshire, of 'oak woods, wending towards Powis (which as all men know is in the Marches of

¹¹ 'New Novels', *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 January 1929, p. 78.

Wales)' (ibid., 20). Regarding the language, of course Webb was not attempting to produce an authentic version of the diction of the time as this could have been Old English (a form which is extremely difficult for the modern reader to comprehend) or early Middle English (believed to have developed in the late eleventh-century and the form in which Chaucer wrote, so not particularly accessible to a general reading public either). Webb needed to suggest a flavour of the period and to capture an appropriate mood and this she does, demonstrating her innovation in style, characterisation and language and the result is vivid and powerful:

I suppose there was never a country so quiet as ours, that is to say quiet of men. But noised with birds it was, so that the clangour of the cuckoos was like a dinning of bells, and out of the forest the doves roared soft as paduasoy, and the hawks and eagles wheeling high from mountain to mountain, filled the empty air with their sovereign voices. There was Balm of Gilead in my garden, and there was the pleasant comfrey and rudweed, which the French call *immortelle* (ibid., 100).

Webb's careful research is evident here in her references to the rich, silk fabric 'paduasoy', known from the Middle Ages onwards and the plant 'Balm of Gilead', known for its rarity and healing properties since Biblical times. Comfrey and rudweed have also been used historically for many hundreds of years for their palliative qualities. The French colloquialism 'immortelle' has obvious connotations of youthful longevity and is suggestive of the everlasting characteristic of the spiritual, creating an image of Polrebec's garden as a place of healing and therapy. The archaism 'dinning' can be traced to Old and Middle English and the unusual phrasal verb 'noised with' helps to reinforce the medieval setting whilst also creating a focus on the pure sounds of nature and thus the absence of human sound in a pre-industrial or urban world.

An imagined, archaic world is also conveyed through Nesta's claim that her 'lineage is elf-lineage', from a place 'betwixt and between all things [...] faery ground [...] you cannot measure it nor go round it', a place which 'you cannot put in your books' (ibid., 47). The mysterious Nesta 'seemed unreal as wanton fays in dreamy, moony worlds' (ibid., 115) and this ethereal aura conveys her otherness in which she, like Prue, exists in the periphery of a borderland. Webb is once more reinforcing her belief in the spiritual and Nesta's 'dreaminess' and

'unreality', along with Polrebec's quest, reject the post-industrial world and rediscover spiritual truth through a focus on the past. The writing is utterly persuasive, taking the reader beyond constraints of time and space into a world in which the reader is deeply and intimately involved in the narrator's thoughts and emotions. Having so successfully used a first person narrator in *Precious Bane*, Webb again chose this form for *Armour Wherein He Trusted* and this effectively unifies the narrative.

When Polrebec first meets the ethereal Nesta we are immersed in his immediate, overwhelming emotions: 'I knew it was my love, though I had never seen her afore, and I was bewildered' (ibid., 22). Once again, Webb uses a female character with an inherent 'otherness', and it is clear from the beginning of the story, when Polrebec finds her ensconced in a flower-decked bower in the midst of oak woods, that Nesta is no ordinary mortal. His presentiment that he will be enchanted from this moment will prove true – "It is a witch-house" [...] "I shall be put in a spell" [...] I was sure she was a faery' (ibid., 23). For Polrebec, Nesta's strangeness is outweighed by her beauty and he marries her. Nesta herself warns Polrebec, though, that 'few of our women wed and when they do, they sup sorrow' (ibid., 68). Nesta is right in her prophecy, for when Polrebec joins the Crusades he is absent throughout seven long years of hardship and danger. Polrebec's attempts to resist the mission are overcome by a persuasive vision: 'I looked toward the Christus on the wall. And behold a dreadful marvel! For even as I looked, the image shuddered and two tears rolled down the face' (ibid., 123-124). As the novel was left unfinished we cannot know what Webb intended for its ending but the fragment's final pages record a letter Polrebec receives from his mother during his long years of absence. She expresses her fear of Nesta's strangeness, finding 'some necromancy in it', 'a green light about her and a taint of wizardry' (ibid., 131), suggesting her magical, almost supernatural nature.

From his first meeting with Nesta a struggle ensues for Polrebec as, passionately in love with her but called by Christ, he tussles inwardly over his choice. The conflict between the physical and the spiritual in the novel can be seen as illustrative of Webb's own plight, 'substituting for her own experiences

the mysterious, almost allegorical plot'.¹² As her body weakened and her world collapsed, she sought to evoke the triumph of the spirit, possibly because she sensed that she was facing impending death. Polrebec sacrifices everything for the Crusades: 'I knew that I must go, and my heart turned in my side and my soul uttered a cry' (*AWHT*, 124). Impelled by religious duty, he forsakes the secure idyll of home and garden where 'the lavender was all spiked over like a castle guarded by halberd men' and where his happiness is like 'the joy of holy recollected folk' (*ibid.*, 99). This emphasis on self-sacrifice and the negation of the self furthers Webb's conviction that only spiritual integrity matters.

Although Webb rejected the ethos of Christian doctrine it was to remain in her diction. To some extent she remained 'churchy; not in an intellectual sense, but in so far as instincts and emotions ruled.'¹³ But, although the church remained 'an old acquaintance,'¹⁴ Webb had detached herself from the church and, despite her recognition of its failings her separation from the creed was initially Jude-like in her bitterness and sorrow, as she writes in the poem 'Desolation': 'Man knows no hope – no goal' (51, 24). And similarly in 'An Estray': 'How did I come so low, / Wandering here / Under clouds of wrath and woe, / With a heart full of fear?' (51, 59). The elongated consonant 'w' is alliterated here, intensifying a mournful sound, and evoking her desolation.

Dorothy Wrenn believed that *Armour Wherein He Trusted* represented a return to conventional Christianity in Webb's own beliefs but I suggest that at the root of this story is her need to return 'home'; her focus on the mythological history of eleventh-century Shropshire a means of connecting more profoundly with the land through which she experienced her transcendent vision and to which she was deeply rooted. The novel encapsulates Webb's sense of the ancientness of the landscape and Polrebec's spiritual quest is a metaphor for a spiritual journey into 'The land within [...] a land of forests, and of meres' ('The Land Within', *SJ: Poems*, 88-89) which is, for her, akin to her very soul.

This poem, 'The Land Within', is thought to have been written late in her life and it powerfully conveys her anguish as she mourns her absence from

¹² Wrenn, p. 97.

¹³ Hardy, *The Life*, p. 386.

¹⁴ Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 339 (original work published in 1895).

Shropshire and the loss of happier times and days of health, hope and love: 'Here the pine harps, and many voices moan / Within the cedar, crying, "Lone! Alone!" (ibid.). The tone of lament here, in the low, mournful protracted cadence of Webb's assonant rhyme, suggests a pitiful sense of grief. Her sorrow at her failed marriage and the child that never was are depicted in imaginative reminiscences of 'a brown woodman, and a boy who smiled, / Running towards the shifting wicket-gate' (ibid.) of a woodland-embowered cottage in which Webb sees her cheerful self, 'leaning from the casement – that was I' (ibid.). Her agony is redolent in her cry: 'Where was that cottage with its lilac trees, / Its windows wide, its garden drowsed with bees? [...] O, in dreams, my soul! In dreams' (ibid.). Webb strives to recapture this vision in Polrebec's remembrances of the 'land within', the wooded country of Shropshire, when he is far away and she refers once more to this essence of spiritual truth as music:

So in the forest a man must hear with his own ears the carol that is for him, and one will hear a very sad song, with pine-trees in it, rasping needle on needle and cone on cone, and another will hear flutes and dulcimers afar, as you hear on the white roads of Italy. Nor will a man well stricken in years hear the same music as a lad (*AWHT*, 19-20).

The pensive, melancholy tone which Webb forms through syntax and vocabulary here helps the reader to engage with Polrebec's personality and thoughts, to listen to the narrator's voice so that we fully understand the nuances of meaning which are conveyed. The word order of the extract is effective because the first word, 'So', creates a reflective tone and sorrow is conveyed through harsh sounding vocabulary such as 'rasping', whilst joy is implicit in the soft sounds of the words 'flutes' and 'dulcimers' indicating Webb's ability to select vocabulary precisely. As has been noted:

this wrestling between earthly and mystical love [...] is more sharply drawn than in any of the preceding novels [...] and closely related to it is another of her central concerns, the striving of the individual to create an individual self, to find his own soul, this inevitably by way of "pain's deep forest".¹⁵

¹⁵ Coles, p. 291.

Like Mary Butts, Webb believed that ‘retaining this spiritual link to the land could heal a sickened soul.’¹⁶ For Butts, as for Webb, a deep connection with a familiar and beloved landscape was a means of reconnecting with the sacred. Butts was greatly interested in magic and pagan worship and, in what has been regarded as her foremost work, *Armed With Madness* (1928) Butts re-enacts the Quest for the Holy Grail in a mythic adventure. Jane Garrity suggests that ‘Butts attempts to order the chaos of modernity through recourse to mythic structures and an insistence on nature’s curative effects.’¹⁷ Butts’s novel re-uses Arthurian legend in an attempt to reclaim a lost pre-war England and her characters seek to ‘remain enveloped by the “true greenwood” and “chalk roads” of their home country, luxuriating in the “green even under [their] feet.”’¹⁸ Garrity notes that an interest in medievalism and the Grail quest in 1920’s post-war Britain overlapped with the popularity of nature cults, indicating that an anxiety about the erosion of ancient English green land and all that stood for was a contemporary concern. Butts’s political views concerning racial and class purity were strongly linked to this notion and thus a cause for concern to modern readers, but, nevertheless, her work is interesting in its focus on the numinous amidst the disruption of change and urbanisation. And Beattie comments that there is a running theme throughout Butts’ work, that the urban landscape ‘is a wasteland [...] which is threatening to engulf the supernatural order of the rural.’¹⁹ And this, I think, is a fear which underlines Webb’s own concern behind her spiritual vision, her expression of which in her work was mastered with increasing deftness. By the time she wrote *Armour* the buoyant naïvety of her early essays and poems had fully evolved with her spiritual development into the mature wisdom reflected in her literary craft. Here the reader is absorbed and immersed in the magical, mythic mood and glimpses ‘the key of the charm forgotten till Eternity’ (*AWHT*, 35). And we glean Webb’s final grasp of that ‘mysterious thing’ (cited in the Introduction of this thesis, *CPP*,

¹⁶ Beattie, ‘Mary Butts’, pp. 86-95, (p. 90).

¹⁷ Jane Garrity, *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 189.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁹ Beattie, p. 91.

37-38), the quest for the supernatural, the spiritual truth located in the experience of the rural:

If we think right, there is no *Now* or *Then*, no wall of glass or of water, no hour shut away, but all, whether sad or merry, spent in Eternity, there lapsing, there renewed.' (ibid., 76).

Webb's capitalisation of 'Eternity' amplifies the concept of the infinite time of the everlasting soul and the brief anaphoric final clauses create an emphasis on the renewal of the spirit. Here her understanding of spiritual reality is beyond everything, transcending time and space, reaching past the corporeal into a moment of utter soulfulness which anticipates a traversal into the eternity of death, the final borderland, in a further image of 'the other side of silence'. In the progression of her mystic vision and her craft, this novel further demands that Webb merits attention as a writer because of the scope and quality of her work.

In the 'ethereal lightness'²⁰ of *Armour Wherein He Trusted* there is a delicate beauty to the writing, a poignancy which captures the intangible and the almost inexpressible. There can surely be no accusations of excess in Webb's controlled writing in the extract above, as has so often been the case with her previous work. And there is something equally touching about the lasting message the work conveys in its eloquent expressions of pure love, both human and spiritual, and of nature as a consummate treasure:

the may [...] it stood at the forest edges in the evening light, spelled by its own fragrance. And if you shut eye to rest from the wound of its too much beauty, it rose with the evening breeze and buffeted you upon the brow. There is no escape from that which is beautiful. It will have our homage.
(*AWHT*, 77)

A magical aura is effectively created here as the may tree is intoxicated by its scent and arrests attention. The two short declarative sentences at the end of the extract make summative points which arrest the reader in their sense of completeness of thought – that there is always beauty in the world and that it demands worship. These sentences act almost as incantations, defying the reader's resistance to the bewitching and numinous power of nature. This passage continues with Polrebec describing the spiritual beauty of winter when

²⁰ Wrenn, p. 98.

our senses are not pried by the distractions of summer and Webb returns again to an image of the undying soul being released from earthly constraints:

And then the spirit rests no more in this or that carnal thing of petalled delight, but starteth away hastily over the waste waters like a seamew, plaining for eternity. (ibid., 78)

She sums up her understanding in a deceptively simple image which is yet artfully elegant. Nature is beautiful and the source of spiritual joy, but we are too easily satisfied with mere beauty in ‘petalled delight[s]’ when there is a deeper experience to be grasped in the yearning ‘for eternity’. Here Webb assimilates all her knowledge, thoughts and vision and this is why this thought-provoking novel is so apt in providing her last message. It is a great pity that readers and critics have not given more attention to this rich work.

Years earlier, at the start of her writing career, she had written of the ‘formative power’ which ‘triumph[s] over all obstacles in producing its special symmetry [evolving] countless variations [from] one germ of life’ (*SJ: Healing*, 37). The notion of one small ‘germ’ of life suggests both the microscopic nature of the origin of life but also its potency to grow and spread. This idea could almost serve as a metaphor for Webb, for those who knew her describe her in terms of her diminutive size and frailty, but also her fortitude. She was ‘a small, fragile person, with large anxious eyes [who] fluctuated between shyness and a sort of hesitant self-confidence.’²¹ Pugh also refers to her ‘strong shy personality’²² as he speaks of her determination to broadcast her message, citing her own words about the artist who ‘must elbow and push [for] if he did not often stop his honeyed utterance to shout his wares he would not be heard at all.’²³ It was St. John Adcock to whom Webb turned in the latter days of her life, when failing health and emotional breakdown led her to throw the uncompleted manuscript of *Armour* onto the fire. He reports the moment when she telephoned him in evident distress, saying how unwell she had been, then abruptly announced: “I have destroyed all I had done of the new novel!”²⁴ He goes on to say, regretfully, that he had ‘seldom heard anything more piteous

²¹ Adcock, p. 325.

²² Pugh, 1923, p. 7.

²³ ibid.

²⁴ Adcock, p. 326.

than the subdued, broken sound of her crying at the other end of the line.²⁵ In a testament to the strength of Webb's vision, once she had calmed down she insisted that 'she could recall it all almost word for word and would set to at once and rewrite it.'²⁶ The fragment we have today of this novel is evidence of her sustained persistence, but time did not allow her to finish this work, for within two months of this conversation with Adcock she was dead.

She would never hear of Baldwin's accolade or know of the brief clamour this created for her novels, in which, for a time, the publishers were unable to supply demand, or be disappointed by how swiftly fame then fell away. Having sunk into relative obscurity for many decades the time is finally right to reclaim this richly poetic and prescient author. The 2015 edition of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* encouragingly states that Webb's novels are 'imbued with [...] individual vision, ideas and beliefs ahead of her time'.²⁷ The writer notes that Webb did not gain repute but claims that 'a revival of her reputation was generated by *The Flower of Light*', a work which created a recognition of 'the relevance [of] her writing [...] in the late twentieth century.'²⁸ As this entry was written by Coles, author of *The Flower of Light*, this comment is not surprising. As Webb's foremost biographer, Coles's contribution is entirely valid, but this entry does not shed any further light on Webb's current reputation as Coles's views are already well established. She states that Webb's novels are 'classics of the rural and regional genre',²⁹ although the term 'classics' is such a loosely applied term that this does not establish any clear meaning about literary value.

Towards the end of her life Webb was haunted, as John Clare was, by the judgements of others and perhaps the foreboding of her oncoming death. Pain, physical and emotional, was frequently a presence in her life, as the poem 'Beyond' suggests: 'far beyond, far beyond, Deeper than the glassy pond, / My shivering spirit sits and weeps / And never sleeps' (*SJ: Poems*, 46). In the same short poem, her isolation is clear in the final stanza, 'Like the autumn dove that grieves, / Darkly hid in dove-like leaves, / So I moan within a woe / None may

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 327.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36800>> [accessed 11.01.17].

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

know' (ibid.). Assonance and rhyme emphasise Webb's loneliness and sorrow here. But, in envisaging her death, she thinks only of ultimate and eternal peace, ensconced in the natural world. In a late poem, 'Safe', short phrases, reflecting on life's end, create a slow, thoughtful pace:

Under a blossoming tree
 Let me lie down,
 With one blackbird to sing to me
 In the evenings brown.
 Safe from the world's long importunity –
 The endless talk, the critical, sly, stare,
 The trifling social days – and unaware
 Of all the bitter thoughts they have of me,
 Low in the grass, deep in the daisies,

I shall sleep sound, safe from their blames and praises (*SJ: Poems*, 47).

Here we imagine Webb in 'the other side of silence' in the sense of a final, tranquil absorption into the natural world. She anticipated with her usual musical poeticism that ultimately she would in a corporeal as well as a physical sense become one with nature. At last, she imagined, she would 'sleep sound', 'deep in the daisies' and 'safe'. The softness of her sibilant and alliterative phrases evoke a soothing sense of peace, portraying a moment in which Webb imagines herself beyond all, completely within 'the other side of silence', and the single word title emphasises this sense of finality. In picturing herself 'deep in the daisies' in the 'sleep' of death, Webb anticipates absolute peace and does not have to wait to dream in the 'sleep of death' as Hamlet envisages or for the consolation of heaven, to be caught up 'in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air' (1 Thessalonians 4: 17-18 NIV) for she is already within the clouds and in the land of her dreams. The fact that she longed to be 'safe' from criticism is a sad reflection on the lack of appreciation of her work, the 'critical, sly stare' in this poem suggesting the attitude of the London literary scene towards her and the juxtaposition of 'blames and praises' recalling the mixed criticism of her work. Her intent had been to relay her message to the world in the time she had but *Armour* carries an undertone of her awareness of oncoming death:

I shall have heard the sudden bell, pealing through the brisk dawn and
 laying down my quills and brushes, I shall hastily depart from this dark

valley of Time, going out among the serried stars as a young knight bent on a new conquest (39).

Polrebec is, on one level, referring to his departure for the Crusades but he is also anticipating death in the pursuit of this dangerous quest. If we recognise Polrebec as a facet of Webb herself then we can see that the references to 'quills and brushes' suggest Webb as an artist / wordsmith who is aware that she will be called beyond the known world of 'Time'. She again envisages herself as leaving the world of human concerns and becoming as one with nature – 'going out among the serried stars'. 'Going out' connotes an image of life being extinguished, burning out as a dying star in a natural, final process. But as she approached death, the natural world was, as ever, a source of comfort and inspiration to her, as Polrebec also depicts:

And leaning down from heaven's wall you will see the white thorn shining deep down, like snow in summer, and you will hear the mavis sing so faint and far away that you must fill up the glats in the song from memory (ibid., 38-39).

Music is again used symbolically here as the song of the thrush is just caught. Although the bird's music is elusive, Webb describes the certainty of hearing it as the modal verb 'will' indicates. That it is a moment of great beauty is clear and that it is a moment of spiritual joy is also evident for Webb seems to suggest that if there were such a thing as the Christian heaven it is truly on earth, rather than above as the image of 'leaning down', the sight of the perfection of the thorn blossom, and catching the transitory birdsong suggests.

When the finality of death came to Webb, too soon, it came rapidly as the effects of Graves' Disease, combined with pernicious anaemia, took hold. In her final few days, she desperately needed nursing care, and in, perhaps, a desire to regain some aspect of her old Eden she chose to leave London and travel to a nursing home near the home of her old governess. Minoni came to care for her, bringing flowers each day and it is reported that some of Webb's final words were, "are the leaves turning yet?"³⁰ as thoughts and memories of nature continued to sustain Webb until the end, as 'she went down in an

³⁰ Coles, p. 317.

agonising struggle against increasing odds.³¹ On October 8th 1927, she slipped into a coma and by the afternoon of that day she was gone, leaving only her work as a reminder of her talent and her vision.

Armour Wherein He Trusted was published in 1929 in a volume with several of Webb's short stories. Once more, critics' responses were mixed, a reviewer commenting that 'none of the content is up to the highest of which Mary Webb was capable [...] Her amateurishness in the short story is peculiarly obvious'³² and, yet, the work contains 'another handful or two of those sharply incised gems.'³³ The first comment here underscores a lack of appreciation for the craft of the writing; the second comment suggests a dismissal of Webb's short stories; and the third comment recognises Webb's genius but demeans its presence as a mere 'handful'. The stories in the volume are often satisfying, moving and eloquent and they continue Webb's key themes of human and spiritual love, nature and religion. In the neat brevity of 'Palm', for example, Webb illustrates the pure spirit of maternal love; in 'The Bread House' she uses the symbolism of Eucharistic bread to illustrate human failure to love and bird song to represent missed hope and opportunity; and in 'Blessed Are the Meek' Webb demonstrates her skill at irony in a sharp attack on organised religion. And there are stories of suffering, sorrow, loss and isolation. Like Katherine Mansfield, Webb struggled with an ongoing battle with her health and, although her work is very different to Mansfield's studies of fractured lives, Webb's stories evoke, at times, a similar sense of suffering and epiphanic moments of self-discovery, some sweet, some bitter, such as in 'In Affection and Esteem'. In this brief but complete tale Miss Myrtle Brown fills her lonely, impoverished hours with 'an impossible dream' (*AWHT*, 201) of receiving a lavish bunch of flowers. Eventually she decides to save up and orders a vast bouquet for herself, but the flowers are misdirected and Miss Brown is left only with failure and dismay. And Angela Smith cites a comment in one of Mansfield's letters relating to her story 'The Garden Party', a tale of 'female disempowerment'³⁴

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 289.

³² 'New Novels', *TLS*, 31 January 1929, p. 78.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Katherine Mansfield, *Selected Stories*, Introduction by Angela Smith, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. xxx.

and disappointment. In this story the young protagonist anticipates a 'perfect day,'³⁵ but, as Mansfield commented, 'life isn't like that. We haven't the ordering of it.'³⁶ These fleeting references to Webb's short stories indicate that they would repay greater study – some were based on vivid childhood memories, others were written near the end of her life in an urgent attempt to earn money quickly. As a consequence, some are better than others but each has its own merit and the lack of any critical interest in these underlines the ongoing lack of critical study into Webb's body of work.

Today, the danger of her being undervalued and underappreciated remains, as has been the case for some of the other women writers I have mentioned in this study: Elizabeth Von Arnim and Mary Butts, for example, who both deserve a renewed interest in their work. Vita Sackville West tends to be known more for her unconventional relationship with Virginia Woolf (who along with Dorothy Richardson and May Sinclair are already recognised as important modernists) than for her own, extensive, written work. And Daphne Du Maurier, though still widely read, has tended to be seen as a popular writer rather than an author who rewards critical study. Flora Thompson is often regarded only as a sentimental, nostalgic writer and this limits a recognition of the complex detail with which she represents rural change. Elizabeth Bowen, Jean Rhys, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Rosamond Lehman and so on are all, like Mary Webb, women writers who wrote about, explored, and expanded ideas about what women's lives were like during the first half of the twentieth century in an age when there were great changes for women. Vera Brittain, Rebecca West and Winifred Holtby have been acknowledged for their outspoken commentaries on these changes in the interwar years but more can be said on their work and those listed above. Childhood, education, work, romance, marriage, sexuality, lesbianism, motherhood, feminism, spirituality: these are all important personal encounters for women, but these authors wrote about other aspects of their socio-cultural experience - war, politics, suffrage, patriarchy, equality, religion – and they all represent female creativity and leave worthy legacies.

³⁵ Katherine Mansfield, 'The Garden Party', *ibid.*, p. 336 (original work published in 1922).

³⁶ *ibid.*, cited in Introduction by Angela Smith, p. xxix.

But here we are primarily concerned with Webb and the ongoing relevance of the body of her work, which also serves, as Coles suggests in her DNB entry, as her 'autobiography', for she left little else to illuminate the workings of her mind. Her message, however, remains abundantly clear - a philosophy based upon the deepest respect for nature, of spiritual awakening, of love and compassion, and an ecological understanding of how precious our planet is. But Julie English Early has suggested that 'the reputation of Mary Webb [...] has been bowed down under the weight of parody; views on the messianic visionaries have not always been either serious or generous.'³⁷ She believes that Webb's mystic themes, the popularity of *Cold Comfort Farm*, and Webb's idealism have prevented acceptance of her passionate conviction. This assessment summarises Webb's position today, for (as detailed at the start of this study) throughout her publishing history her work has been both praised and denigrated and few critics have considered the relevance of her work to contemporary society. We are now ideally positioned to reassess Webb and to recognize the value of what she has to say in connection with our own modern world, and the fear that humanity has created a doomed future for itself.

As we have now reached the centenary of the publication of Webb's first novel, the re-evaluation of her body of work is of increasing relevance and we need to recognise that she has hitherto been badly served and redress this. Webb herself commented on the sad fact that innumerable writers are lost to the literary world because they do not happen to strike the right chord at the right moment and was deeply disappointed by her own lack of success. In reviewing the work of the poet Morton Luce she admired his ability to:

express the simplest, homeliest things with genius [...] what fools we are, to let fair souls live unheeded among us just because their names do not happen to have been said or shouted a sufficient number of times for us to dare to commit ourselves (*CPP*, 50).

She could have been speaking of herself and the simple, yet complex, genius of her work which is yet 'unheeded'. In his posthumous elegy, Pugh expressed a similar regret about Webb and his frustration is clear: 'there has never been a

³⁷ Julie English Early, Review of 'Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World', *Victorian Studies*, 43 (Winter 2001), 326-328 (p. 328).

fine literary artist so cruelly and stupidly neglected and misunderstood'³⁸ as Mary Webb. Webb herself was bitterly disillusioned by her failure to gain literary recognition, and she saw the literary world as tainted by the materialism she criticised in her novels: “the craft of letters has been turned into a strictly commercial transaction, and books are manufactured with the prompt neat aplomb of a pot of factory jam.”³⁹ She connects here with the frustrations which led to the Arts and Crafts Movement which flourished between 1880-1910, in her early life, and which rejected the spiritless nature of mass production. This again highlights Webb as a writer whose work reappraised the early twentieth-century world and was commensurate with other important movements.

Regrettably, few critics have recognised the real power and merit of Webb's work and Pugh was probably alone in his whole-hearted praise of her, both before and after her death. In 1923 he had given a review of her talents thus far in which he validated that ‘to pass from the work of the average modern novelist to the work of Mary Webb is like stepping out of a stuffy room into the fresh air.’⁴⁰ He emphasised her mastery, which ‘holds and grips you from the first word to the last by sheer dint of [its] humanism. [Her] clear-sightedness and poise, [her] wit and wisdom, humour and fancy [...] tragedy and comedy, and those attributes of human sympathy and divine compassion which are born only of a full understanding and a great love.’⁴¹ At this point he was optimistic for her future as a writer; although stating at the time that ‘she has not yet taken her place in the hierarchy of literature [...] Mary Webb is one of the greatest of English novelists in this genre.’⁴² At this juncture he looked forward to much more from Webb and a greater appreciation of her, aptly using a seasonal metaphor to envision her ripe future – ‘the days of the burgeoning spring are upon us, and summer's crown of roses, and the golden aftermath of harvest-home’⁴³ would surely follow. In 1928, only five years later, he wrote of her again, but to rue her passing and to decry the neglect and misunderstanding of such ‘a

³⁸ Pugh, 1928, p. 193.

³⁹ Cited in Moulton, p. 246.

⁴⁰ Pugh, 1923, p. 7.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴³ *ibid.*

fine literary artist'⁴⁴ who had been so wrongfully neglected. He spoke of her knowledge of human nature which was 'profound, unfathomable,'⁴⁵ termed her a genius, eulogizing her 'power of imagery unexcelled by any modern work [...] [her] sense of beauty and proportion [...] [the] gems'⁴⁶ which fill her writing.

It is clear now that not only have the true qualities of Webb's work been misjudged, but that the profound relevance of her work has been missed. Webb reveals a vision of the pastoral that is 'not a myth but a psychological necessity, an underpinning of the self, a way of connecting the self to the environment'⁴⁷ and we now understand why this matters in a universal sense. Ernest Renan commented that "'We ought never to write except about the things we love'"⁴⁸ and this Webb assuredly does in depicting her vision of the interconnection between the self and the external world. And the true extent of her understanding of the universal in relation to her grasp of the central importance of nature to humanity can at last be properly appreciated.

⁴⁴ Pugh, 1928, p. 193.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 194.

⁴⁷ Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p. 115.

⁴⁸ Cited in Shepherd, p. 306.

Conclusion

One firm footing stands in Webb's work, to which all the interconnecting branches of her ideas are joined, and that is her supreme faith that it is possible to draw closer to the elusive mystery of the spirit through the music of nature:

When the crystal ball of the moon stood upon the hill and a clear light without colour tranced the plain [...] the aspen, aware of all, wrapt in all, knew that none would rebuke her, and lifting up her voice, silver with the green and white beauty of ten thousand leaves, tender and plashing and cool as crisp water over a fall, in the absolute, holy stillness, in the hush of heaven, she sang ('Populus Tremula, *EMW*, 276).

Music is again linked to the experience of the numinous here as it unlocks 'the other side of silence' – 'the holy stillness'. Webb's water imagery further connects to notions of refreshment and renewal, underscoring the revitalising concept of rebirth at the heart of her pantheism. Again she uses phonological effects, creating assonant and consonant strands in phrases such as 'crystal ball' and onomatopoeic effects in 'plashing.' Alexander Pope stated that in verse 'the sound must seem an echo to the sense'¹ and in the euphonic poetry of Webb's writing her musical, eloquent voice is identifiable with the aspen's 'cool', 'crisp' clarity of sound. In her celebration of the sacral within nature, where the 'hush of heaven' is to be found, her aspirated alliteration demonstrates her skill in using language to poeticise sacred nature which even in a moment of perfect stillness is vibrant with life. Silver has been reputed to have mystical powers and has many mythological associations and Webb appears to link with this in the tree's 'silver' leaves. And at the core of her ideas is this 'mystically perceived energy'² as she gives 'voice and clarity to those most fundamental things [for which] art was first evolved'³ – our search for meaning. She repeatedly asks, as Erica Duncan comments, 'the most elemental questions' (*GE*, Introduction, 2) and Webb can be claimed as an important twentieth-century writer. This study has sought to reposition her, re-evaluating her work

¹ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org>> [accessed 19 Dec 2017].

² Thrall, p. 367.

³ Duncan, p. 328.

and drawing attention to its essential values: her spiritual ethos and its anticipation of feminist spirituality; her early environmental awareness in her absolute defence of the natural world; and the remarkable poetic quality of her writing. She heard the ‘music of the earth’ (*SJ: Healing*, 21), its mysterious rhythms and silences, echoing this in her work. Her lyricism ‘sweeps along grandly [...] sustained at its highest pitch by a poet’s imagery and word-music that make more shadowy than ever the dividing-line between poetry and a poet’s prose.’⁴ Collard also noted this, comparing lines from both Webb’s verse and prose to illustrate how ‘it is rhythm at its widest sense which at the same time distinguishes and unites’ these.⁵

It is this ‘golden thread [...] the expression of rhythm, a conscious sense of strain’⁶ which, makes Webb’s work (even with its flaws) so unified. Throughout, she demonstrates, as Duncan suggests, her grasp of ‘a force patient and vast, vouchsafing no explanation [in which] the world might find a new bible of spiritual enlightenment – a writing not in fire upon tables of stone, but in subtle traceries on young leaves and buds’ (*GE*, Introduction, 7). Through personal experience, she formed this metaphysical belief in the potency of nature for re-creation amidst the social and intellectual backdrop of her time, in which she recognised the ‘shortcomings of the old and deficiencies of the new.’⁷ Her protagonists reject rationalism and materialism and are renewed and re-invented through the enchantment of nature. Webb illuminates wider cultural implications than the scope of this work can explore but additional research could further examine Webb as a dialectician in her proposal of a solution to the contradictions between the growth of human society through science and technology and its contrasting loss of spirituality and shrinking connection with the natural world. Likewise, a more detailed comparison with some of the other women writers mentioned in this study would repay further consideration, extending our understanding of Webb in her world.

⁴ Moulton, p. 219.

⁵ Collard, p. 458.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 460.

⁷ Thrall, p. 369.

It has been suggested that material and economic progress is ‘no more the root of all evils than it is an alloyed benefit to people or the natural world.’⁸ There may be some truth in this and today few of us would willingly sacrifice the material advantages we have gained through technological advancements, but we are increasingly aware that there is a conflict between our materialistic wants and the future of the earth. Webb’s body of work sacralises this world, recognising what really matters. It is therefore of particular and special relevance in enabling us to see what is of value today and to protect it.

Judith Plant suggested in the 1980s that we were ‘selling our souls to the marketplace’⁹ in a world dominated by massive institutions of governments and industries, which were ‘raping and poisoning the earth which is the source of all life.’¹⁰ Today we are no further forward in resolving such concerns and the situation has become increasingly complex. Sunaura Taylor has recently enquired how ‘we dismantle the exploitative systems that have created these injustices in the first place?’¹¹ More than ever, ‘the interaction between nature and culture, language and reality, between ecosystems and the social and cultural world are now so entangled’¹² that ignoring the need to “think transversally” [...] leads us to more fragmentary thought which [...] will bring more pollution, disorder, and “destruction of the balance of nature.”¹³ We need to change our thinking, cutting across existing, embedded notions about ideology, ecology and gender. This links with Webb’s concerns, especially her emphasis on nature’s capacity to ‘connect spirit and body’¹⁴ as she protests against the ‘drumbeat of waste’¹⁵ which characterises modern society.

⁸ Garrard, p. 203.

⁹ Judith Plant, ‘The Circle is Gathering’, *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (see King above) pp. 242-253 (p. 250).

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 243.

¹¹ Sunaura Taylor, ‘Interdependent Animals: A Feminist Disability Ethic of Care’ in *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections With Other Animals & The Earth* (see Adams & Gruen above), pp. 109-126, (pp. 122-123).

¹² Oppermann, p. 69.

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

¹⁴ Plant, *Healing the Wounds*, p. 250.

¹⁵ Thrall, p. 375.

The complexity of the modern world means that there are political dimensions as well as moral and philosophical viewpoints concerning environmental issues. Webb cannot answer current political and economic complications but she does raise issues which are of value now, for she is in alignment with ‘the metaphysical argument for biocentrism [and its] moral claims about the intrinsic value of the natural world’¹⁶ and her work can contribute in changing minds and lives. We should realise that ‘we stand at a fork in the road of the Holocene epoch’¹⁷ and are now ‘writing the next chapter in the history of our civilization.’¹⁸ Lewis also reminds us that we can either ‘continue to rape the land [or] by acknowledging our ancient and intimate connections with green nature, we can become aware of our participation in the flow of life energy.’¹⁹ Webb speaks to us poignantly of these ancient and intimate connections in ‘the chiming rivers [and] the old, old hills’ (*CPP*, 12) of ‘nature’s ancient memories, her twining prophecies [...] linking ordinary and common things with the miraculous and the remote’ (*SJ: Healing*, 58).

Ecocritical studies have now spread significantly and, as I have noted, there has been some recent interest in Webb. At the time of writing Webb’s work is still in print, but she still tends to be ‘a stalwart of the second hand bookshop,’²⁰ indicating her peripheral position in literary studies and underscoring the need for a re-evaluation of her work. This thesis demonstrates that her depiction of an intense awareness of the rural world and its mythological history offers an exploration of individuation through mystic sensibility. Through this is emergent the spiritual enlightenment of pantheism which recreates the self and in turn illuminates an understanding of individual love as evocative of universal love of the green world. That she does so from a woman’s perspective, in an age when scientific, historical, theological and political spheres were dominated by men, identifies her as of significance in the development of modern feminist spirituality as a response to prevailing forces. Through storytelling, ‘the most spontaneous and basic way of naming

¹⁶ Garrard, p. 202.

¹⁷ Lewis, p. 133.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁰ Pelling, p. 57.

experience,²¹ she depicts a complete philosophy of the reality of the numinous, 'the other side of silence', and this metaphor for spiritual apprehension can also be used in claiming Webb from the perimeter of the academic world. She has, for too long, existed on the margins of obscurity as a comment on the current Shropshire Tourism website seems to anticipate in its information about the Mary Webb Walking Trails: 'If you are not familiar with Mary Webb's novels and poetry, you will find that these trails reveal some of the loveliest corners of the county.'²² My recent enquiry at Shrewsbury's Tourist Office regarding the location of her grave in the large borough cemetery was also met with some confusion, suggesting this is a request not commonly made.

These factors are a sad indictment of the lack of extant knowledge of, and appreciation of, Webb. They make a regrettable conclusion to her long struggles with ill health and the lack of interest in her work, her 'gospel of earth', which evinces her joy in nature, her personal suffering, her rejection of conventional theology and her belief in love and the supremacy of nature. Yet, what we are left with, overall, is her work, 'a rare blossom waiting to be discovered.'²³ And her work glows with the radiance of her vision, which she was so determined to record in the time she had available, knowing that the day would come when 'I will say goodbye to morning, with her eyes of gold' ('Goodbye to Morning, *SJ: Poems*, 44). Nature had been her comfort and inspiration throughout her life but she became exhausted by the mortal realm and longed for the 'green veils [...] The dewy hills of heaven' (*ibid.*). In another poem, 'Colomen', she writes, 'The lady standeth, like a tree / Bent down with blossom ...' (*SJ: Poems*, 92-96, 92). The ellipsis here leads us on into thoughts of timeless eternity, of Webb herself re-imagined in tree-like form. Fittingly her grave rests under the spreading branches of a tall tree in a peaceful spot and in the distance the Shropshire hills she loved so much watch over the landscape.

²¹ Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction* (London: SPCK, 1993), p. 10.

²² <<http://www.shropshiretourism.co.uk>> [accessed 23.06.15].

²³ Beattie, p. 33.

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