

Alyse Gregory & *The Dial*¹

Alyse Gregory met Llewelyn Powys late in 1921. He was a young writer, just starting to publish his African stories in newspapers such as the *New York Evening Post* and the *Freeman*, she was the as yet unofficial Editor of *The Dial*, an outstanding literary review. Her too short passage at *The Dial* was momentous in her life.² There she met the literary and artistic intelligentsia, there she showed her mettle and was greatly appreciated for her intelligence and distinction.

The circumstances which brought Alyse to *The Dial* were told by Rosemary Manning.³ In her autobiography⁴, Alyse Gregory relates how the tea shop she had opened with a friend, two blocks from the offices of *The Dial* at 152 West Thirteenth Street, became a convenient meeting-place for its new owners, Scofield Thayer and Sibley Watson, who brought manuscripts to discuss while having a cup of tea. Among the habitués of her shop, ranging from 'derelict characters to women of fashion', there were a small array of people more congenial to her mind, such as the poet William Rose Benét and his brother Stephen. But some years before, she had already made the acquaintance of a man who was of paramount importance to her: Randolph Bourne. Randolph Bourne, born in 1886 in Bloomfield, New Jersey, was to die, absurdly young, in 1918. His broken body, deformed by tuberculosis of the spine, enclosed the most brilliant mind. After he graduated from high school he had to work several years before he was able to enter Columbia University on a scholarship, at the age of 23. He received his master's degree in 1913. By 1917 he worked for *The New Republic*. With other writers like Bertrand Russell, Van Wyck Brooks, Dreiser or Dos Passos, he contributed articles to *The Dial*, at that time a radical fortnightly owned by Martyn Johnson, and to the avant-garde monthly *The Seven Arts*. It was Bourne who introduced Alyse Gregory to Scofield Thayer. It was the beginning of a great friendship.

In March 1917 Bourne published an article in *The New Republic* to which he declared his stand against the entry of the United States into the war, a statement which cost him his job. Bourne wanted his country to have an intellectual leadership and held that 'Against the thinly disguised panic which calls itself "patriotism" and the thinly disguised militarism which calls itself "preparedness" the cosmopolitan ideal is set'.⁵ He would certainly have played a major part in the development of Thayer and Watson's *Dial*, later on. Scofield Thayer admired Randolph Bourne and decided to back Johnson's *Dial*, which had financial problems, on the condition Bourne would be given a platform. But with the turn of events, the fortnightly changed its course and advocated a participation in the war. As a consequence Bourne's position as a contributing editor became less and less tenable. His final political leading article for *The Dial* was 'Conscience and Intelligence in War', in 1918⁶.

The influence which Bourne, along with Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank and Lewis Mumford exerted, is stressed in a fairly recent book, *Beloved Community*, and the importance of these men now, in modern American thought is underlined:

In contrast to a radicalism that defended natural rights or liberties, or which denounced the economic conditions that drained such rights and liberties of meaning, the Young Americans launched a critique of modern society that was moral, æsthetic, and, above all, personal. It was the personal failure of modern industrial life—its inability to give meaning and satisfaction to individuals—that was its most damning feature from the perspective of those raised on a republican conception of citizenship and a romantic belief in the authority of the creative imagination. 'We were all sworn foes of Capitalism', W. Frank later recalled, 'not because we knew it would not work, but because we judged it, even in success, to be lethal to the human spirit.'⁷

Randolph Bourne died suddenly, of influenza, on 22 December 1918. Alyse would much later mourn his memory and feel regret for having neglected him:

¹ This paper has already been published in 'Powys Notes', Spring 2000, vol.13

² For a detailed description of her life: *Alyse Gregory, A Woman at Her Window*, by J. Peltier, 'Powys Heritage' series, Cecil Woolf, 1999.

³ R. Manning, *Alyse Gregory, A Biographical Sketch*, The Powys Review n°3.

⁴ A. Gregory, *The Day is Gone*, E.P. Dutton, N.Y. 1948

⁵ Nicholas Joost, *The Dial, Years of Transition, 1912-1920*, Barre Pub. 1967, p.131

⁶ R. Bourne, *The History of a Literary Radical*, ed. Van Wyck Brooks, 1920, pp.197-204

⁷ C. Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community*, The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1990, pp. 3 & 4. The title of the book is borrowed from one of Bourne's most famous essays, 'Trans-national America', published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, in July 1916.

With Randolph I was too self-centered to give him the warm assurance he craved. I did give him a great deal, but when I read these essays [*The History of a Literary Radical*] I realise how much more I might have learnt from him and how much more I might have given him... How vibrant, subtle, sanguine these essays of Randolph are! They evoke a whole era. (26 January 1947)⁸

Scofield Thayer and Sibley Watson bought *The Dial* at the end of 1919. For both, this was no ordinary business, and their wealth enabled them to be dedicated patrons of the arts. Alyse Gregory confirms this, saying that Thayer ‘administered his wealth largely as a trust, supporting or helping to support many young writers and artists’. James Sibley Watson, the son of a banker, managed to escape his wealthy environment. After graduating from Harvard in 1916, he turned to medicine and received his degree of M.D. in 1921. As early as May 1917 he had published his first signed review on Samuel Butler. Scofield Thayer also came from a very wealthy family and studied at Harvard, a few years after T.S. Eliot. After graduating in 1913 *cum laude*, he went to Oxford to study classics and philosophy, but the beginning of the first world war put an end to his academic life. In 1918 he was asked to participate in the ‘reconstruction’ of *The Dial*. He had already written some reviews and essays, including an appreciative review of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Lyrical Poems*, a feat of courage in 1918.

Alyse Gregory many years later would draw a subtle portrait of her friend:

Like most people of distinction he was often egocentric, though not egotistical: his courtesy could be exquisite and he was touchingly susceptible to the words of the people he valued. His mind was inflammable and satirical and it was at the same time sober and sad. He defended himself with his wit, the best way of banishing fear. Like Diderot, he would rather be impatient than bored, and he alternated between the tempest and the frozen lake.⁹

‘Dr Watson’, as she called him, is also present in her memories:

I would sometimes catch sidelong glances from the large, expressive eyes of Dr Watson—the most expressive eyes I have ever encountered. He was tall and strikingly good-looking, with fair hair, a fair moustache, and unusually beautiful hands. But perhaps the most unusual thing about him was the quality of his silence, so subtly and evasively provocative that it was difficult to tell whether it was offered as a lure to oneself or constituted his own sole means of escape.¹⁰

The Dial had known various phases: after being the chief periodical of the Transcendentalists, it oscillated between the radical and the conservative, trying to voice the aspirations of the younger generation, and veering again to a sedate position. From 1880 to 1916 in the hands of the Chicago Brownes, it was subdued and prudent. In 1916 under the editorship of Martyn Johnson it veered to modern trends and *vers libre*. In July 1918 *The Dial* left Chicago for New York. People such as Thorstein Veblen, Randolph Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks were among the succeeding editors at that time. Lastly, under the guidance of Thayer and Watson, it was advocating ‘the ideals of the cosmopolitan spirit in literature and the arts.’¹¹

Soon after *The Dial* became his, Scofield Thayer offered Alyse to be his secretary, then his assistant. Alyse, never confident in herself, declined the offer, ‘still prizing humble liberty above “tottering honor”’. She finally accepted and, when Gilbert Seldes left, she was appointed Managing Editor, on 18 December 1923. This experience brought in her life a few years of welcome intellectual labour among the literati, ‘in touch with minds original and imaginative, the pick of all Europe and America’. Discreet about her editorship, she only allowed that she was ‘intensely anxious to live up to [her] obligations’, but she gave a good description of the place:

The offices of *The Dial* magazine and *The Dial* Publishing Company occupied the whole of a large, old-fashioned, three-story house in a downtown residential section of the city, once fashionable... The word *office* is hardly, however, a suitable one to describe the spacious, square, homely rooms, with their casual collection of shabby furniture—selected, apparently, as little for display as for efficiency. They had something of old New York still lingering about them, its serenity and its leisured dignity.¹²

At her office Alyse had her friend Kenneth Burke’s help as assistant editor.¹³ She found

⁸ A. Gregory, in unpublished typescript of her diaries.

⁹ A. Gregory, *The Day is Gone*, p.178

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-2

¹¹ Joost, p.61

¹² A. Gregory, *The Day Is Gone*, p.208

¹³ Jack Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village*, Wisconsin UP, 1996, p.119

time to compile a typed set of detailed 'General Instructions for Editorial Department' which was the rule afterwards, during Marianne Moore's Editorship. The work was exacting, for nothing escaped Thayer's sharp eye:

Like Parliament after some public scandal, the staff held post mortem meetings each month following the publication of the magazine. Scofield would arrive with a long sheet of paper on which he had meticulously noted down every error, and each would be remorselessly tracked to the guilty person. These were painful occasions, redeemed by the presence of Dr. Watson, whose quick and indulgent understanding offered balm to all.¹⁴

She wrote, with elegant and distinctive style, many signed reviews for *The Dial*, fifteen in all, but only after she had left, and some unsigned paragraphs in the 'Briefer Mentions' section. Lafcadio Hearn, Sherwood Anderson, Katherine Mansfield, Paul Valéry, von Keyserling, Dostoevsky, were among the writers she reviewed. She it was who in August 1928 devoted a long review on Proust's recently published *Cities of the Plain*. Some chapters of her own work in progress, *She Shall Have Music*, were published in 1925. One of the (rare) comments she later made in her diaries about her work as Editor concerns Hemingway: she was inordinately pleased to have rejected his stories, in spite of Ezra Pound's insistence. One story was on bull-fighting, which she abhorred. One would like to think that, on the other hand, she was at least partly responsible for the warm appreciation Proust always received from *The Dial*, and which elicited from him extravagant praise about his 'très cher Dial qui m'a mieux compris et plus chaleureusement soutenu qu'aucun journal, aucune revue. Toute ma reconnaissance pour tant de lumière qui illumine la pensée et réchauffe le cœur.'¹⁵

After his reckless exploits in the Rocky Mountains in May 1924 with Dr Watson, Llewelyn Powys came back feverish and ill. Alyse decided New York would be too hot for him and in September she rented a farmhouse at Montoma, in the Catskills. They were married the following month, in Kingston, NY. Alyse had then long, tiring days commuting and finally, with Kenneth Burke's help, she reduced her visits to her office to only once a month. The strain was added to her worry about Llewelyn's health which was, from now on, to be a constant anxiety. Llewelyn meanwhile had decided to return to England. Alyse had to resign in February 1925, thus putting an end to one of the happiest periods of her life.

On 27 April Marianne Moore, who had become a familiar name among the contributors, took over. She was to be the last Editor, for *The Dial* ended with the July 1929 issue. In her fervent tribute, '*The Dial: A Retrospect*' she evokes the spirit of the place, 'the constant atmosphere of excited triumph' and alludes to 'Alyse Gregory's delicately lethal honesty', finding in it 'something apart from the stodgy world of mere routine'. She recalls the morals and the religion of literature held by the staff:

Above all, for an inflexible morality against 'the nearly good'; for a non-exploiting helpfulness to art and the artist, for living the doctrine that 'a love of letters knows no frontiers', Scofield Thayer and Dr. Watson are the indestructible symbol.¹⁶

She also gives us interesting financial details. Contributions were paid for on acceptance; for prose, two cents a word; for verse, twenty dollars a page or part of a page; for reviews termed Briefer Mentions, two dollars each. There were no special prices for special contributors—a phase of chivalry towards beginners that certain of them suspiciously disbelieved in. Any writing or translating by the editors was done without payment, Dr Watson's participation, under the name W.C. Blum being contrived with 'quietness amounting to scandal.' And payment was computed in amounts that are multiples of five.¹⁷

The Dial had its contents printed on the rose-sienna cover. The emblem, a stylization of a Georgian wall-hung sundial, adorned the first page of every issue. It offered about a hundred pages for each issue, and cost 50 cents a copy. The subscription was of \$5 a year, from 1920 to 1929. In the November 1923 issue, the subscription leaflet mentions a membership of over thirty thousand readers. In fact the number of copies printed was more or less around 16,000 and the Business Manager of *The Dial* allowed the Editor to quote to potential advertisers a circulation of about 13,440. Needless to say that Thayer and Watson were in fact subsidizing American arts and letters at that time. Besides a variety of reasons, what brought above all its downfall in July 1929 was the dismal fact that *The Dial* never found a large enough audience and towards the end of the Twenties its integrity itself was its undoing. Marianne Moore,

¹⁴ A. Gregory, *The Day Is Gone*, p.211

¹⁵ Joost, p.276: 'this dear Dial which understood me and supported me better than any other journal or magazine. All my gratitude for such radiance which kindles the mind and warms the heart.' (Tr. by Peltier)

¹⁶ M. Moore, *Predilections*, The Viking Press, N.Y., 1955, p.113

¹⁷ Ibid.

Kenneth Burke and Sibley Watson could not revive with scrupulous responsibility 'what had begun as a spontaneously delightful plotting in the interest of art and artists', as Miss Moore put it.

What made *The Dial* so exceptional, compared to the other magazines which flourished in those exciting post-war years? The answer lies in the exacting level demanded by its patrons: only the best prevailed. The magazine was dedicated to the sole cause of 'high' modern art, sophisticated and innovative. It held no ideology except that of excellence, its only policy was that of 'an intelligent eclecticism'. Scofield Thayer's rich personality, his sense of form and style, his æstheticism, were paramount in the development of the magazine and from 1920 onwards an array of 'young' writers, poets and artists from all over the world, who would later be recognized, contributed to the magazine. Among them we find the Powys.

As early as April 1920 one of Llewelyn's stories, 'A Sheepman's Diary', had been published while he was still in England. He was to be the most published of all, with essays, articles and short reviews of books every year, some years two or three times, up to March 1929. But John Cowper also had essays and reviews published in *The Dial*: in November 1923 'The Philosopher Kwang', 'Children of Adam' in May 1927 and his review of *Time and Western Man*, by Wyndham Lewis in November 1928. Theodore's 'The Painted Wagon' appeared in February 1925; *The Left Leg* was reviewed in 1923 under the title 'Lust and Hate', and Padraic Colum reviewed *Black Briony* in 1925 and *Mr Weston's Good Wine* in 1928. Part of a prose poem by Katie, 'Phoenix', was given in the August 1928 issue.

The Powys were therefore published alongside glorious company. In the November 1923 issue mentioned above, for instance, we find Chukovsky's 'Reminiscences of Leonid Andreev', a review of Joyce's *Ulysses* by T.S. Eliot, philosophical pages by Santayana, Bertrand Russell reviewing Havelock Ellis' *The Dance of Life*, Vachel Lindsay's *Collected Poems* examined by Marianne Moore, and Henry McBride expatiating on the Paris of Juan Gris and the Ballets Russes, when he dined with Pascin and looked at his work... The September 1924 issue opened with 'The Bounty of Sweden', an evocation of Stockholm by W.B. Yeats, on the occasion of his Nobel Prize visit; Paul Morand, Proust's friend, sent his 'Letter from Paris', and some Seurat paintings were chosen to echo Jules Romain's *Lucienne*. For texts and illustrations were often juxtaposed, intertwined. Every issue of *The Dial* was an adventure, offering exciting new vistas.

Through their conception of *The Dial*, Thayer and Watson were able to impress upon the decade of the 1920's certain components of æsthetic taste that have affected American art and letters to our day. There is the urge towards formalism, the emphasis on the work of art as primarily a unique form... There is also the accompanying urge towards a relative impersonality in the editorial regard of the artist and his created work of art... The focused interest of *The Dial* and its staff and contributors was in the work of art, the form that gave moments of delight. Still another urge the magazine expressed is the urge towards what Randolph Bourne called 'an intellectual sympathy which is not satisfied until it has got at the heart of the different intellectual expressions, and felt as they feel... the cosmopolitan ideal.'¹⁸

Jacqueline Peltier

¹⁸ Joost, p.277