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**J. B. Pick, Colin Wilson & E. H. Visiak. *The Strange Genius of David Lindsay. An Appreciation.* London. John Baker. 1970. viii, 183 pp. £ 2.25.**

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Encouraged, perhaps, by the recent paperback success of *A Voyage to Arcturus* in North America, the three main critics of David Lindsay have collaborated to produce a book-length study of his work. Visiak befriended and encouraged Lindsay, and wrote for *Notes & Queries* (March 30th, 1940) the first serious criticism of *A Voyage*; Pick helped Mrs Lindsay after her husband's death, and contributed an article, "The Work of David Lindsay," to *Studies in Scottish Literature*, I (1964); Wilson wrote about *A Voyage* in *Eagle and Earwig* (John Baker, 1966), and prompted Ballantine Books to issue it in North America. In the last thirty years, no one else has taken much interest.

*The Strange Genius* is an important contribution to the study of Lindsay in two ways: it is the sole source of information on the man; it is the main source of information on the unpublished novels and notebooks. And it is very readable. In other respects the book has serious limitations, in that it is a popularising rather than a scholarly work. Its most annoying feature is that works, reviews and notebooks are quoted without, in most cases, full reference being given to the source. Its more serious defect is the lack of sustained and searching criticism: most of the essays are accounts rather than analyses. In one sense only can Wilson's claim in the Foreward, "that this is the definitive work on a writer who will be ranked as one of the most important of this century", be upheld: there are no others.

Pick's contributions to the book, 'A Sketch of Lindsay's life as man and writer' (pp. 3-32), and 'The unpublished novels: *The Violet Apple* and *The Witch*' (pp. 139-82) are likely to be most lasting. These gain from being simply accounts, and his quotations are likely to remain our only source for both novels and 'Sketch Notes towards a New System of Philosophy' for some time to come.

Visiak's contributions (pp. 95-135) are most interesting. We get his impressions of the man as he knew him, some infuriatingly enigmatic hints (e.g. of "a major psychological shock sustained in his childhood" (p. 115) — but he doesn't say what), and some superb anecdotes, one of which I cannot resist repeating: He took Lindsay, as a future celebrity, to a society gathering. Waiting for their hostess, he tells us,

Lindsay succumbed, apparently becoming inert. I myself remained vigilant.

At length, 'She's coming!' I cried.

She was approaching, clearing waves of humanity which opened before her, as it were, under full sail.

The inevitable questions followed: *What books had he written? Where did he write? What were his hours of composition? Where did he get his ideas?* The broadside ran along.

Suddenly, she shrieked, 'Why, he's gone to sleep!'

It was true. 'But, no,' I said. 'He's not asleep. Quite the contrary. He's *concentrating!* He always looks like that when he's really interested.'

'Oh, that's it, then!' she said. Somebody called her away, and the operation was over (pp. 99-100).

Visiak is also the only one of the three to realise the major importance of *Devil's Tor*, not Lindsay's masterpiece (the unrepeatable, other-worldly *Arcturus*) but his most sustained and successful attempt at making *this* world supernaturally significant. However, Wilson tells us (again, in the Foreword) that Visiak's essay on it had to be cut "to less than half its size" to make way for Pick's contributions.

It is a pity that Wilson's own essay was not cut instead, for it merely expands the one on *Arcturus* and *The Haunted Woman* printed in *Eagle and Earwig*. The expansion, in fact, is mainly extension of beginning and end: huge sections in the middle are copied out word for word. At the beginning we are treated to little vignettes of Wilson reading Lindsay "on a hot summer day in 1963, lying on the lawn, looking out over a very calm sea, determined to absorb a little sunlight" (p. 35) or "driving off to Windermere" (p. 36). To the end have been appended brief notes on the other novels, and some no doubt interesting notions which would have been more at home in "The Outsider Cycle."

A rather simple-minded (anonymous) review in the *Times Literary Supplement* (November 20th, 1970) referred to this as "a brilliant example of literary dissection". What actually happens is that, when he gets down to his main subject, *A Voyage to Arcturus*, Wilson insists "that it is not an allegory but a *story* with deeper meanings" (p. 49). After drawing this dubious distinction, he works through the book in the most pedestrian way, suggesting more or less overtly the allegorical meanings: "The religion of Sant (presumably meaning 'health')" (p. 54). Often it is only 'touchstone' criticism: instead of making him feel as if the top of his head were being taken off, however, *The Haunted Woman*, for example, has the milder but "authentic poetic effect of making the muscles of the skin [sic] contract" (p. 81).

Wilson does in fact make a number of acute remarks, but he follows none of them up, and you generally have to know more about

the books than he does to find them stimulating. Whereas Pick mistakenly thinks the incidents of *A Voyage* "cannot be interpreted consistently in a necessary and coherent order" (p. 4), Wilson sees that it "is constructed like a series of Chinese boxes, one inside the other" (p. 46). Indeed it is; but Wilson continues "or it is like . . ." and the insight is abandoned. To see just how the boxes fit together would involve a closer examination of the structure than Wilson, or either of the others, is equipped for. In fact, no one has yet mentioned the three 'rebirths' of the (double) protagonist, or their relevance to the successively social, personal and (for want of a better word) archetypal levels of the allegory.

Paradigmatically, the fault of their whole approach to Lindsay — the reason they find his genius so 'strange' — is revealed in their dismissal of his excellent historical pot-boiler *Adventures of M. de Mailly* (published in the U.S.A. as *A Blade for Sale*). Wilson says in a footnote, "I am leaving [it] out of account because it is written purely as entertainment" (p. 75); Visiak describes it as "a surprising freak" (p. 135); and Pick calls it "a venture of an entirely different kind" (p. 18). The book has Mailly follow through a staggeringly complex "thread of divine logic" (heading of Chapter XIV) to its necessary end: the book is ratiocinative. That is, it is the expression of the 'other face' of Lindsay's talent for fantasy, just as Dupin is of Poe's, or Father Brown of Chesterton's.

Thus it is their chief limitation, from a critical point of view, that they do not attempt to put Lindsay in proper literary perspective. And in concentrating on the freedom of Lindsay's imagination they say little about the enormous background (so well hidden in *A Voyage*, so obtrusive in *Devil's Tor*) of Icelandic and all northern literature; Plato and Gnostic mythology; Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and German romanticism; Carlyle, Stevenson and, especially, George MacDonald: on all of these Lindsay drew.

If I have been critical of a book that was not, in another sense, meant to be critical (Wilson's foolish claim discounted), I have at least hoped to show that *The Strange Genius of David Lindsay* should be the beginning, not the end, of the study of this neglected Scottish writer. The good effects of the book must be to stimulate an interest in Lindsay's novels, and perhaps help to get some of the still unpublished typescripts into print.

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