A profligate’s reserve
by David Yezzi

Reviews of My Dog Tulip & My Father & Myself by J. R. Ackerley

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

J. R. Ackerley
My Father and Myself (New York Review Books Classics)
NYRB Classics, 283 pages, $17.95

Typical of the zoophilist who favors life’s lower orders over humankind, Robinson Jeffers claimed he’d sooner kill a man than a hawk. While one can imagine an instance when this would prove tempting—a particularly noisome cad or deserving fowl—most people, I think, refrain from adopting it as a policy. An animal activist in later life, J. R. Ackerley (called Joe) so preferred the company of his ill-behaved Alsatian bitch Queenie that he often chose her above his friends, who despite their affection for him could not abide his yowling, four-legged ward. Tired of accommodating the unruly beast on visits to the country, Ackerley’s chums left off inviting him altogether. “Best friend” hardly delimits the power of Queenie’s hold on this particular man; she was the dearest thing in his life. “I shall never stop missing her,” Ackerley wrote after Queenie’s death in 1961, “no human being has ever meant so much to me as she meant.” Why this should be the case heavily informs this pair of memoirs, reissued by The New York Review, which has recently taken to reprinting books in addition to noticing them.

Lauded as a minor master by contemporaries and friends such as Evelyn Waugh, Elizabeth Bowen, Vita Sackville-West, and Cyril Connolly, Ackerley may be garrisoned among the army of underachievers that Connolly described in Enemies of Promise (1938). Never wavering from the
path of minority, Ackerley nonetheless managed to lodge a few quirky volumes in the corpus of classics. As he tells us at the opening of *My Father and Myself*, he was almost twenty-three when his parents married in 1919. Ackerley takes this chronological discrepancy blithely in stride: “Nearly a quarter of a century may seem rather procrastinatory for making up one’s mind, but I expect that the longer such rites are postponed the less indispensable they appear and that, as the years rolled by, my parents gradually forgot the anomaly of their situation.” The anomalies of Ackerley’s own situation, however, readers are not likely to forget.

Ackerley began *My Father and Myself* a few years after his father’s death in 1929 and completed it in 1967, the year before his own. The book presents a handy bit of family detective work in which Ackerley discovers more had been going on in his father’s life than success in the fruit business, a prosperity that won him the title of the “Banana King.” If his father had made such a killing, why had he left so little money behind? By the time Roger Ackerley married Joe’s mother, it turns out, he had sired three children by another woman, Murial, whom Joe first encounters as an anonymous figure at his father’s deathbed. Roger’s “secret orchard,” as he called his second household, was disclosed only after his death by means of a letter unearthed in a drawer. Spurred on by his curiosity for the missing pieces of this increasingly labyrinthine story, Joe also discovers that his father as a young man had been the (platonic?) intimate of the flamboyant Comte de Gallatin and that his father’s fatal illness at sixty-six was brought on by a case of syphilis contracted years before.

W. H. Auden, writing for *The New York Review of Books* in 1969, pointed out that in *My Father and Myself* Ackerley “strictly limits himself to two areas of his life, his relations with his family and his sex-life.” Auden’s review, which was reprinted in his *Forewords and Afterwords* (1973), serves to introduce the NYRB’s current edition. Of Ackerley’s homosexual pursuits, Auden makes much, bemoaning the omission of exactly what went on in Ackerley’s bed. “My guess,” Auden wrote, “is that at the back of his mind lay a daydream of an innocent Eden where children play ‘Doctor,’ so that the acts he really preferred were the most ‘brotherly,’ Plain-Sewing and Princeton-First-Year.” Auden was responsible for landing these two terms in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: the first defined as mutual masturbation, the second as the practice of rubbing oneself between another’s thighs. (Though the graduates of that illustrious Garden State institution with whom I’m acquainted claim to have no idea of the meaning of this last reference.)

The self-confessing aspect of Ackerley’s dual portrait leads him at one point to a rather poignant admission: frustrated with his prospects of reaching sex through love, after graduating from Cambridge, he “started upon a long quest in pursuit of love through sex.” Ackerley’s years of cruising compliant guardsmen and other subsidized companions grew out of his search for the “Ideal Friend” and ended only with the acquisition of Queenie, at which point Ackerley’s relentless sexual urges apparently subsided. *My Dog Tulip* (1956), based on his life with Queenie, comprises the fluid-smeared particulars of rearing and breeding the dog that was to become Ackerley’s great love: “The fifteen years she lived with me were the happiest years of my life.”
Ackerley, in a tribute traditionally reserved for long-suffering spouses and stalwart colleagues, dedicated *My Father and Myself* to her memory.

While *My Father and Myself* contain a number of pages on the hapless sexual pursuits of Ackerley fils, the chronicles of Tulip-Queenie’s exploits prove much more scabrous.

Chapter two, winkingly titled “Liquids and Solids,” begins: “In the journal of General Bertrand, Napoleon’s Grand Marshal at St. Helena, the entry occurs: ‘1821, April 12: At ten-thirty the Emperor passed a large and well-formed motion.’” Suffice it to say that in the sphere of Ackerley’s regard Queenie is treated like an emperor. For those with an interest in canine defecation and micturition, this chapter provides absorbing reading. For those who find it unpleasant to hear detailed the bowel movements—in parks, on sidewalks, on terraces, in guest rooms—of a decidedly high-strung German Shepherd, one may want to skip ahead. It will do such a reader little good, however, since what follows is a painstaking account of Tulip’s veterinary visits and mating practices (“The Turn of the Screw”). Needless to say, Tulip is far from placid: she draws blood not only from Ackerley but also from two bus conductors and a postman and outrages not a few veterinarians. Here’s Ackerley, still new to dog ownership, heading off to one doctor’s appointment:

> When I set out with her I was already unnerved by the struggle that lay ahead. Nor were my drooping spirits raised by the first sight that greeted us, a spaniel who was being treated as we arrived… . He was standing quietly on a table with a thermometer sticking out of his bottom, like a cigarette. And this humiliating spectacle was rendered all the more crushing by the fact that there was no one else there. Absolutely motionless, as with an air of deep absorption, the dog was standing upon a table in an empty room with a thermometer in his bottom, almost as if he had put it there himself.

> “Oh, Tulip!” I groaned. “If only you were like that!” But she was not.

As his biographer Peter Porter points out, Ackerley’s technique was to jolt the reader into laughter and disgust, the second often provoked by the first. He aimed to shock, and his success was heightened by the soap-bubble sparkle and lightness of his prose. Nauseous disclosures are dropped in with a dandy’s poise. Ackerley gets great mileage out of the often creepy intimacy of dog and master: as a counter to suspicions of sexual shenanigans between the two, Ackerley, despite his denials, admitted to a bit of “finger work” in conjunction with breeding her. (As Porter notes, Ackerley once returned an author’s manuscript smeared with Queenie’s menstrual blood.) He enjoyed meting out discomfiting observations with a profligate’s reserve, the writing at once probing and fastidious—and hilarious.

It should be said that, despite their striking sexual candor, by today’s standards Ackerley’s books are marked by relative restraint. Like his three other books—*The Prisoners of War: A Play* (1925), *Hindoo Holiday: An Indian Journal* (1932), and *We Think the World of You* (a novel recounting how he came to own Queenie, 1960)—the two here are worked up from life, pieced together from Ackerley’s frequent journal entries. The books are not tell-alls, however; names have been changed and persons well disguised (though their identities have since been ferreted out). Such discretion
seems quaint today. What writer of a family memoir would forestall publication until after the relatives in question and even he himself had died? Now, of course, it is not enough for offspring to dish dirt on their fathers, they must sleep with them as well. Compared with the current memoirists’ disregard for propriety, Ackerley was the soul of discretion, taking care to paint his clearly fallible father in a sympathetic light.

In addition to publishing his thin, unforgettable volumes, Ackerley served for nearly thirty years as the literary editor of The Listener, the weekly magazine of the BBC. During his tenure there, he published colleagues and friends such as Clive Bell, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, Wyndham Lewis, Christopher Isherwood, as well as Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, Auden, and C. Day Lewis (or MacSpaunday, as Ian Hamilton refers to them collectively). E. M. Forster was one of his closest confidants, and he often advised Ackerley on his love life, always toward caution and moderation, the kind of advice Ackerley rarely followed. Though Forster is quoted in My Father and Myself, his identity is withheld. (Forster, by the way, was one of Queenie’s greatest detractors.)

Similarly, in My Dog Tulip, Ackerley conceals the name of another acquaintance, referring to him pseudonymously as Captain Pugh, in whose house Tulip soils a carpet. As if this weren’t bad enough, the mess is then trod through the halls by an unobservant housemaid. Pugh, it turns out, is Siegfried Sassoon, a great admirer of Ackerley’s play about the First World War. (Ackerley’s descriptions of war—he was twice wounded—and his meeting with his brother Peter in the trenches in France are among the best rendered passages in My Father and Myself.) It is to Ackerley’s credit that he never dragged his friends in by name, libel laws notwithstanding. His ultimate subject was himself, and in the candid pursuit of some basic truths about his life and his relationships he was unflinching, revealing himself as alternately amusing and bitterly disappointed. If Ackerley was his own harshest critic, his substantial gift was his ability to pronounce sentence on himself with inimitable wit and charm.

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