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Satyr & family man

by [Guy Davenport](#)

Review of Augustus John: The New Biography

Augustus John's largest canvas, unfinished at his death in 1961 (at age 83), still sits in his studio at Fryern Court in Dorset, spray-painted over by vandals. It is a large composition inspired by the French philosopher Charles Fourier (1772–1837) in whose utopian plan for a wholly new order of society John discovered late in life a prophetic description of the way he had actually lived, believed, and exulted. He had been as messily and chaotically a bohemian as Joyce Cary's Gulley Jimson, as adulterous as Zeus, and as pragmatically moral as his favorite people, the Gypsies.

And yet if we knew little of his life—which resembles nothing so much as a novel by Iris Murdoch about the enigmas and hygiene of muddled passions and bedeviled consciences—we could say that he was a portrait painter whose chief concern (as Sir John Rothenstein insisted) was civic order and dignity, as well as a lyric visionary whose beautiful women and children are the most charming (and romantic) in modern European art, not quite to be placed beside Mary Cassatt, but nearby.

Portraiture can bestow symbiotic fame: Charles I and Van Dyck are historical molecules, as are Carlyle and Whistler, Erasmus and Holbein, Isabella d'Este and Leonardo. There are lord mayors in England whose memory depends on their portraits by Augustus John. We can illustrate a record of English writing in our century with John's portraits of Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Hardy, Lytton Strachey, and practically all the rest. Joyce spent an uncomfortable hour posing for his most sensitive image, believing that he was being exploited and his fierce dignity molested by John's familiarity and a friendly hug. Ronald Furbank was too shy to last out his sitting. Queen Elizabeth II laid on a string quartet (the Renaissance touch) but John was too discombobulated by palace protocol ever to finish the commission. John "always got a likeness" (the safe thing to say) and hence was overworked by rich Americans and sitters for perfunctory canvases. Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery complained that his ears were "in the wrong place" and that he'd heard that the painter was a womanizer.

Is John's Lady Ottoline Morrell a caricature or a cruelly insightful diagnosis of Bloomsbury *hauteur*? His Streseman seems to be an actor playing Streseman. His H. C. Dowdall (Lord Mayor of Liverpool) is not at all certain that he ought to be fool enough to pose for John or as Lord Mayor of Liverpool. Shaw closed his eyes. Thomas Barclay is aristocratically stoic, knowing that he will hang in a board room, and Joseph Widener will never forgive whoever talked him into sitting for the painter.

For John is always there, chuckling and swearing, his stabbing Gypsy's eye sizing up the horse for which a deal must be made. The subjects John liked got some of the best portraits of the century—Joseph Hone, Tommy Earp, Jane Harrison, William McElroy, Arthur Symons. Against

these fine portraits the honest critic must place the stiff formal work: T. E. Lawrence, the Emir Feisal, the Marchesa Casati. Did John add anything to the art of portraiture? No. He worked athwart modernism and all its styles. Nowhere in his output is there anything close to Picasso's Gertrude Stein or Wyndham Lewis's Eliot, nothing like Tchelitchev's Edith Sitwell or Stanley Spencer's Dame Mary Cartwright.

Michael Holroyd, a man outside the universities (while exemplifying everything that ought to be in them), began his career writing the biography of the forgotten biographer Hugh Kingsmill, and then took on Lytton Strachey, as mercurial and elusive a subject as the art of biography might find among the English, and then built, in three volumes, his epic Bernard Shaw. This new biography of John is a revision of two volumes published in 1974 and 1975. Much new archival material had come to light, people close to John had died, and possessive collectors had succumbed to indifference and mortality.

Holroyd is diligent. He has worked in everything that could be found out. He'd missed knowing John, though he collided with him on a London corner when John was drunk and tottery. But he had moved in John's world in his other biographies. There was the family (a tribe of children by a harem, two of whom were wives, some legitimate and many *demijohns*, several still uncounted—the scholars are still counting the offspring of Shelley). There was the parallel world of John's sister Gwen, a splendid painter who has been coming into her own. John liked to say that he would be remembered, if at all, as the brother of Gwen John, who was as reclusive as John was public, and as meticulous as John was slapdash.

John was born in Wales in 1878 into a thoroughly Victorian family densely commercial, religious, and comfortable. A novelist would never have shaped John's life the way it happened. His life had no shape: it had a momentum that eschewed a forward course and plunged into zigs and zags. Everything's all right until John gets to the Slade School of Art, becomes its crack draftsman, as authentic a genius as his friend Wyndham Lewis. Sex came shyly at first (if you can believe it), and then raged. The old John recognized himself in Fourier's Calculus of the Passions: he was a Butterfly (a satyr, a Don Giovanni) combined with The Family Man (a David, a Solomon). He was also a Gypsy; John could speak several dialects of Romany, and was something of a scholar of their folkways.

So that as this shapeless biography gets into its first steam, we see John, two wives and two mistresses, and the first wave of biological development—all boys and all bedded down in cardboard boxes in a room on the rue Monsieur-le-Prince. John's womenfolk got along with each other; babies were born while John was making another. For the rest of his life there would be children underfoot. They grew up well, by and large, to be air aces in the Battle of Britain, an admiral, an architect ("I thought, you see, that I might have to design an insane asylum for the whole family").

There was a day any filmmaker might envy when a Gypsy caravan drawn by New Forest ponies drew up at a boys' school in Dorsetshire. Dorelia John in Pre-Raphaelite finery dismounted and began to unload boys in togs of her own making (some were wearing clothes and shoes for the first time), boys in purple, green, and yellow velvet ("the Persians" the school called them). The schoolmaster watched as one boy emerged, two, three, on up to five, all with wild mops of hair. They were all fluent in French and could recite the principle parts of lots of Latin verbs; none had ever set foot in a school before. As they had had to fight each other for food and a place to sleep, they turned out to be more than a match for the hazing by their schoolmates that was inevitable, and a kind aunt came to their rescue with Christian clothes and British shoes.

There are many such cinematic moments (John and John Quinn motoring across France, with the high comedy of John's driving and Quinn's realization too late that this was no adventure that a prim New York lawyer and collector ought to have agreed to; Rupert Brooke hastening into Cambridge to

bring back Lytton Strachey to see John's family camped out in Grantchester, Arcadia for all to see), but what does it all mean? One can see Holroyd packing in everything that came to hand—John's own autobiographies, William Rothenstein's *Men and Memories*, from which Holroyd bites raw chunks that don't always digest. From George Moore's *Confessions*, for example, he takes a description of café life in Paris. "The usual marble tables are there," Moore writes, "and it is there that we sat and aestheticized 'till two o'clock in the morning." This becomes in Holroyd "sitting through ... long summer evenings until completely 'aestheticized' by two o'clock the following morning." Moore is reporting conversations among artists; Holroyd thinks he's talking about getting soused. There are similar paraphrases from Rothenstein and others that are only slightly varied and with details that have slipped out of place in the copying.

The massive biographies that are the style nowadays risk the paradox of losing, or hiding, their subjects in an avalanche of words. A short life of John by, say, a Strachey or a Hazlitt, could at least keep John's energy and exuberant spirit to the fore. Holroyd warns us that this is not a book about John's painting and sculpture. Well, it helplessly is and regrettably isn't. The many studios are here, but no paint or brushes, no stretching of canvases, no turps, linseed oil, or palette knives. No schedules—did John finish a painting all in a few hours, like Van Gogh, or dab at it for weeks like Cézanne? Did he progress from period to period (apparently not)? Why did he give everybody Cupid's-bow lips? Was it El Greco alone who made his figures much taller than life? Aside from his womenfolk and children, did he ever choose a subject for a portrait out of friendship or admiration?

In any painter's work there is a discernible psychology and iconographic vocabularies. Painters have hearts and minds. Can Fourier and Gypsies account for all of John's world outside the portrait studio? Holroyd is aware that John's painting is out of fashion and that it is something of an embarrassment to historians of British art. He wisely saw, however, that John's life was a comedy of much color and humanity. It engaged with many interesting people (Dylan and Caitlin Thomas, Henry Tonks, Wyndham Lewis, the Rothensteins father and son, Henry Lamb, John Quinn) and it is as a comedy, with intervals of pathos, that this biography succeeds. To have been so busy as a portraitist in the age of photography, and to have lived so freely on one's own terms in the worst of centuries are reasons enough for meriting a long and sympathetic biography.

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