

WENDY POLLARD, *Pamela Hansford Johnson: Her Life, Works and Times* (Shepherd-Walwyn) £25

Pamela Hansford Johnson was best known for her 27 novels, starting with *This Bed Thy Centre* (1935) and ending with *A Bonfire* (1981); but her first publication, at the age of 14, was a poem, 'The Curtain' (1927), and her first book a poetry volume, *Symphony for Full Orchestra* (1934). The latter garnered favourable reviews, even though the critical criteria these implied seem rather slack: the *TLS* found it 'full of reflected radiance, of the "ever-changing light" that plays across the face of Nature', and

*Poetry Review* discerned 'the essentials of good poetry in Miss Johnson's work – emotion, restraint, colour, imagery, and a happy handling of a variety of themes'. It was through poetry that Johnson would connect with another fledgling poet, Dylan Thomas; but that relationship, like her later marriage to the novelist C.P. Snow, helped to cast her into the literary shadows to an extent that could, even in her lifetime, almost black her out as a writer – as epitomised by a question noted in her diary during an American tour in 1958 in which her husband had star billing: 'And have you ever written, Lady Snow?' In this first biography of Johnson, Wendy Pollard, while acknowledging the importance of the men in her subject's life, aims to rescue her from this secondary status and see her steadily and whole, as a key figure in the English literary world whose fiction made a significant contribution to the mid-twentieth-century novel.

Johnson was born and grew up in Clapham, but, less than a year after she started to attend the local girls' grammar school, her father, a minor colonial administrator home on leave from West Africa, died in the lavatory in the middle of the night; his financial imprudence left his family with debts. This ruled out university for Johnson: after leaving school, she took a six-month course at a secretarial college and then a post as a shorthand typist at the West End branch of an American bank, the Central Hanover Bank and Trust Co. One Sunday she found she had won the half-guinea *Sunday Referee* 'Poet's Corner' prize for her poem 'Chelsea Reach' and later that year, on 3 September 1933, a then obscure figure called Dylan Thomas won the same prize for his poem 'That Sanity Be Kept'. This impressed Johnson and she wrote to him, initiating a considerable correspondence (though most of Thomas's letters to Johnson have now been published while hers are lost). Pollard argues that Thomas's 'appreciative comments about [Johnson's] letters and her brief diary entries tell a tale of the relationship that differs substantially' from those of Thomas's biographers, which, most significantly, do not convey Thomas's huge emotional and literary impact on her life – or hers on his.

Prior to his 'Poet's Corner' contribution, Thomas had published some poems in Wales, and two in England – one an early version of 'And death shall have no dominion' in A.R. Orage's *New English Weekly*, the other in *Adelphi*. Thomas adopted the role of mentor to Johnson, claiming in his first letter that he was her own age, although he was a month short of his nineteenth birthday and thus, at that time, still legally a boy. He offered thorough critical commentary on most of the poems collected in *Symphony for Full Orchestra*, objecting, for example, that a locution in the title poem: 'Weave the straining clouds / Into maddened shrouds' 'has too many words – and the wrong words in it. The rhyme is a jingle. The adjectives add nothing. Polish up or remove that phrase, & I have no quarrel with the poem from beginning to end'. The published poem omits the phrase.

*Symphony* was published as a prize for submitting to the *Referee* what was judged to be the best poem over the last six months and Thomas's own *18 Poems* was the next *Referee* prize volume. The correspondence between Johnson and Thomas, who was still living in Wales, continued, and began to develop a romantic dimension that their meetings in London and Wales

strongly intensified. In her memoir, *Important to Me: Personalia* (1974), Johnson recalls their being 'deliriously happy' during Thomas's second stay in London: 'We talked of marriage, certainly we would marry some day, when Dylan had a job. He talked of becoming a bicycle salesman, doing his rounds in yellow rubber hood, cape and boots.' In 1934, Thomas needed parental permission to marry – but Johnson did not yet know this.

Soon after Thomas arrived to stay with her in August 1934, a new journal called *New Stories*, which had published Thomas's tale 'The Enemies' in its second issue, accepted Johnson's short story 'Suddenly A Woman'. Pollard contrasts its unadorned prose with 'the lush romanticism of her poetry', especially praising the 'subdued eroticism of the final paragraph'. 'Subdued eroticism' was perhaps also an element of her increasingly fraught and physically unconsummated relationship with Thomas, who often seemed 'very wretched about his writing & me – I'm afraid'. But if Thomas's writing career progressed slowly, Johnson's proceeded apace. After falling ill and resigning from her bank job, she worked quickly (as she usually did) on her first novel. She had planned to call this *Nursery Rhyme* but accepted Thomas's alternative suggestion drawn from Donne's 'The Sun Rising': *This Bed Thy Centre*. This title would contribute to the *succès de scandale* of the novel, which Chapman and Hall accepted for publication on 28 December 1934 and which came out on 5 April 1935, launching Johnson on her life-long career as a novelist.

Johnson's relationship with Dylan petered out, sometimes painfully, though he would reappear, often awkwardly, in her life, both before and after his death. In December 1936 she married an Australian journalist, Gordon Stewart; they had two children and wrote two detective novels, *Tidy Death* (1940) and *Murder's a Swine* (1943), under the pseudonym Nap [Neil and Pamela] Lombard. But they divorced in 1950 and she married C.P. Snow (then aged 45), with whom she had a son. This marriage does not come across as especially happy: Johnson seems to have been devoted to Snow and to have put his happiness and writing career before her own, while he retained many of his bachelor habits, especially his relationship with his sometime secretary, Anne Seagram. He was also prone to depression, especially when his novels seemed underappreciated; in January 1952, for example, Johnson memorably described him as 'so down' that 'it is like living within a great cold pudding'. Johnson herself would continue to be a prolific novelist but never achieved canonicity in the way that, say, Elizabeth Bowen or Iris Murdoch did. She was active as a reviewer and broadcaster, especially on the BBC radio programme *The Critics*, and she gained a higher public profile in the 1960s as a vehement opponent of permissiveness in literature, drama and life, writing a deeply felt polemic, *On Iniquity* (1967), about the Moors Murders as, in her view, a horrific consequence of such a climate; but this made her seem out of touch, a kind of literary Mary Whitehouse. A reevaluation is clearly required; Pollard's sympathetic, judicious and informed biography makes a major contribution to this, bringing Johnson out of Thomas's and Snow's long shadows.

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