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‘The Country Boy’:

Investigating the Dennis Potter Archive, Forest of Dean, England

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ABSTRACT

This article presents scholarship relating to work conducted in the Dennis Potter Archive, Dean Heritage Centre, Dean Museum Trust, England. It argues that the Dennis Potter Archive is a significant archive consisting of handwritten manuscripts and notebook drafts of virtually all of the work of famed writer Dennis Potter (1935-1994), allowing us unique access to the engine room of his creativity. The article focuses on the ‘discovery’ of Potter works previously unknown and/or inaccessible, including completed drafts of unproduced television plays and unproduced film screenplays. It also sheds new light on the genesis of perhaps Potter’s most famous work, *The Singing Detective* (BBC TV, 1986). It shows how this began as a ‘last’ television play but that as it developed, Potter reached back to themes and preoccupations he first explored as a young man in an unpublished novel, written decades earlier. Marrying research in the Archive with statements Potter gave about his work during his lifetime, the article uses accumulated Potter scholarship, together with manuscript critical analysis and dating, in order to piece together a clearer and fuller understanding of the working life of one of the most famous names in British television and film history.

KEYWORDS

Dennis Potter

Archive

Television

Play

Unproduced

The Singing Detective

INTRODUCTION

Nearly three decades have passed since the death of Dennis Potter (1935-1994). During his lifetime, Potter came to be celebrated as the *doyen* of screenwriters of British television drama: a pioneer within the medium of a whole series of non-naturalistic dramatic devices designed to capture more accurately ‘what goes on inside people’s heads’ (Potter, 1986: 29). In television plays such as *Stand Up, Nigel Barton* (BBC TV, 1965) and *Blue Remembered Hills* (BBC TV, 1979), adult actors were cast as children to magnify both the pleasures and the pains of a half-remembered childhood. In his most famous works, the six-part serials *Pennies from Heaven* (BBC TV, 1978) and *The Singing Detective* (BBC TV, 1986), Potter utilised to great success his most celebrated device of characters breaking from the naturalistic narrative flow in order to burst, suddenly and joyously, into song; miming, in rapt syncopation, to old danceband recordings of the nineteen thirties and forties.

By the time he died of pancreatic cancer in June 1994 at the age of fifty-nine, Potter had authored seven original television serials; four adapted serials and thirty television plays. This was not to mention four published novels, seven produced cinema screenplays and one original stage play. There was volume as well as depth to Potter's creative writing and it was all achieved despite, or perhaps even because of, the fact he had been a lifelong sufferer of acute psoriatic arthropathy – a crippling combination of severe psoriasis afflicting the skin and arthritis crippling the joints – which he had first contracted in 1962 at the age of twenty-seven, prior to his success as a screenwriter and while still working as a journalist. This was the disease Potter would come to describe as his 'shadowy ally' (Bakewell, 1976: 66). By the mid-nineteen sixties, it had forced him to abandon previous ambitions of a political career and to turn inwards: determined to forge a new career, indeed vocation, not as a public man but as a creative writer. This became both a marker of self-respect in the face of what Potter regarded as a particularly degrading illness and more practically, a means of ensuring a continuing flow of income for his wife and young family of three.

In 1990, I was fortunate to secure a rare academic interview with Potter while working on the first British PhD thesis on his work.¹ By then, Potter was the fêted celebrity *auteur* of British TV drama. During the course of a generous and positive exchange, I asked Potter if he had kept any script drafts or unpublished manuscripts of his work which I could perhaps consult for research purposes – for example, drafts of *The Singing Detective*, since I had found out by that time this work had been rewritten by Potter 'top to bottom' at the request of its director, Jon Amiel. Potter batted the question away, telling me: 'I shouldn't think they exist'. He then stated of his work more generally: 'What would happen is, you see, that I would rip, rip,

rip or write over'. So 'the scripts don't exist'?, I persisted. 'I suspect they don't', he replied (Cook, 1990).

After his death, it became clear Potter had been more than a little disingenuous with this particular reply. In fact, he carefully had kept and filed nearly all his major completed manuscripts since the late nineteen fifties, including draft handwritten manuscripts of what eventually became *The Singing Detective*. In 1983, Potter wrote: 'I do not believe what writers say about themselves, except when they think they are not saying it about themselves... the masking of the Self is an essential part of the trade' (Potter, 1984: 13).² Or as he admitted to me at one point during our interview: 'Journalism and all those things ... don't have, I believe, the same constraints, the same necessities for truth as the plays do. What I say about them and what they are, are not necessarily the same thing' (Cook, 1990).

In later years, Potter's record-keeping was helped by his daughter Sarah who acted as his administrative assistant. But the heart of Potter's creativity lay in a series of foolscap notebooks – cheap in the nineteen sixties when he first started but increasingly of better quality as his career progressed and his fortunes rose - where everything would be written down. Potter never typed anything. Once a work was finished, a handwritten fair copy would be handed over to someone else to type up or to word-process for submission to the TV and film companies. Dennis Potter's entire *oeuvre* was written in longhand. Particularly as his illness bit harder and harder, writing became literally a physical act to which he attached the greatest importance. His felt-tip pen would be strapped into his arthritically

crabbed and twisted hand as he carefully followed all the upward curves and downward strokes of each successive letter. ‘Words. Words make me hold my breath’, as Potter’s writer hero, Philip Marlow, rhapsodizes at one point in *The Singing Detective* (#6).

After Potter’s death, this manuscript collection was stored in the offices of his literary agent, Judy Daish. In the late nineteen nineties, journalist and author the late Humphrey Carpenter was able exclusively to draw upon some aspects of it during his writing of Potter’s ‘official’ biography: a controversial work subsequently disowned by the Potter family.³ But storage conditions in a busy literary agency were far from ideal. Ten years later, the entire collection was put up for sale with the expectation it would be sold to a US institution. At this point, a consortium stepped in to save it for the UK and to bring it ‘home’ to Potter’s native Forest of Dean in the West England. In 2011, the Forest of Dean Community Interest Company, with the support of the Potter family and other interested parties, successfully secured Heritage Lottery funding to purchase the complete archive and preserve it in a dedicated facility within the Dean Heritage Centre, Soudley, Forest of Dean. In June 2013, the archive and an associated Potter exhibition was opened to the general public, attracting some publicity.⁴

SCOPING THE DENNIS POTTER ARCHIVE

a) Rejected television plays

The Dennis Potter Archive is a substantial archive. It consists primarily of finished typescripts, manuscript fair copies (written in Dennis Potter’s hand) and a series of notebooks within which script material would be first drafted. With the exception of Potter’s television play on the life of Christ, *Son of Man* (BBC TV, 1969), which appears to be missing⁵, all of Potter’s body of thirty original television plays is represented, either in the form of finished

handwritten or typed scripts, or, in many cases, multiple drafts. These drafts valuably allow the reader to chart the changes and revisions made during Potter's personal creative process up until the final manuscript version that would be typed up (by someone else) and handed over to the television companies for production.

The Archive also contains several examples of handwritten manuscripts of television plays which were never produced, together with surviving fragments of scenes of unidentified works. Complete scripts of two television plays that were never produced exist in the Potter Archive in handwritten form. From 1966, there is a quarto notebook containing a handwritten seventy-one page script for *Almost Cinderella*.⁶ This was Potter's attempt at an adult version of the Cinderella story and had been intended as a 'Christmas Play' for *The Wednesday Play* slot (BBC TV, 1964-70). It attracted controversy and much publicity when Gerald Savory, the then Head of BBC TV Plays, refused to allow it to go ahead for production. Speaking at the time of transmission of his 'Christ' play *Son of Man*, Potter's take on BBC managers was that 'tinkering with a fairytale' was 'worse blasphemy [for them] than tinkering with the Bible' (Purser, 1969: 37).

While the story of the unproduced *Almost Cinderella* is relatively well-known having been covered by the press at the time, far more obscure is *Mushrooms on Toast*. From the evidence, this was drafted in 1971. This thirty-eight page complete handwritten manuscript had been a commission for BBC2's *Thirty Minute Theatre* slot (BBC TV, 1965-73) but was rejected for production in January 1972 (Carpenter, 1998: 276). The script is one of a cycle of 'visitation' plays Potter wrote during this period, in which mysterious strangers arrive to disrupt and unsettle middle-class lives trapped within suburbia. The most well-known examples were *Schmoedipus* (BBC TV, 1974) and the notorious 'Devil' play *Brimstone and*

Treacle : banned from BBC TV in 1976 and not finally screened by the BBC until 1987.

Mushrooms on Toast exhibits a feminist-influenced awareness that had first manifested in Potter's earlier 'visitation' play *Angels Are So Few* (BBC TV, 1970), which had been written in the wake of the rise of the Women's Movement in the late nineteen sixties.⁷ In both works, the focus is on the plight of the suburban housewife: trapped in the tedium of domestic existence and longing for freedom and escape.

In *Mushrooms on Toast*, two mysterious American men from her husband's US-owned pharmaceuticals company show up one day on the doorstep of bored and trapped Janet Poole while her husband, Dick, is out at work. Dick is a research chemist developing a new strain of mushroom. The 'sexual instability of the mushroom' forms a key metaphor of the play. The Americans, in a bizarre form of corporate vetting, test Janet's loyalty as company wife through insinuating her sex life is 'unstable' and that her husband is having an affair at work. Poor put-upon-Janet is able to turn the tables in the end, throwing them out of the house. But by the close of the play, it is clear she is deeply lonely, even suicidal; yet nevertheless defiant as she phones her absent husband to tell him, coldly, his dinner is in the oven: 'Mushrooms and something. Or something with mushrooms... In the oven... With – with -... With my head'. (Potter, 1971: 38)

Though *Mushrooms on Toast* was not in the end produced, Potter used the 'sexual instability of the mushroom' motif in his writing a year or so later of *Schmoedipus*, where a similarly trapped, repressed middle-class housewife, Elizabeth, is visited one day by a strange young man claiming to be her long-lost son.⁸ In a sub-plot, Elizabeth's absent husband, Tom, works for a giant multinational food corporation which is trying to grow the perfect homogenised

mushroom but struggling with the fungus' inherent genetic unpredictability. Ten years later, Potter would return to this clash between US homogenisation and English idiosyncrasy as symbolised by the depredations of the food industry, in his first (and only) original stage play *Sufficient Carbohydrate* (1983). During a couples' holiday in Greece, Jack, an English food company executive, rails against the bland homogenisation of his American corporate backers who boost profits through genetic engineering and the biochemical manipulation of natural foodstuffs.

As all this illustrates, ideas were seldom wasted in Dennis Potter's writing. There are literally hundreds of such interconnected themes and motifs running throughout the entire span of Potter's work. Works would be recycled and revised, particularly if they had not previously seen the light of day. Another key example in the Archive is *Rivers of Babylon*, a ninety-one page typescript (earlier handwritten drafts are not extant) that was submitted to the BBC in May 1967 but rejected by Potter's friend and *Wednesday Play* script editor, Kenith Trodd, as being 'much too raw' (Carpenter, 1998: 203). This work is made much of in the late Humphrey Carpenter's biography (he devotes ten pages to it) since it features a character, Ronnie Wills, who frequents prostitutes. To the annoyance and distress of the Potter family at the time, Carpenter in his biography tried to tie the play to an anguished 'confession' of the same practice Potter allegedly had made to friends, including Trodd, in the early nineteen sixties prior to his fame as a TV playwright.⁹

There is no question that *Rivers* is a deeply disturbing script to read. It charts Ronnie Wills' encounters with prostitutes on seedy streets and in particular his assignation with his ninety-eighth - one which explodes into violence following an altercation over money, as the

sexually repressed Wills, the product of a strict Christian puritanical upbringing, unleashes all of his pent-up sexual frustrations and anger. He bangs the prostitute's head repeatedly against a bedroom wall, screaming rhythmically as he does so: 'Har-lot ! Har-lot !' (Potter, 1967a: 75) Recognition of the depth of the personal crisis which has brought him to this point leads Wills, reluctantly, to the door of a hospital psychiatrist. While he is able to confess his prostitute addiction to the doctor, he cannot bring himself to confide in his wife, Amanda. The play ends with Wills no further forward in this regard, burying his head in his hands.

A year later, a similar encounter between hospital psychiatrist and unwilling patient, together with an angst-ridden public 'confession' of prostitutes, became central themes of Potter's seminal TV play, *Moonlight on the Highway* (ITV, 1969). This was written in 1968 for Kenith Trodd, who by that stage had decamped to become a drama producer for London Weekend Television (as a member of the independent drama production unit, Kestrel). *Moonlight* is regarded as seminal in the Potter canon because it was the first time Potter had used popular dance band music of the nineteen thirties - in this case the sweet melodies of crooner Al Bowlly - as 'foreground' rather than 'background' to his drama. The full-length handwritten script of *Moonlight on the Highway* is housed within the Potter Archive. Running to one hundred and five pages, it shows the version of *Moonlight* produced for final television transmission was heavily cut for length in order to fit a fifty minute commercial TV slot.¹⁰

Unusually, the full-length manuscript is prefaced by an introduction by Potter written specifically for the performers. This makes evident the breakthrough the writer clearly felt he had made with this play in using music as 'foreground' rather than 'background' in order to

shine some much-needed ‘moonlight’ into those very dark corners which the earlier, rejected *Rivers of Babylon* had also tried – perhaps less successfully - to explore. Potter wrote in his introduction to the *Moonlight on the Highway* script:

This is a play which needs to be read and, of course, performed with the music always in mind.

The music is foreground, not background.

Ideally, the discs should be cut up into the pages, and the play read with a stylus (Potter, 1968: 1).

Despite being rejected, themes and ideas first developed in *Rivers of Babylon* would resurface, transformed, not only in *Moonlight on the Highway* but in other equally seminal Potter works of the period. His well-known BBC TV play, *Follow The Yellow Brick Road* (BBC TV, 1972), also features a confrontation between a hospital psychiatrist and a reluctant patient - in this case, Jack Black, an unemployed actor, who believes he is a character in a television play; one, moreover, written by a malignant and sex-obsessed ultimate Author. Jack is in the throes of a deep spiritual crisis. As his hospital psychiatrist probes, the patient recalls a moment when, as a child, he was riding his tricycle near his home and suddenly the clouds took on ‘a radiance’. The child sensed ‘God was *too near*’ (Potter in Muller [ed.], 1973:331). Jack then recalls a more recent encounter when he had got down on his knees and tried to pray to God. But the only word that came back to him was: ‘Slime !... No God... nothing else but slime’ (Potter in Muller [ed.], 1973: 332-333).

Likewise, five years earlier, in *Rivers of Babylon*, Ronnie Wills' wife walks in on him when he is attempting to pray. Wills admits to her:

All my life I have been conscious of – a God. A monster spreadeagled on a cloud, looking down and breaking his toys. (Pause) Look at the world. There is no adequate explanation for its miseries. Napalm scorching the skin off hungry babies... Human beings wrestling in a pit of slime... Cats torturing mice. (Potter, 1967a: 87)

Ronnie then reveals his psychiatrist has dismissed all these existential concerns about the nature of suffering, simply recommending he take one pink pill and one blue pill every morning. He tells him: 'If John Bunyan had come into my care, Mr. Wills, the world would not have got *Pilgrim's Progress*. We would have been complacent, content, and full of drugs. But for fourteen years, he was a very sick man...' (Potter, 1967a: 85) At the end of *Follow the Yellow Brick Road*, we see the same reductionist determinist view of medical science in the face of human suffering, as Jack Black is finally prescribed 'Mogabrium' as a cure for his psychological afflictions. Mogabrium is a new breed of 'happiness pill' which will blot out all the pain and suffering Jack perceives in the world but will probably rob him of his soul at the same time. The prescribing doctor declares proudly: 'If Mogabrium had been available two thousand years ago... I can think of at least one wild man who would have stuck to carpentry'. (Potter in Muller [ed.], 1973: 376-377) This is a direct self-reference to Potter's own *Son of Man* from a few years earlier which had portrayed Christ as a long-haired wild man who forsook carpentry in order to follow God.

From these various correspondences between *Rivers* and other more well-known work, we are able to see from the Potter Archive how much this earlier unproduced work was closer in character to a spiritual, even religious, play. While the sexual and salacious themes of *Rivers of Babylon* were made much of in the late Humphrey Carpenter's 1998 biography, comparison with *Follow the Yellow Brick Road* underlines how much its central focus was really upon a man undergoing a severe personal and spiritual crisis.

b) *Unproduced screenplays*

As several commentators have noted¹¹, there was a general move in Potter's writing, as it progressed over the years, towards a greater spiritual optimism - away from what the writer would later call the 'in-turned nihilism' (Potter, 1978: 2) of much of his creative output of the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies, as exemplified by the various works discussed above. Nevertheless, there remained an underlying consistency to Potter's writing: the same themes, concerns, even plot ideas, would be returned to again and again, albeit invariably with a different, more positive, light shone on them than before.

This is evident from the numerous cinema screenplays contained within the Dennis Potter Archive. As outlined in the Introduction, Potter, during his lifetime, saw seven of his screenplays produced as feature films; to be added, posthumously by an eighth: a big screen version of *The Singing Detective* released in 2003.¹² However, the Archive displays a more complete picture of the extent of his activities as a film screenwriter, where, in later life, Potter would be commissioned on a regular basis to write screenplays for Hollywood; the majority of which never got financed and produced. He, however, would be paid handsomely for this feature film writing work. 'When will they catch on? Those studios paying for drafts they never actually make!', as his screenwriter character Daniel Feeld

points out in Potter's penultimate TV drama, *Karaoke* (#1, BBC TV and Channel 4 [co-prod.], 1996).

Within the Archive, there are full drafts of at least fifteen other feature film screenplays aside from the eight that have been actually produced.¹³ The majority date from the nineteen eighties and early nineteen nineties when the success of the TV *Pennies from Heaven* and later *The Singing Detective* opened doors for Potter in Hollywood. These range from adaptations of science fiction and fantasy novels - *Cradle Song* and *The Man Who Would Not Die* (both written 1982)¹⁴ - to *Opium Blue* (first written in 1984 and revised in 1991): a version of Charles Dickens' unfinished final novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) to which Potter provided an ending (adapted from a 1980 publication by Leon Garfield).¹⁵

Several of the unproduced screenplays predate, however, Potter's later Hollywood phase. The earliest dates back to 1968 and was written not long after Potter had acquired a new agent (switching from Roger Hancock to Clive Goodwin). *The Sins of the Fathers* seems to have been part of a concerted attempt by Potter to diversify his career away from sole reliance on BBC TV, following the row over *Almost Cinderella* and the rejection of *Rivers of Babylon*. This included at the time penning TV plays for ITV and accepting a commission by Kenneth Tynan to write for the National Theatre.¹⁶

The screenplay of *The Sins of the Fathers* is based around the experiences of John Newton (1725-1807). Newton was a sailor heavily involved in the Atlantic slave trade who later converted to Christianity and became a cleric, penning the hymn 'Amazing Grace'. In his later years, Newton worked with William Wilberforce in the campaign to abolish slavery throughout the British Empire and he lived long enough to see the passage of the first Abolition Act in 1807. The title of Potter's screenplay echoes the title of a book, *Sins of the Fathers: A Study of the Atlantic Slave Traders, 1441-1807* by James Pope-Hennessy, which

Potter had reviewed for *The Times* in November 1967. The book chronicled the cruelties and horrors of the Atlantic slave trade, drawing upon the journals and letters of the traders, captains and slaves actually involved, including Newton himself. Potter had been greatly impressed by the humanity of Pope-Hennessy's overall account and his review offers some clues to his interests with the screenplay:

Slave-trading and Empire-building are still carefully separated in the minds of the average English hypocrite - which is perhaps only a nastier way of saying that the two crimes continue to be celebrated in opposite ways in our history books. (Potter, 1967b: 21)

Exposing the crimes which had built the British Empire and doing so through the figure of John Newton – the repentant slave trade sinner who ‘once was lost’ but later ‘found’, in the words of his famous hymn – clearly offered a potent combination of creative attractions for Potter. World Film Services Limited, the company of British film financier, John Heyman, considered Potter's screenplay (Carpenter, 1998: 372), however it did not eventually make it into production.

Seven years later, Potter gained another opportunity to break into cinema when he was recruited by the veteran Hollywood director, Fred Zinnemann, to provide a screenplay adaptation of John Fowles' acclaimed 1969 metafictional novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Numerous attempts had been made to adapt this for cinema in the years since its first publication. The difficulty, however, had always been how best to handle for the screen the several endings which Fowles had provided for his story of the relationship between Charles Smithson, an amateur nineteenth century naturalist, and Sarah Woodruff, the ‘disgraced’ independent woman he falls in love with.

The Archive contains Potter's various attempts at fashioning a screenplay from this, including the final one hundred and eighty seven page typescript draft he completed for Zinnemann in October 1975. Potter concluded his screenplay with what he labels 'An Ending' in which the emancipated Sarah eventually rejects Charles.¹⁷ But this was only one of three possible endings Fowles had provided in the novel and the difficulty of doing justice to the book on screen eventually proved too much for Zinnemann who 'couldn't get a script he was totally happy with'. (Combs, 1981: 34) A film version did eventually come to be produced in 1981 but under the direction of Karel Reisz and from a screenplay by Harold Pinter.¹⁸ Pinter managed to find a way of translating Fowles' multiple endings to the screen through the innovative device of cross-cutting between the couple's fraught relationship in nineteenth century England and a parallel narrative centring on a fictional crew making a film of the story within the more relaxed moral climate of the late twentieth century present.

THE LAST TELEVISION PLAY

Despite these early setbacks, Potter would finally get his break into screenwriting for cinema in the wake of the popular and critical success of his six-part 'play with music' for BBC TV, *Pennies from Heaven* (1978). This led to an invitation to work with the Hollywood director Herbert Ross and eventually to Ross helming a big-budget Hollywood film musical version of *Pennies from Heaven* for MGM studios, based on a new screenplay by Potter.¹⁹

Throughout 1980 and 1981, Potter became a regular transatlantic commuter flying back and forth from England for meetings in Los Angeles, as he responded to requests for numerous wholesale script redrafts of *Pennies* during pre-production as well as, sometimes, new script pages during shooting.

The feelings of dislocation occasioned by this experience and this process come through in some of Potter's writing of this period. In the Potter Archive is an early nineteen eighties handwritten draft of an unproduced screenplay version of *Double Dare*. *Double Dare* was Potter's well-received 1976 BBC TV *Play for Today* centring on an English writer who increasingly confuses the borderlines between reality and fantasy in his own life. The feature film version, however, relocates the action to Los Angeles where the English screenwriter character finds himself caught between the strange and dislocating fantasy world of LA he encounters in Hollywood and his own memories (and fantasies) of domestic life back in England.²⁰ In a subsequent interview, Potter - who always hoped a screenplay version might someday be produced – expressed the view the relocation to Los Angeles made this iteration of *Double Dare* more effective than the original:

... the alienation is much stronger. There is a greater sexual fear, banked up by cultural fear, as well as the sense of selling out. The dislocation of place and time in [the main character's] mind in the nowhere city of Los Angeles is very much part of it. (Fuller [ed.], 1993: 113)

Meantime, in his absence, the world of British television, which Potter had previously known, was transforming into a much more commercial environment; just as Britain more generally was changing rapidly during the premiership of Margaret Thatcher in the nineteen eighties. Writing in June 1983, just days after Thatcher's landslide victory in the General Election of that year, Potter expressed his 'anger and frustration' that he may well have written his last '“original”... one-slot, one-shot play for television'. (Potter, 1984: 32) It had been three years since his last had been produced - by far the longest gap in his career. A few

years later, Potter recalled his feeling that the studio television play itself – the form he had worked in and championed for most of his career and which first brought him to national prominence as a writer – was now in its death throes: ‘It seemed to have gone forever’ (cited in Oakes, 1986: 98). Potter began to write down some ideas for a new studio play – a series of scenes set in a hospital ward in which all classes and sets of people were reluctantly thrown together through illness.

Called *The Last Television Play*, this work survives complete as an undated handwritten draft within one of Potter’s notebooks in the Archive. Significantly, it is prefaced by the ‘death’ of Dennis Potter himself.²¹ We open in a crematorium where ‘a few arty (ie. scruffy looking)’ people have gathered to mark the passing of the late unfortunate Potter who the vicar intones:

choked to death on a small piece of rolled-up and decorated smoked salmon while – presumably – chewing his own thoughts at twice the speed of sound itself on a British Airways Concorde... half-way between England and America. Perhaps not exactly the kind of – of – Mid-Atlantic demise some of you, his worried friends, had predicted, but near enough to it to satisfy his own sense of the appropriate. (Potter, undated, c. early 1980s: 1)

The last television play therefore marks the end, also, of Dennis Potter himself: literally choked to death by luxury, having ‘sold out’ to America.

The scene then shifts to a hospital ward where a writer of original television plays, called ‘Nigel Barton’, finds himself marooned inside his own skin, afflicted by acute psoriatic arthropathy; the same dreadful skin disease Potter himself suffered all his life. If this dramatic scenario sounds familiar, it is because this and the following scenes closely mirror and replicate the hospital ward scenes in Potter’s famous *The Singing Detective* serial. In

other words, these seem to be Potter's earliest first drafts of what eventually became *The Singing Detective*.²²

Many of the most famous and memorable hospital scenes of *The Singing Detective* are already present in *The Last Television Play*. Doctors and nurses lip-synch to the 1947 hit, 'Dry Bones' (by Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians) [while patients in the ward carry on as 'normal, otherwise unconcerned'](#) (Potter, undated, c. early 1980s: 36). A South Asian patient, Ali, of whom the main character is fond, dies in the next bed, [leaving the latter in a state of impotent distress at the suddenness and mundanity of death](#). A senile old man grotesquely tries to clamber into the main character's bed, thinking his late wife is still alive; while later, the writer character struggles to keep his own sexual composure as a pretty nurse greases his skin in order to ease his psoriatic affliction. But there are also extradiegetic interpolations. A recording of an October 1980 National Film Theatre interview with Potter is cut into the action at one point as the 'real' writer intervenes to remind that:

television could have been, should have been, might have been – and at one stage promised to be – the one medium in the country which could have at the same time and in the same manner addressed all kinds and conditions of men and women and children in their own homes – with their defences, their social defences stripped away. (Potter, undated, c. early 1980s: 47)²³

But significantly this is interrupted by 'gales of studio laughter', as the scene cuts back to the senile old man attempting to climb into the writer character's bed. Lofty ideals of the past are thus undercut by present-day decline and humiliation: both fit now only for mocking laughter.

Through the intermittent use of canned laughter and 'cackling applause, whistles' (~~Potter, undated, c. early 1980s: 60~~) [even in the face of the main character's 'helpless tears'](#) (Potter,

[undated, c. early 1980s: 60](#)), it ~~becomes~~ ~~becomes~~ clear ~~all the characters~~ ~~all the characters~~ in *The Last Television Play* ~~are trapped~~ ~~are-within~~ in a grotesque TV sit-com. At one point, the ~~main~~ writer ~~protagonist~~ ~~character~~ explains he always likes to put jokes in his own work: ‘But people are beginning to see through the jokes. The critics are - well, poking about in the – in what lies behind them. They see, smell the vomit and the – pain. [It bothers people. Of course, it does](#)’. (Potter, undated, c. early 1980s: 32)

Potter talked about *The Singing Detective* in somewhat similar terms. In a November 1986 interview with the *Radio Times* to promote the finished production, he described how it had originally begun as a series of scenes set in a hospital ward, which he thought ‘were quite promising’. He recalled it was really ‘the idea for a sit-com’:

I just wanted to make use of some of the comedy that takes place in hospital... but the ideas stayed with me and much later they fell into place.

In 1985, when he came to revisit these ideas for what would become *The Singing Detective*, he began adding bits to the script with that growing ‘sense of dread when you know you’re digging out something’ (cited in Oakes, 1986: 98).

From the evidence of the Potter Archive, *The Last Television Play* is therefore that original ‘idea for a sit-com’ Potter was recalling. When he expanded his hospital ward premise out into the six-part dramatic serial format of *The Singing Detective*, what Potter then added were memory and fantasy sequences. Now, the bedridden writer character was no longer simply depicted through his interactions with the other characters in the ward. Audiences were also taken on a journey inside the main character’s head. TV playwright ‘Nigel Barton’ was rechristened as ‘Philip Marlow’ in *The Singing Detective* – a writer of pulp detective stories who, in the fantasy sequences, reimagines himself as a trilby and trenchcoat-wearing gumshoe, cynically righting wrongs within the murky post-war climate of 1945 London. But

what about the flashback sequences in *The Singing Detective* to the very same period – when Philip Marlow remembers his trauma as a child at having to leave his beloved rural Forest home in the West of England²⁴ for the chaos and congestion of London ?

Within the Archive are notebooks containing various handwritten drafts of an unfinished and unpublished Potter novel called *The Country Boy*. These materials are amongst the oldest in the Archive. It is difficult to date them all precisely but they seem to have been written over a number of years. Some drafts appear alongside handwritten drafts of TV reviews and this surrounding material aids identification of the composition of these particular revised drafts as September 1962.²⁵ This was several years before Potter's debut as a TV playwright and when he was working as a TV reviewer for the *Daily Herald* newspaper, having had to give up regular reporting due to the onset of psoriatic arthropathy. However, some drafts of *The Country Boy* are written in a neater, less rushed hand, suggesting they predate the onset of Potter's illness and stretch as far back as 1958.²⁶

The country boy of the title is 'David', who finds himself uprooted when his mother decides to take the family to live in her native London at the end of the Second World War. The boy is forcibly taken away 'from the small, green, gorse-bloomed mining district of Wodene, horizoned by the blue half-sky of the hills across the border' (Potter, c. 1958: 9) This creates tensions within the household and arguments between his rural-born father, Harry and Londoner mother, Mary, which the boy overhears. David lies awake at night pining for home: 'Ten years old, he had lived long enough to have proprietorial feelings about the past as well as a nostalgia for parts of it that he had, in fact, never possessed. He was very homesick.' (Potter, c. 1958: 7)

Around the same time as writing this, Potter had secured a deal for his first non-fiction book. *The Glittering Coffin* (published 1960) had been commissioned by publishing firm Victor

Gollancz as a coruscating ‘state of the nation’ examination of life in post-war Britain, as seen through the eyes of one of the rising ‘angry young men’²⁷ of the period. The then twenty-three year old Dennis Potter - who had earned a reputation for himself as a firebrand student activist while still at Oxford University (1956-59) - fitted this bill perfectly. And yet amid all the political analysis and critiques of nineteen fifties Britain to be found in *The Glittering Coffin*, there is one passage which is striking because of the way it stands out from the surrounding material. In this, Potter recalls how, as a ten year old, he first left his native Forest of Dean for London and the feelings of entrapment and homesickness which he experienced: ‘I cried all through a hot, noisy London night, cried with the kind of sick passion of those who love a place almost as much as they love a person’. (Potter, 1960: 41)

Both in this passage from *The Glittering Coffin* and in the drafts of the autobiographical first novel we now know Potter was working simultaneously on during this period, issues were evidently being worked through. Like the boy, David, of the novel, Potter was uprooted from the Forest of Dean at the age of ten years old when his family had to move to London in May 1945 due to a housing shortage in the Forest. Biographies of the writer have explored the feelings of dislocation the young Potter experienced during his initial stay there in 1945, as well as the trauma he underwent of domestic sexual abuse (at the hands of a maternal London uncle): a fact the writer would keep secret for many years.²⁸ But in terms of his body of work, what is striking is the way in which themes of displacement and of childhood exile first explored in the unpublished *Country Boy* novel resurface decades later as Potter expanded *The Last Television Play* into *The Singing Detective*. Clearly, there were issues which remained to be explored creatively²⁹ - that ‘growing sense of dread when you know you are digging out something’, as Potter told the *Radio Times* in 1986. And these are the themes which animate and elevate *The Singing Detective*, driving its central narrative and forming the beating emotional heart of the final produced work.

CONCLUSION

The Dennis Potter Archive in the Forest of Dean is therefore a significant repository.³⁰ Its handwritten and other draft materials help shed fresh light on one of the most eminent creative figures in the history of British television and film, deepening and broadening previous understandings. The Archive literally gives us access to the engine room of Potter's creativity, demonstrating the extent to which the writer would work and rework material, sometimes over decades. It not only reveals new Potter works hitherto unknown and undiscovered. It enables us to trace the gestation of some of Potter's most well-known work, often from rather surprising beginnings. Marrying research in the Archive with statements Potter made about his work during his lifetime allows us to piece together, like the proverbial detective, a fuller and richer picture of the working life of one of the most famous names in television history; a figure whose screenwriting legacy lives on, continuing to inspire subsequent generations in terms of its creativity, experimentation and boldness.

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NOTES

¹ The thesis was published as Cook, (1995; 1998 [rev. 2nd ed.]). Extracts from the interview with Potter were published in Gras and Cook (eds.) (2000: 240-251).

² *Waiting for the Boat – Dennis Potter on Television*, a collection of three Potter TV play scripts, was published by Faber and Faber in 1984, however Potter's preface to the collection is explicitly dated June 1983.

³ Carpenter (1998). In a subsequent 1998 interview with *The Times*, Potter's daughter, Sarah, expressed the opinion that Carpenter had been 'too caught up in chasing sensational titbits that would sit nicely in the [newspaper] serialization and sell a lot of copies' (cited in Gras and Cook [eds.], 2000: 162).

⁴ See, for example: Morris (2013).

⁵ *Son of Man* may be missing because it was completed by Potter in autumn 1968 when he was in hospital and the handwritten script was delivered directly from there to the BBC to be typed up.

⁶ This can be found in the Archive under DP2012.22.46 together with some associated correspondence (DP2012.22.47).

⁷ *Angels Are So Few* was written in 1969 and the finished production transmitted by the BBC on 5 November 1970 as part of the first season of *Play for Today* (BBC TV, 1970–1984).

⁸ *Schmoedipus* was completed in 1973 and the finished production first transmitted by the BBC on 20 June 1974 as a *Play for Today*.

⁹ But as Carpenter also admitted in his 1998 biography: ‘It is, of course, impossible to discover, thirty five years later, whether Potter did buy the services of prostitutes and if so, how often. It is conceivable that the whole story was a fantasy, or at least a considerable exaggeration, inflated from a few actual experiences. What is clear is that the confessions (whether real or fabricated) answered some psychological need within him. It could be argued that they were some kind of exhibitionist sexual act in themselves. And they do appear to be closely linked to his illness.’ (Carpenter, 1998: 137)

¹⁰ Scenes of the main character, David Peters, visiting prostitutes were cut to make the script fit the fifty minute timeslot. This has the effect of Peters’ prostitute confession at the end (to a group of fellow admirers of the nineteen thirties crooner Al Bowlly) come as a complete surprise not only to Peters’ listening audience within the play but to the watching TV audience at home.

¹¹ See, for example, Cook (1998: 287-290) and Greaves in Greaves *et al* (eds.) (2015: 218).

¹² *The Singing Detective* (2003), Wr.: Dennis Potter, Dir.: Keith Gordon, USA, 109 mins.

¹³ A ninth, *The White Hotel* - a 1990 Potter screenplay adaptation of the D.M. Thomas novel - was eventually produced as a BBC Radio 4 play in 2018, directed by Jon Amiel (director of *The Singing Detective* TV serial). This production was released as an audio book by Penguin in 2022.

¹⁴ *Cradle Song* (also variously titled *The Discovery* and *Orphan Star*) was based on *The Night of Kadar* (1978), a science fiction novel by Garry Kilworth. It concerned the thousand year search for humans to find a planet that could harbour life following the nuclear destruction of earth. *The Man Who Would Not Die* was based on a 1981 horror thriller by Thomas Page, revolving around a man repeatedly brought back to life by a medical experiment. The nightmare of living a 'life after death' has echoes with *Cold Lazarus*, Potter's final TV drama (BBC TV and Channel 4 [co-prod.], 1996).

¹⁵ Charles Dickens and Leon Garfield (1980), *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, London: André Deutsch.

¹⁶ The National Theatre play was never produced because it appears Potter never fulfilled the commission. The unproduced complete screenplay of *The Sins of the Fathers* can be found in the Archive under DP2012.22.85.

¹⁷ This is reminiscent of the ending Potter gave to his 1989 TV serial *Blackeyes* (adapted from his 1987 novel) where the heroine, Blackeyes, finally rejects the manipulative authorial narrator figure (played by Potter himself). The Archive contains numerous drafts of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (DP2022.22.128 - 133). A copy of Potter's finished 1975 screenplay is also housed in The John Fowles Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.

¹⁸ *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), Wr.: Harold Pinter, Dir.: Karel Reisz, UK, 124 mins.

¹⁹ *Pennies From Heaven* (1981), Wr.: Dennis Potter, Dir.: Herbert Ross, USA, 108 mins.

Potter previously had been commissioned to write a ballet film for Ross (a former dancer and choreographer). This unproduced screenplay called *Unexpected Valleys* (also known as *The Next Step*) is in the Potter Archive.

²⁰ In this particular draft of the screenplay version of *Double Dare* (DP2012.22.177), the name of the writer character is changed from ‘Martin Ellis’ in the TV play to ‘Nigel Barton’; the same name Potter gives to his writer character in *The Last Television Play* - see note 22 for further discussion of this. *Double Dare* went through several screenplay versions and name changes over the years including *Ghost Writer* (originally developed for the National Film Finance Corporation in the UK in 1978) and *Love Me True*.

²¹ These two pages, depicting the ‘death’ of Dennis Potter, appear looseleaf at the front of the notebook, suggesting they were inserted later as a suitably self-referential opening for *The Last Television Play*.

²² The Dean Heritage Centre’s catalogue lists this draft material as 1986 because it was found alongside other box files pertaining to *The Singing Detective* (1986). However *The Last Television Play* was almost certainly composed much earlier in the nineteen eighties and later filed away as related to *The Singing Detective*. Humphrey Carpenter in his 1998 biography discusses a script proposal called *Under My Skin* that was submitted to London Weekend Television (LWT) in October 1980 as a putative plan for a thirteen-part Potter series which ‘would celebrate the styles, techniques and virtues of electronic [studio] drama’ (cited in Carpenter, 1998: 435; 632). This outlined hospital scenes highly reminiscent of *The Singing Detective* centring around a TV playwright character called ‘Jack Black’ (the name of Potter’s main character in his 1972 BBC TV play, *Follow The Yellow Brick Road*). However, Carpenter seems to have completely missed the evidence amongst his papers that Potter actually wrote these hospital scenes out as *The Last Television Play*. This completed draft single play script is divided into four parts intended to be interrupted by advertising breaks, strongly suggesting it was originally designed for British commercial television (for example, LWT). Potter would then later return to his hospital ward concept in 1985, reworking and expanding it into *The Singing Detective* for the BBC. The idea of *The Last Television Play* as

a self-referential review of his history as a TV playwright is accentuated by Potter's decision to revive the name of 'Nigel Barton' for his central writer character. Barton was the 'working class hero' protagonist of Potter's first big TV drama success, *The Nigel Barton Plays* (BBC TV, 1965), comprising two linked plays *Stand Up, Nigel Barton* and *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton*. The completed *The Singing Detective* is also, in part, a review of Potter's history in television drama, with many links and references back to previous Potter works. See Cook (1998: 211-217) for discussion of this.

²³ This interview took place on stage on 30 October 1980 as the culmination of a National Film Theatre (NFT) retrospective that month of Potter's TV work. It was filmed by Potter's production company, PFH (Pennies from Heaven) Limited. Its interpolation in *The Last Television Play* (the *Under My Skin* proposal also mentions its intended use; see note 22 above) seems to reinforce the evidence of *The Last Television Play* being a composition from the early nineteen eighties. The honour of the NFT retrospective, in conjunction with his new Hollywood scriptwriting career, may have stimulated Potter in his writing to reflect self-referentially upon his past body of TV work.

²⁴ In *The Singing Detective*, it is never explicitly stated this is the Forest of Dean though it is implied by the film locations and the characters' accents.

²⁵ The evidence for dating this as September 1962 is that the later revised drafts of *The Country Boy* appear in Potter's notebook alongside handwritten TV reviews. One is of an interview presenter Huw Wheldon conducted with Orson Welles about Welles' latest film *The Trial* (1962). This was transmitted as an episode of the BBC TV *Monitor* arts series on 16 September 1962. There is also a Potter review of a TV play called *Address Unknown* by Christopher Williams which was transmitted as part of the BBC TV play series, *Studio 4*, on

3 September 1962. In the later revisions of *The Country Boy*, the names of the parents, Harry and Mary, are changed by Potter to Fred and Iris.

²⁶ In his biography, Carpenter cites the evidence of a letter written to publisher Victor Gollancz in 1958, in which Potter mentions a novel he was writing at the same time as *The Glittering Coffin* (Carpenter, 1998:86). Potter may have returned to *The Country Boy* novel in 1962 in an attempt to finish it, as a result of the financial uncertainty for his young family occasioned by the onset of his illness that same year.

²⁷ Originally derived from publicity surrounding John Osborne's 1956 stage play, *Look Back in Anger*, the description 'angry young men' had entered popular discourse in the late nineteen fifties as a shorthand to denote those voices of the younger generation expressing discontentment with post-war Britain.

²⁸ See Carpenter (1998: 27-32) for extended discussion of this.

²⁹ Mysteries about his family's move to London in 1945 also seem to have haunted Potter in real life right up until the very end. In 1994, as he was dying from cancer, he asked his sister June: "“Didn't I find it odd that Mum took us two and Dad didn't come ?”" Potter even asked his mother (who was still alive): "“Was that a separation ?”" And Mum said, "Well, no." But he must have seen it as a separation – though I [June] didn't." (Carpenter, 1998: 28)

³⁰ The online catalogue for the Dennis Potter Archive can be found at:

<https://www.deanheritagecentre.com/learning/dennis-potter-archive> (Accessed 15 March 2022).

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