

Yankee puritanism and Southern aristocracy, was evinced in American literature as early as the works of James Fenimore Cooper.

<sup>11</sup> More recently, revisionist historical works, such as Stephen Saunders Webb, *1676: The End of American Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1984) and Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America*, have expanded on the Cooper vision of the upstate New York-native American connection. These works have enhanced the sense of the native Americans as historical actors, not just passive primitives. This is far more Powysian in spirit than a view of the Indians as noble, poetic savages, transatlantic "Celts."

<sup>12</sup> Powys's interest in this area was, as usual, clairvoyant and prophetic; it went unmatched in any visible American literary production until the recent appearance of William Least Heat Moon's *PriaryErth*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991).

## The Mythology of Escape: *Owen Glendower* and the Failure of Historical Romance

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*Owen Glendower*, so melancholy in its preoccupation with lost origins, was the novel of John Cowper Powys's "homecoming." In 1934, Powys imposed a deceptive narrative closure upon the first sixty years of his life in the great *Autobiography*, and left America, where he had written his Wessex romances, to return to Britain, eventually settling in Wales in 1936. Powys's Welsh essays, collected in *Obstinate Cymric* (1947), record the identification of his "philosophy up-to-date" with "the idea of Wales" as a configuration of landscape, mythology and race.<sup>1</sup> Yet Powys had never lived there; the place of origins was a fiction. He would claim that he had acquired his "passion for everything Welsh" long before, "after my son was born, thirty years later than my own birth and sixty years later than my father's."<sup>2</sup> The claim insists on a paternal genealogy, and himself at sixty, at work on the *Autobiography*, Powys remembered how his father's "eyes used to burn with a fire that was at once secretive and blazing, like the fire in the eyes of a long discrowned king, when he told us how we were descended from the ancient Welsh Princes of Powysland."<sup>3</sup>

Powys's desire to "go back" to Wales was accompanied by a desire to write the hyperbolic romance of his career.<sup>4</sup> It seems that *Owen Glendower* was at first to have been that romance. In the essay "Wales and America" Powys identified his new Corwen "territory" with the novel's myth-soaked topography, and he constantly referred its writing-process, longest and most laborious to date (1937-39), to its Welsh "spirit of place."<sup>5</sup> As it turned out, *Owen Glendower* was not to be the "book of wonderful possibilities," but, rather, one which confronts the heartbreaking contraction of possibilities. Even as Powys wrote *Glendower* he began to think ahead to a great "romance of the dark ages" which would materialize as *Porius*, the most troublesome work in his canon.<sup>6</sup>

Realization of the defeat or at least deferral of the informing romance project gives *Owen Glendower* both its peculiar tonal

poignancy and an often disconcerting aesthetic self-commentary, which will be the basis of this essay. When Powys identified his historical topic as "an age of transition,"<sup>7</sup> he also thematized the critical status of *Owen Glendower*, not only for his own canon and career, but for the literary and cultural histories it represents. The novel comes tortuously to terms with the historical failure of its own Romantic-Modernist aesthetic, and with the political implications of that aesthetic as ideology. For *Owen Glendower* is a novel of the late thirties which discovers the alternative to a discredited historical regime to be a mythopoeic return to ancestral origins that can only reproduce that regime in monstrous form, and so attempts to imagine the purely negative term of a place outside history altogether: in a strategy Powys himself would call "the mythology of escape."

Critical judgments of *Owen Glendower* have divided upon the generic crux of a romance synthesis of history and myth. On one side stand those commentators who praise the book ("the most detached, the most relaxed, the most Olympian of the novels, and the most satisfying . . . his definitive and crowning work")<sup>8</sup> for a realization of mythic intentions, and on the other those who damn it ("his most melancholy and straggling novel . . . the least manageable, the worst constructed")<sup>9</sup> for a betrayal of historical realism. The former group tends to share ideological ground with Powys's revisionary Modernism, and thus to grant his romance project an authentic mythopoeic status.<sup>10</sup> G. Wilson Knight discovers in the novel his own Christian-Medievalist hermaphroditic system, mediated by an impersonal and objective ("Shakespearian") historical representation.<sup>11</sup> Less flamboyant versions of this allegoresis are rehearsed by subsequent Powysian mythographers such as John A. Brebner and Morine Krissdottir,<sup>12</sup> and by representatives of the mainstream English critical tradition among Powys critics. Glen Cavaliero, the most interesting of the latter, attempts to reconcile Powysian mythopoesis with the neoclassicist psychological formalism of Eliot, Richards and Leavis. The combination of visionary authenticity with a metonymical register of "intensely-felt physical actuality" achieves, thus, a representational ethos of "precision", "sanity" and "balance"; Powys's Welsh-historical topic "provided the perfect objective correlative for his own subjective philosophy", so that by the end of *Owen Glendower* "history has become a myth."<sup>13</sup> The historical realists, however, have sternly insisted that Powys never "came home", least of all in this novel.<sup>14</sup> Their critique, most strongly argued by Roland Mathias, reads *Owen Glendower* as a historical novel disfigured by contradictory mythopoeic intentions.<sup>15</sup> Powys's historical data are

inaccurate, his speculations incredible, his social representation fuzzy, and his fictional themes incapable of any "political fulfilment."<sup>16</sup> Mathias's essay offers the most cogent, as well as most negative, account of the book, and we may accept its judgment that *Owen Glendower* is a failure according to putative standards of historical realism; but to say as much is to beg the generic question. *Owen Glendower: An Historical Novel*: Powys's subtitle begs it too, self-consciously, more than a century after the death of his beloved Walter Scott. We may best respond by turning to a contemporary account of the term, and the source for what I have been calling the 'realist' critique, Georg Lukács's influential study *The Historical Novel*.<sup>17</sup>

Lukács argues that the modern historical novel has fallen out of a privileged discourse of realism characteristic of the heroic bourgeois epoch of the first half of the nineteenth century, when "history" could be imagined as progressively and organically congruous with the present, as a constitutive stage of its own economic, social and political formations. In the post-1848 novel, "history" has declined to a "decorative and exotic" substitute for that formative historical dynamic. It has become a fetish which "shimmering colorfully in its distance, remoteness and otherness has the task of fulfilling the intense longing for escape from this present world of dreariness." Lukács's own argument rests on a similar idealization, that of a heroic age of realism, and so falls under the rubric of the Modernism he denounces. But Lukács's true, polemical subject is the romantic ideology of Modernist representational modes, and as such his analysis illuminates Powys's dialectical enterprise of romance, which rehearses both the poetic escape from a simultaneously impoverished and overdetermined historical present and the remythologizing return upon it. To read the modern historical novel is indeed to observe the strategic pushing back of its narrative scene toward some remote, lost and idealized past of which the "inner social-historical meaning is of no concern to [the writer] and to which he can only lend the appearance of reality in an external, decorative, picturesque manner by the conscious application of archeology." Worlds left out by history, extinguished lustres of innocence and beauty: *Owen Glendower*'s Wales, about to be written over by the canonical English History of Henry IV, takes this rhetorical station.

To represent modernity as a contradictory condition, as a dilemma, Powys combines two potent tropes: the experience of historical process as an estrangement, and the idealist hypothesis of an unknowable reality, beyond discourse, both excessive and empty in its radical otherness. The "essential unknowability of the present,"

says Lukács, drives the novelist to the past, only to find that history too remains unintelligible (to all but a fitful divination). "History" becomes then the dimension of an ontological unreality, a baleful enchantment or nightmare, unaccountable to mere human agency or responsibility. The novelist's favoured scene is a past "out of history", having no relation to the present but that of its negation. Its aesthetic is elegiac, a compound of distance, separation, absence, "impregnated with memory and desire to give it poetic substance." This historically blank and empty pastness becomes, dialectically, the Narcissus's mirror of the alienated present: within the ornate frame of an antiquarian strangeness, we can only recompose our modern subjectivity.

In these briefly-sketched theoretical terms, we can see that Powys's tangled yarn of historical solecisms is part of an aesthetic design which subjects the scene of history to a systematic recession and displacement, to make way for the melancholy autonomy of a modern subjectivity and its narrational mode of a sequence of epiphanic spots of time. The novel's fifteenth-century world is itself a modernity which many of the characters find oppressive. It is true then that we read here no sustained representation of modes of production or social relations, but instead a sumptuous reconstruction of scenery, costumes and cultural tags: an archeological shell left empty for the habitation of a psychology and aesthetic deriving from Nietzsche, Freud, Dostoevsky and Pater. Powys's "age of transition" has less to do with the passing of feudalism and the rise of renaissance proto-nationalism (xx) than with an existential condition of pure flux, medium for "universal" conflicts of the will and fatality.

The narrative of history is, as Powys unfolds it, both over- and under-determined, elaborate and elliptical, sketched in the margin as other discourses crowd the center of the page. Where Powys's main source, J. E. Lloyd, established historical causes and effects, the novel obscures them in favour of the programmatic caprices and irrelevances of its plot—a wonderfully erratic and unstable construction. This plot, as it dawdles, veers and jumps through Book I, suspends its protagonist, Owen Glendower's cousin Rhisiart, in the helpless role of hostage, handed around in an inscrutable political chess-game, waiting for a reckoning that is continually promised and put off. Here Powys presses one of Scott's conventions (the passivity of the hero amid historical events)<sup>18</sup> to a bizarre extremity. The first part of the novel closes with the rescue of the hostages by Owen Glendower himself. The exploit is certainly "rash and unnecessary," as Mathias says, and Powys at once exaggerates it with preposterous melodramatic highlights, always a

disruptive generic signal, and deflects it to the commentary, in recalcitrant Wessex dialect, of two suspicious bowmen—one of whom is named "Tom Hardy." The point is surely that Powys contrives his narrative to be as digressive and accidental as possible: history struggles to be represented in a modality of indirection, interruption, generic discord, abrupt ellipses and shifts of point-of-view and pace, in which great themes are "forgotten" for hundreds of pages, trivial anecdotes breed and multiply, and (synecdochically) what Rhisiart remembers in the end—more intensely even than the sacrifice of his true love Tegolin—is the death of his old horse Griffin (931.)

Thus, through Owen himself, the narrative meditates upon its version of history:

It seems to a superficial eye as though the whole course of human history often depends on the turn of a hair, on the tilt of an eyelid, on the fall of a feather; but to a more philosophical mind these trifles are only the instruments of what we call fate or destiny, a force for which in our nescience we have no adequate name. (818)

For even indeterminacy is overdetermined:

In one sense thousands of lives depended upon the fact that from its shelter beneath a painted shield this ferocious insect attacked the Frenchman's guest; but in a deeper sense we may conjecture that if the gnat had failed its purpose fate would have found some other instrument, no less trifling, to carry out its shameless purpose of allowing Henry of Lancaster to die in his bed. (819)

Such formulations pre-empt any kind of analysis. The book's gallery of interpreters—bards, scholars, statesmen, seers, mages—keeps posing the question: whose voice speaks for history? Mad Friar Huw, obsessed (in parody of Glendower's own mythic claims) with a lost-but-returning King Richard, is only an exaggerated version of many characters in the book: the master-code consistently applied to history is an *idée fixe*, one more distraction in a text of distractions. Typically, it is the seedy charlatan Hopkin ap Thomas whose prophecies coincide with history; but which history? Glendower misinterprets to catastrophic effect. Successful politicians, like Master Young and (in the end) Rhisiart himself, learn to shift with the signifier. "Scientific" analysis is pushed to the margin, the annotation of a minor character (Iago, 748-749).

History is not a complex of human actions but a metaphysical dimension of inauthenticity: in the novel's mythographic terms, the captivity of Annwn. For the project of romance, reality must uncloud itself of this sinister dimension, at first for the moment of epiphany, at last for the whole mythic terrain of which that moment is the connecting gleam. Certainly Glendower's rebellion seeks to ignite a consolatory splendour in the murk: if the hero is banished from the scene of history, he will enlist in the eternally-returning order of archetypes. The romance is to replace the historical representation of temporality, as a relentlessly contingent and deterministic series of displacements, with an "archetypal" structure of dispersal and return, a cyclical reiteration of identities.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, its narrative must assume the mode of a pattern of timeless moments. Myth will redeem history by canonizing its deferrals of presence: Owen, like Arthur in *A Glastonbury Romance*, is *rex quondam, rexque futurus*, for the future in the past, forever.

In terms reminiscent of the Grail vision of *A Glastonbury Romance*, *Owen Glendower* opens with the romance idealism of young Rhisiart:

The dark swirl of the sacred river, its noisy foaming over its rocks, the blood-streaked rack of jagged clouds that now completely hid the real Dinas Bran only to lift in front of him once more, as he had seen them since his boyhood, the enchanted battlements, towering to heaven, of the citadel of his secret thoughts; these things became like a spiritual body, larger, freer, more porous than his fleshly one. (28)

Rhisiart anticipates a visionary replenishment of the ruinous scene of history. But such intercession is no longer possible once he actually enters that scene, in the second chapter, "Rhisiart draws his sword." The chapter-title is a (quasi-parodic) generic signal identifying the supreme performative gesture of historical romance, the assertion of a will-to-power over history. But as Mathias observes, Rhisiart's will is allowed to go to work only by the "unrealistic" suspension of every other in the crowded scene. Nevertheless, the episode is very carefully constructed. The collective paralysis allows Rhisiart to speculate

... how helter-skelter and casual a real battle must be, if it took so long for a single event, like the burning or release of this friar, to come to a decisive climax.

"Are all the events in the great world like this," the boy

thought, "so different from what the historians say?" (40)

The moment of suspension makes room for an insight into the nature of history which is the precondition of Rhisiart's action; he can act only after the revelation that he is "at the mercy of uncontrollable events" (43), when agency has been stripped of the illusions of value and self-determination. And as the moment stretches and fills up with, or disintegrates into, the trivia of observation and ratiocination, the scene of history begins to be emptied out, or covered with its true obscurity. "Rhisiart began to feel a curious darkness stealing over his senses" (43); language grows unintelligible (44). It is under these conditions that the romance-impulse may return, to reconstruct itself upon no visionary transparency but a "darkness" or void of pure impressionistic "psychology":

And then there fell on him "like a clap of thunder and a fall of mist" a curious cessation of all movement of time. Time stopped; and something else, another dimension altogether, took its place; and in that deep time-vacuum, with an absolute naturalness—heaped doubtless by the calm assumption of his horse that he was doing what he always did—he drew his crusader's sword out of its sheath and lifting it high into the air rode forward. (45)

The romance gesture does not blaze forth from any synthesis of myth and history, but is the blind issue of the negation of one by the other. History, ontologized as temporality itself, is obliterated to a "time-vacuum," "something else, another dimension altogether."

The negative dynamic of the evacuation and dissolution of the novel's historical scene at its privileged moments of insight also dominates its rhetoric of "spirit of place." As Powys elsewhere describes it:

Any concentration upon a particular spot on the world's surface—as long as its historian includes all the "somethings" that are even remotely representative of "everything"—has a power in it. . . that satisfies the nostalgia of the human soul more than anything in the world, except, perhaps, a landscape of Platonic essences by a painter like Gainsborough. . .<sup>20</sup>

In *Owen Glendower*, however, spirit of place becomes description without place. Dinas Bran, as we have seen, is Rhisiart's Grail-vision,

"fortress of his ancestors" (259) and locus of romance. But once inside the castle, he finds only "scattered heaps of ruins" (260), and the myth-history synthesis splits irrevocably apart: ". . . these two Dinas Brans *separated completely*. The imaginary one lifted itself clean out of this draughty mad-house of broken stones. . . and limned itself on those flying cloud-wracks of the mind's horizon that no madness could touch and no burning blacken!" (261) The historical residue is a gibberish-haunted wasteland. For the first time the novel has announced the defeat of the imagination, the startling rout of the supernatural narrations of *A Glastonbury Romance*. The visionary is set apart as a dream of escape, constituted by the negative term of its *absence* from history.

The "objective" texture of the novel thus registers itself as an impoverishment. The dissolution of the visionary provokes an acceleration of negative epiphanies of dissolution:

It was a feeling of the vanishing away of all things, the absorption of all things; the rushing down in a cataract of annihilation of loves and hates, of bodies and the bones of bodies, of souls and the thoughts of souls, all of them swallowed up like unreturning ripples in the great ocean of Being. (262)

Rather than plenitude, the "great ocean of Being" is another term of sheer negativity: goal of the death-drive, a figure I shall pursue later in this essay. Meanwhile, this extraordinary rhetoric proceeds to its logical terminus—and one of the book's more curious self-commentaries—at the scene of reading, the material here-and-now of textuality:

He wished now that it could be suddenly five hundred years hence, be at the opening of the twentieth instead of the opening of the fifteenth century, with his bones lost and Lowri's bones lost, and the shard of that insect within him, that was now goading him to perdition, lost, too! (263)

Elsewhere, Powys uses the trope of anachronism to similar, and subtler, effect. The novel's opening sentence compares Rhisiart and Griffin to Don Quixote and Rosinante, and much later Rhisiart hears the lines of Shakespeare's *Hotspur* (in *1 Henry IV*) as an unintelligible oracle from some "Shrewsbury beyond space and time." (661) These devices, deliberately oblique and gratuitous, reverse the program of (e.g.) Eliot's *Waste Land*; they dissolve the historical into the synchronic and tautologous space of sheer

textuality, nullifying a prophetic mode.

The rhetoric of drift and dissolution determines all the novel's revelations of scene. Sublimity characteristically occupies the pure flux and sensation of the dawn sky:

Nor was it long as they watched. . . before that rose-tinge had spread over the whole sky till it reached the zenith, while in the quarter where the blood-streaks had first appeared it was as if some vast magic gates had opened, leading into an infinity of glorified distance, into a receding perspective of golden space. (547)

The "vast magic gates" of romance vision disclose an eternal recession of "distance" and "space," terms of pure placelessness. The lost ancestral home of Glendower's desire is Mathrafal, site of a legendary, prelapsarian dispensation (413-415). Now Mathrafal is another ruin, mythologically portentous because it has been emptied of history more thoroughly even than Dinas Bran. The spirit of a place that was and is no more lends Glendower prophetic voice: "The past is the eternal!" (415-416) But in the novel's terms, this means less eternal return than eternal recession: home, the mythic place of origin and belonging, occupies a pastness that is absolute, irrecoverable to any here and now.

Place, then, is historical; and the visionary dissolution of the scene of history reveals only its own negative dynamic, no landscape of platonic essences. Powys's mythographic figure of the fall of Annwn is more problematical in this respect than the buoyantly perennial Grail of *A Glastonbury Romance*. Annwn mythologizes history as an enchantment of ontological estrangement in which we are all hostages and exiles. It is "the world which is *not*—and yet was and shall be!" (890), but the teleological promise weighs much less than the recognition of absence and pastness. What Powys calls his "mythology of escape" is evoked in a distinct rhetoric of Welsh history and spirit of place(lessness):

The very geography of the land and its climatic peculiarities, the very nature of its mountains and rivers, the very falling and lifting of the mists that waver above them, all lend themselves, to a degree unknown in any other earthly region, to what might be called the *mythology of escape*. This is the secret of the land. This is the secret of the people of the land. Other races love and hate, conquer and are conquered. This race avoids and evades, pursues and is pursued. Its soul is forever

making a double flight. It flees into a circuitous *Inward*.  
It retreats into a circuitous *Outward*.. (889)

The mythology of escape is the obverse of the supernatural narration of a synthesis of the visionary and the phenomenal, myth and history: it is constituted by a negative dialectic ("a double flight") between its evanescent scenery (the "circuitous Outward") and the visionary dissolutions of the subject ("a circuitous Inward.") Long before Powys went to Wales, he had imagined it as a sanctuary, somewhere he could retreat to "possess my soul in peace."<sup>21</sup> Wales was the homeless home of historical exclusion, space of romance as a narrative itinerary of exile, refuge, "secret passages." (915) As such, the case is more complex than the Lukácsian account of a consolatory fetishism might allow. In one of its passages of self-commentary, the novel distinguishes between true and false versions of a mythology of escape. Young Elphin, sentimental aesthete, persuades himself that he has got his love Luned pregnant, whereas he knows full well the culprit is the unscrupulous Iago. This bad-faith idealism generates a schlocky, sub-Laurentian Platonism ("shapes of life's fecundity from all the elements of Nature," etc.) in contrast to the "authentic" negative sublime that sheds its somber lustre around Glendower: "But if life under the girdle of Luned and in the enclosed garden of Elphin's fancies seemed timeless and immortal, in the magician's chamber of the Prince of Wales it was dark with fatality and sprinkled with the foam of all that rushed away." (750)

In the *Obstinate Cymric* essays, Powys defines his visionary escapist mode as a systematic immersion of subjectivity in the "destructive element" of Heraclitean flux and contingency which is, as we have seen, the revelation of spirit of place and the scene of history.<sup>22</sup> An ultimate negative capability, or emptying of subjectivity into the phenomenal moment, becomes the transcendental principle of subjectivity. The paradox calls for attention. I have remarked that in *Owen Glendower's* visionary moments the scene of history is cleared, or rather blacked out, for a Paterian epiphany of sheer sensation—a ground of "pure psychology"; yet this ground reveals itself as a dissolution toward absolute opacity or absence. Elsewhere, Powys suggests that consciousness has two sides, that which "faces objective reality," and that which faces "inward upon a dark and empty void."<sup>23</sup> That mysterious internal void is at once a "growing conscious of consciousness" and an arena of "revelation." In other words, self-consciousness is a negative term, constituted by the gap between the subject and the object-world; that gap becomes an absolute, no

longer relational, term ("a dark and empty void") as the site of subjectivity. For Powys will not relinquish the figure of the transcendental individual subject, even in the desperate revision of a purely negative principle of being.

This is the slippery idea that underlies the mythology of escape, and its extraordinary anti-visionary trope of Glendower's self-exteriorization or "soul-projection." Mathias has quite correctly defined the novel's mode of action-in-history as "reactive," and likewise both Rhisiart's involuntary revelations and Glendower's voluntary soul-projections are reactive "escapes from the pressure of the moment" (656): that moment being, as its contexts make quite clear, the *historical* moment.<sup>24</sup> In these terms, the mythic refuge must always turn out to be an inauthentic substitute. The structure of the romance-quest simply reverses itself. The principle of alienation or difference, which once projected an unattainable, always-receding fullness at the end of a self-displacing teleology, is reinvested as an irrecoverable primal negativity. It is this original lack that propels the mind "outward" into sensuous apprehension of the object-world, in other words, is the source of perception-as-desire, the "nostalgia of the human soul" that seeks a landscape of platonic essences—the home before us which turns out to be the homelessness whence we came. As we saw when Rhisiart drew his sword, the moment of revelation discloses only that primal negativity: historical alienation internalized as a "dark void of absolute nothingness"<sup>25</sup> which is yet the site of refuge and power, the primary imagination in eclipse. If the mind cannot be everything, then it must be nothing.

The "soul-projection," described in the *Autobiography* and Welsh essays, Porius's "cavoseniargizing," is an overdetermined figure: the instances of astral travelling seem too banal (like a children's rhyme, says Broch O'Meiford, 914) to account for Powys's insistence on it as a rhetorical centre of authenticity. Rather, it is the willed meditation upon the negative dynamic as transcendental term. Here the literary model is Dostoevsky's epileptic Prince Myshkin, for whom the (involuntary) evacuation of his own subjectivity and of the temporal moment is preceded by the deceitful, erotic promise of a transparency of presence. The most elaborate, and mysterious, narration of the soul-projection is given in the chapter "The Goosander," when Glendower begins his series of grievous compromises with the scene of history in which he has chosen to act. "The pressure of the moment" is about to have him sign the Tripartite Indenture, ally himself with the unsavoury French and their pope, condone the French emissary's vivisectionist outrages, humiliate his son-surrogate, and sacrifice the Maid of



Edeyrnion as a factitious "bardic symbol" to his own lust. The Harlech night sets the scene for an overdetermined romantic sublime, but the full moon hollows itself out to represent the purely negative trajectory of the mythology of escape: "A great luminous hole in the swimming ether, a hole that resembled a hole in space" (644), luring Glendower to "pass beyond space into whatever lay on the other side!" (645)

The soul-projection then takes place as a mingling with the "moon-intoxicated" nightscape and a translation of point-of-view to the goosander, a sea-fowl, in a mode of mystic-erotic "ecstasy" which intensifies into a "whiteness" not transparent but opaque, the Melvillean trope for a visionary blankness and a negativity of presence: "all grew white, white with a whiteness like the breasts of sea-queens, white with a whiteness that to the goosander's arctic blood was a beauty so extreme that it resembled the passing from love to death!" (646) Once more the mythology of escape arrives at a figuration of death, its absolute term. When Glendower looks out at the goosander again, the epiphany resolves into the post-coital mode of what might be called Powys's "grotesque sublime," less generic keynote than sign of a disintegration of all generic tonalities and values:

But if the contemplative goosander looked queer as it rocked in the moonlight, Owen's own head, thus protruded from that vast grey pile, would have looked to any human eye more than queer. It would have looked grotesque. But neither for the organs of birds nor of fish, nor for the less complicated apprehensions of sea-anemones, can we conceive the category of the grotesque as an aspect of life. . . . But even so, even if a forked beard and gold-circled brow protruding from an arrow-slit and confronting a goosander never repeated themselves through all eternity, can we conceive such a sight presenting itself to the world-spirit as grotesque? The world-spirit and a moonlit star-fish on Harlech sands must share, we feel, the same attitude to such occurrences—all grotesque; therefore *nothing* grotesque. (654)

Powys's "all grotesque and nothing grotesque" heralds the absurdist and existentialist aesthetic of the post-war period. *Owen Glendower* looks out, from the historical ruin of its romantic Modernism, upon the bleak prospect of a poetic which figures itself at the end of history.

A little later, Glendower's self-speculation brings a bizarre

vision of his own state as a pure consciousness utterly divorced from any authentic historical being. With the signal of "a grotesque grimace" (720), the self-exteriorization becomes a self-fragmentation into a multiple mirroring of doubles:

. . . For if the power possessed by the body of Owen of seeing itself in a mirror created one "mysterious double," the power possessed by the mind of Owen of analyzing its own thoughts created a second mysterious "double"; so that the Prince of Wales at that moment became a four-fold being, became, in fact, what might be called a *Quaternity*.

. . . Owen's was the only consciousness in that magician's chamber, and to the consciousness of Owen there was nothing in the mirror and nothing standing before the mirror. There was nothing there at all but what Owen was thinking and what was analyzing what Owen was thinking. From a Quaternity the Prince had diminished into a Duality. (721)

This extraordinary solipsistic inversion, in which consciousness is turned back on itself until *the body* disappears, arrives at the absolute, vacant solitude of the subject imagining itself to itself.

These anti-epiphanic sequences accompany Owen Glendower's intuition that to oppose "history" is to take part in and so perpetuate it. The "mythology of escape" is the response to that terrible double bind, a reactive impulse which can only mythologize its own negativity as metaphysical term. Having suggested some contexts and principles for the mythology of escape, I will in the remainder of this essay fold it back into the novel for a reading of its two dominant narrative figurations. The first is Rhisiart's romance quest or homecoming, which combines (as does the *Autobiography*) the modes of Wordsworthian epiphanic narrative and Freudian family romance. Rhisiart's romance turns back upon its origin, to recover the absent term of his placelessness, which turns out to be the place of the father. For Owen Glendower himself, as I have been suggesting, the mythopoeic adventure against history itself becomes history, which necessarily corrupts, falsifies and diminishes all who take part in it. Finally, I shall interpret the ways in which the mythology of escape represents the relationship between the defeat of Powys's romantic Modernism and the historical impasse of the late 1930s, on the common ground of ideology.

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Rhisiart's first step onto the scene of history prefigures the alarms and excursions of Glendower's campaign, which will not get under way until the second half of the immense novel. First, a four-hundred-page prelude, in the full Wordsworthian sense, must unfold. The growth of the hero's mind is narrated through a sequence of epiphanic moments, in which the visionary rhetoric of the romance quest is displaced from the evanescent Grail-towers of Dinas Bran onto the seemingly stable psychic ground of the family romance. This prelude defines the necessary role and stance for the imaginative hero in the scene of history: the hostage, substitute without historical place or being, "looking on" (Ch. X). The visionary gleam is reduced to a Freudian peep-show.

Rhisiart, homeless and fatherless, returns to Wales to redeem history from the treachery of his own ancestor at Dinas Bran ("restore the lost glories of the old chiefs of Powys," 5). The romance castle is at once the stronghold of myth and the place of the father in history, defined by a typology of the fall. We recall that John Cowper Powys (himself "a native of Wessex") referred his own obsession with a Welsh ancestral scene to his father; while the *Autobiography* suggests that his romance-impulse or will-to-narrative derived from a somewhat different source, his mother's readings of Sir Walter Scott. The romantic imagination of Rhisiart comes likewise from his mother, "the wittiest romancer in Hereford" (928), and its Welsh-mythological topics from his nurse Modry. The point is made again and again that in Wales Rhisiart is an outsider, whose maternal "Norman blood" determines all his characterological traits, including the very romance impulse to recover a Welsh paternal origin. As Rhisiart at last approaches Dinas Bran, a configuration suggests itself: "... it came back to him, as he climbed this hill of his long desire—a 'hostage' not a conqueror now—the way Modry had comforted him with the thought of Bran the Blessed, as they listened awestruck one summer night to the wild weeping of his frivolous mother!" (259) The text begins to chart a psychoanalytic ground for the mythology of escape. Rhisiart's lost Welshness and paternity combine in the mythic Bran, a benign ancestral giant whose "gigantic head" is "able to give surcease to all human sorrow"—that nostalgia of the human soul—even in the mutilation of historical defeat. (258) Rhisiart's memory connects the thought of the lost magical father with the Freudian *topos* of the primal scene. What was really going on in that scene of "wild weeping," and what Rhisiart has repressed from his memory of it, will be the full, scandalous revelation of Dinas Bran. The romance-impulse is one of "comfort," a drive to escape from the intolerable pressure of the primal scene which represses the father from that scene and

sublimates him as a benign, ideal giant absent and elsewhere, and at the same time seeks his place on the erotic maternal body: the "hill of his long desire" into which Dinas Bran will metamorphose with startling regularity. The end of such a quest can only be the revelation of its impossibility, that the father was already there, all the time.

Meanwhile, Rhisiart crosses "the threshold of the fortress of his ancestors" (259) in thrall to the perverse fascinations of Lowri, its present mistress and the book's most garish figure (there are quite a few others) of erotic sadism. Sadism, the privileged psycho-erotic keynote of Rhisiart and also of the autobiographical Powys, represents both an irreducible principle or lowest common denominator of fallen, i.e. historical and paternal, sexuality, and its institutionalization in modern history. "Shall we burn together, Rhisiart?" (259)—Lowri's trope of damnation equates submission to this erotic drive with martyrdom or sacrifice on the stage of history, a fate which hangs over Rhisiart and his friend Walter Brut for much of the novel. Once inside Dinas Bran, Rhisiart experiences the first of the sequence of negative epiphanies. It is his consciousness of "the dark nerve which Lowri had set twitching in his inmost being" that expels the visionary Dinas Bran from its historical site of ruination, and, indeed, "burning." (260-261.) The anecdote of the Russian student, a blatant generic anachronism, declares a "code of influence" which helps us to interpret the scene. Dostoevskian psychology (cf. Owen's fits) will figure in the novel as an authentic semiosis of "human nature", displacing, or rather short-circuiting, the romance idealism: "It seemed to him that he could actually feel an 'insect' of lust within him, that was only connected with his brain by a thin corridor, and that had no connection at all with his heart or his soul." (261)

Rhisiart goes on to set up a familiar, mythologizing opposition, between "modern cynicism" and "the romance of everything," translated into immediate, generic terms: the Dostoevsky-novel motif of "evil desire" for Lowri, versus the nostalgia for an early, pure romance mode. "But what he longed for. . . was to feel again all he had felt when hand in hand with Tegolin he had first set eyes on Owen's forked beard! (262) The secure regime of a wise, omnipotent father-prince-magician and his chaste daughter, under which the hero's sexual consummation is sanctioned and yet postponed, is a resolution *topos* basic to literary family romance, as Shakespeare's last plays remind us. Yet: the text will not allow Rhisiart this mythic opposition, for the generic terms cross and commingle. Lowri is not only Tegolin's mother, but is associated, in her erotic license, with Rhisiart's own; her "depravity"



binds the family together, in its fallen dispensation, being shared not only by Rhisiart but by (it turns out) the magical father, Owen himself. The Russian "insect" is also the anagram of a Russian, i.e. Dostoevskian, *incest*, and the idealized romance-regime will disintegrate, in the second half of the book, into the internecine conflict between father and son over Tegolin.<sup>26</sup>

Dinas Bran accommodates not only the sinister sexuality of Lowri, associated with the pagan-dionysiac cult of "Saint" Derfel, but the matriarchal regime of the Lady Ffraid, who invokes the antithetical tutelage of Bran the Blessed. But the Saturnian dispensation of Bran covers precisely the aporia of the family romance, its impossible placeless place of resolution: that of the magical ancestor which is the maternal body without—*before*—the father. Rhisiart thus resists the "colossal feminine entity" which Dinas Bran once more becomes, fearing the dissolution of the phallic term of his identity: "He felt as if some secret core of free egoism and masculine profanity was in danger of being submerged and lost in this super-feminine place." (294) For this, as I have suggested and will elaborate in a later context, is the narrative's ideological limit, that which it cannot represent. The Bran-term is excluded from the start, and the fallen sexuality of Derfel is the only authentic psychic ground: Rhisiart's "senses were more stirred by the wicked lust of the mother than by the sweet fidelity of the daughter." (298) Resistance to the patriarchy and assertion of the autonomy of self/will/phallus take place in the bizarre congress with Luned, in which Rhisiart's ecstasy recreates the entire universe as a titanic erotic organism, synecdoche of himself. (302-305) This triumph, however, consumes itself and Rhisiart is left with the dejected knowledge that the visionary climax of his subjectivity has resolved itself into the determining figure of an impersonal biological fatality, and delivered him after all to "feminine" dissolution: "An indescribable weakness, as if the hard core of his independence had turned into a warm-flowing sluice, reduced him to silence." (306) Rhisiart's sex-education can only send him back to the "wicked lust of the mother." His final epiphany has him confront at last the secret of that primal scene which has generated him. Rhisiart arrives too early for an assignation with Lowri; prompted by his "Russian insect," he spies on her sadomasochistic antics with her husband, Simon the Hog—a scene of exuberant trashiness: "He was witnessing just then for the first and last time in his life what few men have been privileged to contemplate: namely, the writhings of a lust-demented lady on the breast of a man whose arms were tied behind his back." (335) This grotesque tableau actually represents a desperate inversion of the primal scene of a rape committed upon

the mother by the father. It is, presumably, the repressed content of that summer night of wild weeping, against the intolerable knowledge of which this is one of a sequence of defensive tropes. Rhisiart has himself internalized the father's erotic violence (and in the *Autobiography* this is accompanied by an admission of impotence, the inability to reproduce such violence); sadism is then transferred to the mother, making her the aggressor. And now Rhisiart, "looking on," can only identify himself with the wicked lust of the mother: "... and the tension between her and that unsightly torso was like the tension between the most reckless, the most desperate, the most instinctive desire in him and something, some Person, some indescribable Reciprocity that had been escaping him ever since he set out on his quest." (335) This rhetoric suggests that we have come very close to the autobiographical secret of the novel, the psycho-erotic figure for its central, irresolvable contradiction.

Instead, Rhisiart takes upon *himself* the sexual submission, or (the novel's important trope) sacrifice, of the mother to the father. This extreme and last-ditch displacement leads to a cure—"The Russian insect was submerged, drowned, lost" (335)—and a visionary transumption, now posed on the startling new scene of *sacrifice to the father*:

He suddenly felt *physically* light, as if no material obstacle could resist him. The fancy rushed through his brain that this whole scene was taking place *in his mind*, as he watched, light as a feather, the dipping of his own limbs in those barrels of pitch! He was dying for Owen. He *had* died for Owen. It was against the majestic torso of Owen that his soul, now quivering in spasms like hers, would soon be at rest, untroubled, dissolved, satisfied! (335-336)

The introjective rhetoric gives the clue: the scene is indeed taking place "*in his mind*," as a fresh triumph of repression, a complete internalization of this new configuration.

Erotic sado-masochism is equated, once more, with martyrdom on the scene of history, both now "resolved" in the mode of sacrificial submission to the father. This outrageous scene concludes the Freudian variations and inversions of the Wordsworthian epiphanic sequence which constitute Rhisiart's prelude; but Rhisiart's engagement with the scene of history will unravel this resolution, reveal it as no more than another substitute or repressive displacement. For the scene of history is the place of the father: wherever Rhisiart turns he will find him, blocking his desire, already there before him.

Dinas Bran is replaced by Catherine, Owen's daughter, as Rhisiart's next figure of "pure romance" (501, 565); Owen frustrates this by marrying her off to Edmund Mortimer, for dynastic reasons. Rhisiart's narrative at last elects Tegolin, all of a sudden remembering and revaluing what becomes, in retrospect, their moment of pure romance before the entry into history. But this most authoritative reproduction of the just father/chaste daughter paradigm is also broken, this time in an intensified and sinister mode, that of the erotic struggle for the Maid between son and depraved father—a *Russian incest* which constructs itself in chiasmic symmetry against the Lowri-Rhisiart coupling. Tegolin is also to be sacrificed, now for erotic and bogus-prophetic reasons as well as those of *realpolitik*. The crisis is amplified and awarded (once more) a pseudo-resolution, in the *scena* of the proclamation of "the Maid in Armour." The scene is remarkable for its schematic recall and *stretto* of earlier tropes and topics—the Russian insect, the sacrificial father (707-708)—towards a full-scale rationalization. At the last moment, the dreadful father fades from the scene, allowing a rhetoric of resolution to take his place: "[Rhisiart] suddenly felt as if he and Tegolin had always been holding hands like this, behind and beyond all that happened. He even felt that holding her hand he was beyond the bitter humiliation of that knot of frustration that had been recently damming up the channel of his spirit." (710) A romance continuity is remembered and restored, "behind and beyond" the historical narrative of interruptions and forgettings and disappointments. The end of Rhisiart's quest would at last seem to have realized itself, in its vulgar-Freudian version of a "normal" sexuality. Rhisiart has first been drawn to Tegolin, we remember, by his sadistic nerve (35-36). Now she is miraculously eroticized by the "rose-petal tinge" of a blush, which purges and sublimates Rhisiart's sadism, reprogramming it as a conquest of the primal scene of "the first woman given up to the first man":

She was *his* now—passive and docile. He was a man, a master, soon to lift upon old Griffin's back the sweet captive of his sword and dagger. (713-714) . . . he felt as if it were his prerogative and his privilege, his alone among all men alive, to catch in that rosy stain the aboriginal tremor of the female yielded up to the male, which made the very waves of the salt sea shiver and dazzle and redden to the power of their recurrent dawns! (714-715)

This queasy prettification of bloody rape quickly folds into another primeval memory, of a more authentically prelapsarian order: "The

only woman whose body had ever lain by his body in the magic bonds of sleep was the woman now by his side. The Maid had known all the while the mystery of this bond, the fusion of their souls on that Midsummer night beneath the sub-rational, sub-passionate under-tides of sleep." (715) The Maid is, at last, the Mother, restored inviolate; a primal absence is replenished from those under-tides of sleep.

In order for such a reunion to be possible, the father has to vanish; and the rhetorical energy of pure wish-fulfilment dematerializes Owen to "a cloud, a shadow, a pillar of smoke, a thing without feeling," so that it may seem "lawful" for Rhisiart to devote himself to his bride (714). The scene may close with a luxuriant cadence of the tropes of romance fulfilment: "But it was this, and nothing less than this, that gave to his possession of her now this incredible feeling of recurrence, as if they were only returning, easily and naturally, to a link that had existed between them time out of mind." (715) Finally, Rhisiart is restored to effective romance action, in the Hollywood rescue of Owen from the assassin's knife.<sup>27</sup>

This is the novel's only scene of major-key romance synthesis: the quest has been contained within the figural resolutions of the family romance, and Rhisiart and Tegolin invested with performative power over the scene of history. But not for long. History unmakes all, in futility and defeat, when the expedition fails and Rhisiart and Tegolin are imprisoned, hostages once more. The terrible father returns to impose his penalties, this time in the guise of Henry IV himself, the novel's hyperbolic father-in-history. His yet more drastic regime of sexual sacrifice forces Tegolin to submit to one of his officers to save Rhisiart from the scaffold. What has all too briefly been wrested from the father, the father takes away again.

A strong scene in Powys's next novel, *Porius*, defines the paradigm for this mode of family romance, in which the hero returns to an "aboriginal" site of unfallen love "before" the father and his sado-sacrificial regime. Porius claims he is descended from the Cewri, prehistoric giants of the Welsh mountains, source of his soul-nostalgia. After a battle, he catches sight of the last two survivors of the race—a father and a daughter. Porius's congress with the daughter recovers the "aboriginal tremor of the female yielded up to the male." Their idyll is interrupted by the vengeful father, who strikes at Porius with a club but kills instead the daughter. He then kills himself, leaving Porius alone with the fragmentary words of their language. Richard Perceval Graves has pointed out that the episode recalls specific tropes from the *Autobiography*, codifying Powys's own childhood confrontation with

a divinely wrathful and destructive father.<sup>28</sup> Porius's return to the scene of his desire, the scene of ancestral origins, is blocked by a paternal intervention which now reeks of blood-sacrifice and racial extinction.

It is a sign of the problematical power of this family romance that the *consolatio* of the final chapter in *Owen Glendower* has to leave it out: it cannot be resolved, only deferred beyond the book in the hollow promise of a reunion between Rhisiart and Tegolin. The narrative concludes with the point of view, for the first and last time, of Glendower's true son, the quintessentially dejected and impotent Meredith. Rhisiart's sadism is never "cured" in the text, but displaced, onto Glendower himself, in the scene of history, the narrative of which gives the second dominant figuration of its mythology of escape. As I have suggested, the scene of history is the place of the father. Sadism is his fallen erotic principle, and sacrifice its codification in the text of history, whether in the ritual burnings and butcherings of Lancastrian England, or the modern scientific vivisections Powys so abhorred. The novel's characterological system is dominated by two types: sadists, of whom we have met some but by no means all, and sacrificial victims, of whom there are quite as many. Glendower, as Mathias reminds us, is recurrently figured as "sacrificial prince," but the term slides around in an interesting way. He is at once jealous god demanding propitiation, sacerdotal agent who offers on the altar of political necessity, and, most surprisingly but most insistently, victim garlanded and drugged for the knife. (122, 710) He both sacrifices others, and is sacrificed himself; for the father too is caught in the machinery of history, the dimension of fate he cannot help but perpetuate. He too is condemned to the impotent recognition of his inauthenticity.

The arch-father-in-history of the novel is, as we have said, Henry of Lancaster. He is also its grotesque paradigm of pure consciousness without place or being; usurper, sleepless from "intolerable nervous tension," like "a corpse, in the early stages of decomposition, tottering under a suit of glittering steel." (845) An idealizing construction of the novel's romance scheme, the thematic of Glendower's uprising, might propose an opposition between, on the one hand, the Bolingbroke regime of history, as the institutionalized power-sadism of a monotheistic, totalitarian, "modern" state, of which theology and science are the ideological buttresses (624-635); and on the other, the dream of a Wales restored to its mythical Saturnian dispensation before the foreign invasions and conquests. However, Owen's role as tyrannical father, "old conjuror", grotesque mask and double—Bolingbroke's shadow—suggests the confusion built into such an opposition; for the

mythopoeic impulse to rewrite history can only go to history for its terms.

Owen is most degraded in the sequence of episodes that includes "the Maid in Armour." His degradation follows a double, indeed dialectical, course. His political involvement in the scene of history forces him to connive in the atrocities of his followers and allies, including the devastation of civilian populations and Gilles de Pirogue's "scientific experiments" on dogs and Jews: sinister tropes, at the edge of World War II. But there is more than that. The essential "Welshness" that Owen draws upon in his war of national liberation, the power-reservoir of *spiritus genti*, turns out to reproduce the "historical" sadistic instinct, only in the atavistic, crude form of dionysiac violence, rather than its modern refinement as the scientific rationalization of cruelty. The dark nerve defines both the regime of the father, and the "primeval" instincts of the fallen self, pre-empting romantic rebellion.

The career of Davy Gam offers the best account of this logic. An "aboriginal," indeed simian, Welsh ruffian who likes a burning better than anything, Gam is at first the faithful henchman of Glendower's cousin the repulsive torturer Hywel Sele. But Gam transfers his devotion to Glendower after the latter gets rid of Sele with a sadistic trick of his own. Glendower's familiar spirit is also a swashbuckling rapist (39-40), which links him to the Derfel cultists, on whose support Glendower at first relies. Gam eventually displaces the Derferlites, as the sign that Glendower has completed his political reappropriation of aboriginal dionysianism for his cause, when he intervenes as Glendower's proxy to remaster the erotic scene, in his murder of the prophet of Derfel.<sup>29</sup>

The Derfelites sanctify a primeval scene of rape-sacrifice. The utopian dispensation of Bran, fatherless immortal ancestor, has been excluded early from the narrative, and aboriginal Welshness, a prelapsarian alternative, remains an empty term which must always yield, as the Lady Ffraid predicted, to the fallen ancestor term of Derfel. Thus there is nowhere to go back to; opposed signs dissolve into each other, into the ground-term of "history," the erotic sadism of the paternal regime. "But to what end?" Owen interrogates his enterprise: "blood and ashes!" (395) To the end that his enterprise must fail, not so much because he is "not ruthless enough" on the stage of history, but because he has acted there at all. Yet the only alternative is no alternative, the utopian dirge of the mythology of escape with its negative sublime of historical exclusion.

The signifier of racial origins finds its purest, parodic representation in the "round, mild, greedy-idiot eye of [the] simple goosander, whose personality reproduced to the smallest particular

that of its ancestors of two thousand years ago." (645) Elsewhere, it too is subject to the book's rhetorical regime of eternal recession. Owen himself is no aboriginal, but a "pure-blooded Brython," one of the endless series of conquering aliens along which the pedigree of Welsh history slips back (a figure to be amplified in *Porius*). It is Broch O'Meifod's wife Morg who taunts Owen with racial inauthenticity as she lays upon him the appropriately Heraclitean "curse of the water and the wind." (433) Morg and Broch themselves, however, are granted genuine aboriginal status. Broch is the text's only stable, authentically mythic type, whose "death-love" is set in opposition to Owen's "life-love." The latter turns out to signify Owen's stubborn desire to figure in history, in other words, the (increasingly corrupted and discredited) romance impulse, which is fundamentally at odds with the Prince's own (authentic) "fate-sense" and negative capability of self-emptying into the inorganic. Broch sets death in absolute opposition to "pain" (539), root principle of the sado-sacrificial dispensation of the father in history. His powerful rhetoric of mystic submission to the death-drive is the text's most authoritative figure of the mythology of escape. Like the Lady Ffraid, Broch represents (indeed he preaches) a dissolution of individual identity. (775) Again like her, he is identified with Bran, now "deus semi-mortuus" or primeval corpse-god (472). The ontological assuagement that the mythic pre-father dispenses turns out to be peace after death. (495)

In Broch is condensed, and to that extent contained, the narrative's "utopian aporia"—out-of-history, self-dissolution, death. As such, Broch is one of the novel's most highly-charged rhetorical nodes, hence the minor critical debate about whether he is "central" or "marginal."<sup>30</sup> He is both, the transcendental term of the mythology of escape which cannot be admitted to resolve it: for then there would be no romance, no narrative motion, no rhetorical force, but a sub-Wordsworthian lyric of "rocks and stones and stumps" (455)—the true negative sublime against which the novel has been striving, yet towards which it gazes in fascination.

And so the narrative retreats from this aesthetic of the abyss into the mythopoeic recovery of its final chapter. It is testimony to the authority of Broch that it stages this recovery on his terrain, the subterranean site of prehistoric mound-dwellers. A band of the dispossessed, huddled on ancestral ruins, contemplates the cold consolation of the mythology of escape: that authenticity resides in defeat, that home is to be found in exile. Glendower must claim mythic status from the negative sublime of exclusion from history, and now the narrative confers on him aboriginal, indeed autochthonic being ("Prince of the mound-dwellers," 891),

ostensibly through (after all) maternal descent, but really by contagion from Broch. The ancestral mound at Mynydd-y-Gaer contains an altar "earlier than the mound-dwellers" with "no scooped-out hollow for blood," the relic of a pre-sacrificial culture (911). But this is rhetorical indulgence. Owen's apotheosis signals itself as mystification and bathos (he is "one of those singular persons who appear at rare intervals in our human tribes," 887), as a regressive childish fuss of "race-rituals" (921), as the hollow cadence of a prophetic mode without content ("a crack in the visible . . . through which the invisible was blowing an ice-cold blast on its phantom horn," 925). Owen is dead before he even can perform his last gesture on the scene of history, the symbolic rejection of Henry V's symbolic pardon. If "history has become a myth," it is only by the reduction of the mythic to a set of empty formal flourishes.

The authoritative view of the scene's reversion "to what it must have been when the old inhabitants of Mynydd-y-Gaer gazed across it, thousands upon thousands of years ago" (887) is Broch's. The vision falls back along its characteristic trajectory to "the calm of the inanimate . . . [a] desolate and dehumanized world, of wet mists upon grey rocks, towards which his spirit yearned." (887) Such rhetoric traces the gravitational pull of the mythology of escape, for this is the true, first and last bedrock of platonic essences beneath the novel's shifting and shimmering scenery of mythic desire. This is its final realization of spirit of place, the transcendental poverty of a world without history: a "primal supremacy of grey slate." (887) The *tabula rasa* is the site of ancestral origins, before the family romance, and also the terrain of the Cewri in *Porius*, where it is not only the scene of death, but of racial extinction.

That last trope from *Porius* (1942-49) outweighs any explanation to which the family romance alone may lay claim. *Owen Glendower* was written at the end of the 1930's: this banal but important fact recalls us to the novel's inscription of its place in history, its own unfolding of the ideological space shared by its (canonical) modernist aesthetic and certain political programs of the inter-war decades. In modern narratives, the classical double bind of the family romance represented an authoritative mythological encoding, on the "private" and "interior" *topos* of the bourgeois nuclear family, of the felt contradictions of a social and collective dimension of life dispersed into increasingly intricate systems of mediation. What is at stake here is not the "truth" or otherwise of the family romance (and of its psychoanalytic figures), but rather its extraordinary modern privilege as authentic mimetic code or narrative genre. As such—not just synecdoche, but sub-textual ground—it represented the last "meaningful" pocket of collective

life: reduced, quarantined and repopulated with a pantheon of transcendental signifiers routed from the public domain of exchange, labour, politics, "history." Powys's (appropriately) lurid version discovers this ontological preserve, of the nature of the family and thus of the individual and thus of history, as a primal scene of sexual violence, of which the necessary issue is an internalized condition of mutilated being. In *Owen Glendower*, the family romance maps an ideology of liberal despair, that a revolution can only reproduce in more abominable guise the regime it displaces. Rhisiart seeks to recover a lost, mythic father and redeem history from a false father, but ends up submitting to the sacrificial mode of history and reproducing the false father; Glendower's opposition to Henry IV turns him into a crude shadow of Henry IV. This narrative also rehearses a standard Marxist account of the relation between democratic-capitalist and fascist formations which is very much to the point. The melancholy discovery of *Owen Glendower* is that the mythopoeic rebellion against the prevailing order dialectically reconstitutes it. This is because both "alternatives" are imagined within the prevailing ideology of the absolute self, the by now labyrinthine depths of which are to be founded on a racial essence or archetype. The race-archetype offers the false promise of a collective dimension which both transcends and yet guarantees essential individuality; for a collectivity which would revise that term of identity can only be imagined as its threatening dissolution, as death. Thus the text's aporia or term of ideological limit. In just this way, a fascist ideology sells itself as a redemptive pseudo-collectivity which keeps intact a capitalist mode of production. Such a contradiction must displace itself into increasingly extravagant mythologies, toward a collectivity that can only affirm itself by negation, by the invention and proscription of terms of otherness.<sup>31</sup>

For Powys, Nazism came to be the dreadful paradigm, not only of thirties totalitarianism and the end of historical alternatives, but of a redemptive discourse of remythologization based on the terms he himself had favoured, "the romance of race." But Powys, a gentle man who spent his life fleeing from centers of power, never shared the totalitarian longings of some of his eminent literary contemporaries. He came to idealize the Spanish Anarchists, betrayed by their Communist allies in a civil war taking place even as he began *Owen Glendower*, for his own political myth. The novel represents an interesting set of displacements and condensations of the political terms historically available to Powys. The Anarchist ideal of an unimaginable, impossible collectivity combines, under the stewardship of the peace-loving diplomat old Adda at Dinas

Bran, with a League-of-Nations dream of the dissolution of national frontiers (that anxious trope of the thirties), to configure the lost cause that never had a chance (324): Adda's mission of appeasement makes him the first of the book's atrocity victims. The Communist alternative is equally unthinkable. Philip Sparrow's interminable and ineffectual peasants' revolt is treated as lightly as are the Marxist machinations in *A Glastonbury Romance*, and Powys, like Orwell (who also idealized the Spanish Anarchists), saw modern Russian history as the fierce precursor to fascism in these years of hard-line Stalinism.<sup>32</sup> While Lancastrian England exhibits the evils Powys associated with the rational-empirical Western democracies, we recall that Bolingbroke himself has just usurped an *ancien regime* (now redolent of a Czarist nostalgia, mysticism and decadence), and prosecutes ideological purges in the name of a massive centralization of discourse. The Francoist theocracy in Spain also comes to mind. Against this powerfully-condensed figuration, Owen's Welsh rising begins as a nineteenth-century nation-state *risorgimento* and turns into a gruesome mirror-image of its enemy. The logic of this trajectory forces Owen to accommodate a Gilles de Pirogue, whose hybrid of atavistic sadism and scientific rationalism is the monstrous offspring of the new age: its true, its only "synthesis of myth and history." His project, "the secret of life, the secret of not-dying. . . the elixir of life!" (634-635), is an obscene parody of Owen's, and of the romance-quest of Powys's modernist aesthetic: to find the elixir-word which will restore life to the wasteland.

The romance-quest becomes, in its most powerful synecdoche, the quest for a name. Owen explicates the mythographic inscriptions of Welsh spirit of place:

. . . the only way, as you pursued the long reversion of demigods, by which the true Immortals could be reached, was to follow their traditional pedigrees *to the end*.

"Where," he went on to explain, "the pedigrees become silent—where, in fact, a name has no 'fab' or 'ferch' affixed to it—we touch the depths. I used to beg my friend Iolo to make a litany of the names thus reached, so that we might invoke them with the more reverence *just because* they have no father and no mother!" (772-773)

Mathrafal, place and history dissolved to an irrevocable pastness, is reduced to such a name: despite the dust and ashes of historical ruin, indestructible romance will survive in the mere syllables.(413) Thus the project of a political remythologization retreats to the modernist



aesthetic of a pure form without content, transcendental term uncorrupted by ideology. But the word of revelation, the unfathered speech that names itself on the edge of silence, is also without meaning. The fragments the poet has shored against his ruins are his ruins. Recognizing how much he has lost, Owen experiences a visionary yearning for the project of romance remythologization in all its splendour:

But he had a strange feeling, as he stretched his head through this stone slit in the great wall and listened to the breaking of the waves, that all these blackened towns and ruined villages were the result of an enchantment, like that flung by the magicians upon the persecuted Fryderi; and that if only the clue-word, the exorcising word, could be uttered on such a night as this, all the waste-lands of ashes and blood would grow fresh and green again! (644)

The prophetic impulse, canonically evoked at the close of Eliot's poem, declares itself as an impossible "if only." The novel ends with a scattering of its point of view, the flight of a pair of ravens who proclaim the final vacancy of the oracular: "*Nis gyn!* I don't know! *Nis gyn!*" (938) The echo of his grandson's lament invoked a magical Owen at the beginning of the chapter, but now, to the dejected imagination of Owen's true son, the scene's mythic presence is a fading ghost, "something in that vast broken landscape that had echoed that hollow answer in his ears as long as he could remember." (938) The ravens disappear "towards the mounded turf and the scattered stones that were all that was left of Mathrafal": the paternal grave that once and for all demythologizes the scene. The voice of the *genius loci* whispers away to the imaginary echo of an "I don't know" in a "vast broken landscape," all that there is to hear.

"Sing of human unsuccess / In a rapture of distress," W. H. Auden advised poets in 1939 as he contemplated the same wintry view. *Owne Glendower* is probably too fascinated by its own unsuccess ever to enjoy a large readership, but its academic interest is considerable, and many of its raptures still have the power to disconcert. It commands a remarkable place both in the literary history it surveys and in its author's canon. Janus-faced, it broods upon the ruins of its own romance enterprise, and casts longing glances toward the dark wood of refuge, evasion and futility that will be *Porius*:

Everything else at that particular point in space and time, as the two men moved into the path of the one man,

was a dramatic cause followed by a dramatic effect; but although in its long and magical existence the cry "*Nama—nama—sebesio!*" possessed ten thousand times more interest than anything that could possibly occur at this spot on the eighteenth of October four hundred and ninety-nine it was destined to dissolve into absolute annihilation without being understood by anyone, without making an impression on anything, without producing as much effect upon the course of events as the smallest of that crowd of midges.<sup>33</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>John Cowper Powys, *Obstinate Cymric: Essays 1935-1947* (London: Village Press, 1973), pp. 7-18, 37-48, 137-182.

<sup>2</sup>John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934), pp. 306-307.

<sup>3</sup>*Autobiography*, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup>"... Sometimes I even *play* with the notion that I may eventually settle in Wales for the rest of my days & be buried in the land of my fathers! For I sometimes think I could write a book that I would enjoy writing more than anything I could possibly write and I see it as an extraordinary book—a book of wonderful possibilities—a book into which various qualities more naturally adapted to poetry than to prose might be thrown." J.C.P., letter to Littleton C. Powys, September 3rd 1933; cited in Belinda Humfrey (ed.), *Essays on John Cowper Powys* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972), p. 338.

<sup>5</sup>"I began it in the Valle Crucis Chapter House on April 24th, Eve of St. Mark 1937 and ended it on Mynydd-y-Gaer on December 24th 1939. So it took three years, the longest I've ever taken to write aught." J.C.P., *Letters to Nicholas Ross*, sel. N. & A. Ross, ed. A. Uphill (London: Bertram Rota, 1971): 14 January 1940, p. 15. See also Richard Perceval Graves, *The Brothers Powys* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 228, 290-291, 303.

<sup>6</sup>Powys wrote to Iorwerth Peate as early as October 13 1937, while at work on *Owne Glendower*, acknowledging with some enthusiasm the latter's suggestion for "a future romance." Peate says that the suggestion concerned the Dark Ages in Wales. J.C.P., *Letters 1937-1954*, ed. Iorwerth C. Peate (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1974), pp. 1-2. Powys recorded his hatred of "the 13th 14th and 15th



centuries" and his conviction that *Porius* "beats that Glendower book of mine hollow" in a letter of 14 November 1951 to C. Benson Roberts (in Humfreys ed., pp. 344-345.) Humfreys suggests that *Owen Glendower* is a "try-out" for *Porius*, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup>John Cowper Powys, *Owen Glendower: An Historical Novel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), "Argument," p. x. Future references to this edition will be cited in the text.

<sup>8</sup>Glen Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys: Novelist* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 107, 119.

<sup>9</sup>Humfreys, *Essays on JCP*, pp. 28, 46.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Cavaliero: "This novel, like Powys's whole output, is a corrective to false notions about the nature of modernity," p. 107.

<sup>11</sup>G. Wilson Knight, *The Saturnian Quest: A Chart of the Prose Works of John Cowper Powys* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964.)

<sup>12</sup>John A. Brebner, *The Demon Within: A Study of John Cowper Powys's Novels* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973): "a delicate balance of the ideal and the actual. . . Powys manages not only to write about to also to create myth," p. 176. Morine Krissdottir, *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest* (London: MacDonald, 1980), cf. p. 122.

<sup>13</sup>Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys*, pp. 108, 113. Cavaliero's account is echoed by C. A. Coates, *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape* (London: Macmillan, 1982), cf. pp. 134, 137.

<sup>14</sup>But cf. Coates, who does take the homecoming seriously: "Wales had provided a place and a tradition," *ibid*, p. 137. On the homecoming topos in Powys, see Gwyneth F. Miles, "The Pattern of Homecoming," in Humfrey, *Essays on JCP*, pp. 219-232.

<sup>15</sup>Roland Mathias, "The Sacrificial Prince: A Study of *Owen Glendower*," in Humfrey, *Essays on JCP*, pp. 233-262.

<sup>16</sup>Mathias, pp. 241-245. The judgment is echoed by Humfrey in her introduction.

<sup>17</sup>Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, trl. H. & S. Mitchell (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1962), especially pp. 183-205, 230-250. Lukacs wrote the book 1936-37.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Alexander Welsh, *The Hero of the Waverley Novels* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

<sup>19</sup>For this characteristically High Modernist aesthetic see Eric Gould, *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.) It can be read everywhere from the elite poetics of Eliot and Lawrence to popular culture; its systematic monument is Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957.)

<sup>20</sup>*Obstinate Cymric*, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup>*Autobiography*, p. 308.

<sup>22</sup>*Obstinate Cymric*, pp. 99-111, 158-177.

<sup>23</sup>*Obstinate Cymric*, p. 99.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Owen's pseudo-vatic trance at Mathrafal, which frees him from "every pressure of modern transactions," p. 413.

<sup>25</sup>J. C. Powys, *Obstinate Cymric*, p. 177.

<sup>26</sup>If the "Russian insect" seems to have come out of Ippolit's dream in *The Idiot*, the sexual rivalry between Owen and Rhisiart recalls that between Dmitri and his father over Grushenka in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

<sup>27</sup>The episode is actually adapted from Scott's *The Talisman*.

<sup>28</sup>Graves, *The Brothers Powys*: "This bizarre episode, with its giants associated with nostalgic longing, with sexual desire, and with savagery, and with its explicit reference to an important episode in his own childhood concerned with tadpoles and his father's anger [!], must rank as one of the most highly personal passages in all Powys's writing," p. 311.

<sup>29</sup>The episode (pp. 731-738) suggests both Rhisiart's "primal scene" and the Cewri scene from *Porius*. As in the former, the female victim (lecherous little Efa) is made into the erotic-sadistic aggressor, and the rapist becomes the victim. The narrative stance toward the rape theme is often ambivalent, and Owen's final sentimentalization of the thuggish Davy (p. 891) indicates how much is awry in the novel's self-revisionary conclusion.

<sup>30</sup>Wilson Knight: "he remains a peripheral figure," p. 71. Mathias dissents, pp. 247-248.

<sup>31</sup>For a cogent account of this area of inquiry see Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, The Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 1-25. The theoretical protocols of my essay, written in the summer of 1984, owe much to Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), then at the height of its influence in the U.S.

<sup>32</sup>Powys's correspondence with Louis Wilkinson during the war years gives a good account of his political views. Louis Wilkinson (ed.), *Letters from John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson 1935-1956* (London: Village Press, 1974.)

<sup>33</sup>John Cowper Powys, *Porius: A Romance of the Dark Ages* (London: Village Press, 1974), p. 23.

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