

## "A Peculiar Blending": Powys's Anglo-American Synthesis in *A Glastonbury Romance* and the *Autobiography*

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One of the reasons for Powys's undeserved marginalization is a premature pigeonholing of him as a "Celt." Powys's Welsh family name belied the fact that by and large he and his family considered themselves "English." But whatever effect this might have had on his reception was countermanded by the clearly Celtic setting of such books as *Porius* and *Owen Glendower*. The "Celtic" mantle cast on Powys has led many of his potential readers to classify him as fey, eccentric, mystical, otherworldly. It has prompted them to either misread Powys or not to read him at all<sup>1</sup>. This mistake is easily rectified by a cursory glance at a page of Powys, for instance the many passages of *A Glastonbury Romance* which try to recoup groundedness even as they diagnose exultation. No amount of close reading, however, will disestablish impressions based more on ideological simplicities about ethnicity and culture than on any sort of textual analysis.

These culturally based clichés, paradoxically, are also closely tied up with the self-image of that would-be international phenomenon, literary High Modernism. Powys saw himself as a modernist, but Modernism did not return the favor. The manifest excuse for this is that Powys was seen as a retrograde idealist who did not subscribe to Modernism's cult of despair. But there is a deeper motivation for Powys; rejection is the way he problematized what we might call the purities of adhesion held dear by Modernism and its acolytes. It is my argument that Powys's subtle but dramatic rupture of these purities was assisted not only by his complex knowledge of the history and culture of the British Isles, but also by his longtime residence in the United States, during which several of his greatest books were produced.

Anglo-American Modernism has traditionally been seen as

preoccupied with ideas of source, origin, or authority. These images of authority can seem very old-fashioned and emblematic, as in the case of the later Eliot's Christian assent. But they more popularly took the avatar of greater appeal, that of a liberating purity or exemption on the part of artist, work, and coterie reader from a broad network of overlapping aesthetic and social matrices whose full and sordid extent was deemed unworthy of the high decorum of Art. Modernism's claims to authority were lodged in the purportedly liberating anti-bourgeois, anti-majoritarian rhetoric. But this did not make them any less authoritarian. In the teeth of Modernism's pretensions to mandarin ecumenicism, there was nonetheless, especially in the critical reception of Modernist texts, an adherence to certain constraining ethnic and cultural tropes.

One of the most egregious of these revolved around the idea of the Celtic. It is the interpretive constraints generated by Modernist Celticism which are largely responsible for what until recently was Powys's unfair obscurity. What we call Anglo-American modernism can just as aptly be described, in terms of ethnicity rather than nationhood, as Anglo-Celtic, given the canonical prominence of writers such as Yeats and Joyce. The Irishness of these writers certainly does not mean that they were captives of ethnic essentialism or tribalism. The greatest phase of Yeats's poetry occurred after he had passed through both Celtic twilight and Irish-nationalist preoccupations, and Joyce, as Declan Kiberd put it in a heroically brilliant recent lead article in the *TLS*, evaded the British-imposed Celtic traits of "poetry, emotion, and hypersensitivity" in his pursuit of an "anti-national epic"<sup>2</sup>. But this independent-mindedness did not faze the canonical Modernist interpreters of Joyce and Yeats. These interpreters, while often neglecting the social and historical contexts of the writers' Irishness, tended to tacitly rely on the writer's national origin to undergird the contention that they were serenely removed from the tawdry mainstream of British modernity.

In this, they were following the lead of the father of many of this century's most reductive and repressive critical ideologies, Matthew Arnold. In his "On the Study of Celtic literature," Arnold codified the fault-lines which were to govern canonical twentieth-century inscriptions of the Celtic in literature. Arnold does not seem, on the face of it, an enemy of the Celts, even if by name and temperament he proclaimed himself to be one of the workaday Saxons whose bourgeois prowess he saw as urgently requiring the supplement of Celtic pathos. Arnold seems to value the Celts as agents of inspiration and creativity who can educate the Saxon majority into a greater sympathy with their imagination. Yet this

privileging of the Celts is in fact invidious. In an "Orientalist" way, it ascribes discrete qualities of character to determinate ethnic entities in order to name this entity as something "other" than the dominant entity which, through the avatar of Arnold, attempts to categorize it. Arnold, the ostensible proto-Modernist, was in accord with the most vulgar elements of Romanticism in his insistence that race and ethnicity are palpable substances that can infuse natural literatures with a defining *je ne sais quoi*.<sup>3</sup> Arnold's distinction does not liberate or enfranchise the Celts. Through its rhetoric of race and ethnicity, it arrests them in a position of isolate, autotelic extraction from any larger nexus. This nexus is presumably forever Saxon. The Celts, in their alleged opposition to technological modernity, are locked into a hypocritically sentimental nostalgia. They are denied agency and historicity. (Arnold certainly did not foresee the Easter Rebellion.) Thus, in the later critical extension of this dichotomy, Joyce and Yeats are hailed as aesthetic heresiarchs, striking out against the banal Saxon complacency of bourgeois modernity. But by being so classified they are rendered powerless to pragmatically alter that complacency rather than merely standing out against it in mute protest.

It is against the background of these Arnoldian expectations and constraints that *A Glastonbury Romance* was received. If a reader untutored in matters Powysian picks up a novel entitled *A Glastonbury Romance*, he or she will no doubt expect a phantasmagoric neo-Arthurian melodrama, replete with vistas of mythic totality and the upsurge of a repressed, sacral paganism against bourgeois and Christian restraints. Powys works from the beginning, though, to upset these expectations. Part of this irony stems from his creative genius, but part simply from his immense and freely dispensed store of knowledge. Powys understood that, far from being some sort of pagan remnant, the Arthurian tradition, and Glastonbury's symbolic role in it, was thoroughly and uncompromisingly Christian. Powys may have a heterodox attitude towards the Grail and the other Arthurian resonances cited in the novel, but they are presented as resonances fundamentally Christian in thrust. Powys, who knew that the Celts, especially in the alleged time of Arthur, had tended and celebrated the Christian faith, when, in the words of Milton, all the Saxon fathers "worshipped stock and stone," would never have been one to present the Grail resonances as a piquant exemption from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. By recognizing the mixing between Celtic and Christian, Powys prevents the Celtic from being used as an archaic foil for the Saxon. When Powys (or his narrator-surrogate) first alludes to the "immemorial Mystery of Glastonbury" he is careful to note that

"Christians had one name for this Power, the ancient heathen inhabitants of this place had another," but he is equally concerned to allow them both a place in the legacy of the landscape.<sup>4</sup> Powys is a strenuous advocate of mediation and continuity, the two words most thoroughly expelled from the lexicon of high modernism, with its fetishes of the marginal and of dissociations of sensibility which posited wastelands of dreariness between embattled cultural peaks. This feeling for mediation was tied to Powys's spirituality. The Powysian idea of a cosmic perceptiveness not lodged in either a heavenly or a chthonic nexus, but manifesting itself in pan-sentient "infinitesimal ripples in the creative silence of the First Cause" (GR 1) applies as much to the history of culture as it does to the individual psyche. In Powys's vision of the past and present of Glastonbury, everything participates; nothing is left out. Powys's ambient setting is so lovingly and stirringly comprehensive that it disallows any potential for privileging or categorizing any given ethnic or national essence. Were this not enough, Powys thoroughly unravels and outflanks the possibility of Celtic-Saxon mythologies through several typically shrewd strategies.

As he does in *Porius*, Powys avoids a bipolar ethnic opposition by his introduction of a "multicultural" panoply. In *Porius*, there are not only the refined, civilized Celts of the house of Cunedda, themselves migrants rather than land-bound indigenes and far from being fantastic, irrational, and primitive. There are also residual Romans, archaic Picts or Gwyddyl-Ffichti, and even far older remnants of Stone Age "savages." Combined with the groups whose identification is spiritual rather than ethnic in nature, such as the Mithraic presence or the Saturnian rites associated with Merlin, *Porius* presents a panoply of interest that can never yield to a monolithic typifying of Celtic magic doomed to yield to Saxon belligerence. Most of these strains have some Celtic tinge, but are as different with respect to themselves as against any external opponent. This fissuring of the monadic Celt makes it impossible to correlate the Celt with an airy, impossibly pure spirituality, as is desired by Arnold and his heirs, and thus also forbid any simplistic condemnation/exaltation of a Saxon antonym.

The avoidance of lending prominence to an oppositional Saxon was deliberately counter-Germanophilic, and had as much to do with the book's 1940 publication date as its 499 setting. But even in *Glastonbury*, written before the threat of Hitler, Powys avoids the sterility and prejudice of the Celt-Saxon dichotomy. As in *Porius*, Powys avoids the dichotomy most effectively by having the Celtic be not the ultimate vestige of sensual archaism but itself a latecomer with respect to an almost impalpably ancient Neolithic culture. This

culture, though, is adduced less as an ultimate origin than as a ground so far remote that it cannot be invoked to provide any authoritative or consoling historical sanction with respect to the present. By being "far older than Christianity, far older than the Druids" (GR 175), this primeval layer is insulated from a crudely ideological use. Powys insists on several layers, not just a binary opposition between past and present, sacred and profane. This multi-layered effect extends to the novel's present. John Crow's musings during his revelatory childhood experience with Mary Crow and Tom Barter are indicative of how Powys sees England itself as a contrary patchwork, not a doughtily monolithic Saxon bailiwick to be liberated by the Celtic sacred.

we can't get away from the fact that we Crows are plain sea-faring Danes, settled for centuries as simple working families in the Isle of Ely. We haven't the goodness of the Saxon, nor the power of the Norman, nor the imagination of the Celt. (GR 76)

The differences within England, which include Danish and Celtic aspects as well as Saxon, is as important as any differences between England and entities outside it. When John eventually journeys to the region around Glastonbury, he acts as if he has been transplanted to a totally foreign universe. John's reaction shows both the all-importance and the arbitrariness of designations of place and specificity; it undercuts their utility. John ascribes ethnic characteristics to himself and others, but places them so specifically that they are unable to be exploited as broader cultural paradigms.<sup>5</sup> This is true of the novel as a whole; there are Saxon elements in Glastonbury's heritage, but they are material, matter-of-fact, not filled with the racialist idealism of the nineteenth century. Examples are the way the charter given to Glastonbury by King Ine of Wessex is grafted onto the town's immemorial mystery, and the emphasis on the ancientness of the Zoyland family name without imputing to it any kind of occulted ethnic prowess. Powys thus avoids the pat contrast of stolid yet triumphant Saxon with dreamy, imaginative yet failed Celt so popular in literary discourse in the fifty years preceding the publication of *A Glastonbury Romance*.

What Powys is after, here, though, is not just a demographic multiculturalism. It has an ontological dimension as well. It has to do with what Powys himself called a "multiverse" and what Charles Lock has more recently analyzed as an absence of "monological intention."<sup>6</sup> Without monological intention, there can be no partitioning, either of history or of imaginative experience, into

deployable, coherent wholes. The problem here is not just the categorization of ethnicity. It is the categorization of transcendence. If the Celt-Saxon stereotypes are to be thoroughly uprooted, transcendence cannot simply be seen as a retaliatory rebuke to the ravages of the modern, scientific mind. Powys does not see it this way, because all of his characters who most dramatically engage the transcendent are, in a radical sense, eccentric. Of the three characters most associated with a putative incarnation of the numinous, one, John Geard, is a Christian minister. Although his revivalism increasingly strays from its Evangelical roots to far more extravagant and less orthodox tendencies, Geard always remains within the low-Protestant piety that had first led Canon Crow to make him the legatee of his will and thus situate him at the center of the book's plot. Geard reveals the myths latent in even the most consciously unaesthetic of Christian traditions. But he cannot operate as a kind of primal rebuke to alienated Christian transcendence, a rebuke that would accord with the vulgar-Nietzschean expectations of a certain strain of "mythic Modernism." Geard's low-church antecedents are important. They are true to the plurality of the Anglo-Celtic ecclesiastical landscape. The Arnoldian tradition would like to see Celts, when they admit their Christianity as well, as Catholic, Catholicism possessing the same sort of marginally imaginative status with respect of Anglicanism as Celticity does to racialist Saxonhood. But, statistically, most Scots and, especially, Welsh are and have long been what the Anglican point of view would see as dissenting Protestants. Geard is not, even as he tries to resurrect the past of Glastonbury. He thus differs from the aestheticized High Church advocated by Newman and later to be resuscitated, as a paradigm for social and interpretive control, by Eliot and Auden, and seen as the quintessence of modernist spirituality.

If Geard does not embody stereotypes of the spiritual, is there anyone else in the novel who does? The figure most associated with the specifically Celtic associations of the Arthurian legend, Owen Evans, is scholarly and contemplative rather than charismatic or messianic. Even the "esplumeoir" which he sees as representing the culmination of Arthurian lore is a dank and isolated enclave shut off from the world, not an irruption of spiritual nourishment onto a desiccated modern cosmos.<sup>7</sup> The Christ-mania of Sam Dekker is treated by Powys as at once a psychological disturbance stemming from a displaced guilt over his adulterous relationship with Nell Zoyland and an ontological realization so cosmic in scope that it achieves the panoptic impersonality that can preside over the outside of worldly mysteries even as it penetrates to their inside.

While Powys is too subtle to see Sam's feelings as anything like reducible to a merely personal neurosis, their tumultuous nature insulates them from bearing a programmatic message, pro or con, with respect to Christianity. Sam's visionary disturbance is at once too personal and too global to be used as an annunciation of an ideological revival of a mythic paganism of the sort associated by Powys in his *Autobiography* with the views of his younger brother Llewelyn.<sup>8</sup>

Powys's polyvalent vision of Glastonbury's ethnic and spiritual composition is concomitant with his unusually detailed and specific portrait of the region described in the novel. Glastonbury is not merely casually invoked as a mythic *omphalos*, but sketched in a swath of physical and social detail reminiscent of Trollope's *Barsetshire* series.<sup>9</sup> The effect of this is not, though, a mimetic specificity. It is a polymorphous overlap of levels of representation that tropes the cultural history diversity of Glastonbury itself, making it almost, in Derridean terms, a "Glastonbury," a juxtaposition of different narratives and stories that are never conclusively grouped under a categorical rubric.

Yet one of the most valuable clues as to the extent of the this-worldly detail of Glastonbury is, paradoxically, one of that site's most mystical resonances. It has usually been seen as an anomaly that John Cowper Powys composed *A Glastonbury Romance*, a book seemingly intense in its British setting and identification, during his residence in America, more specifically at Phudd Bottom in Columbia County in upstate New York. The circumstances of the book's composition, though, become less anomalous when it is realized that Powys's Glastonbury is not the locus for a nostalgic or mythic Arthurianism. It exists as a synthetic and hybrid set of spiritual and material resonances. Thus geographical terms such as "Glastonbury" and "Phudd Bottom" only have no meaningful connection when "meaning" is measured exclusively in terms of Arnoldian cultural paradigms which stress divisions between large wholes rather than affiliations between minute particles. A close examination, indeed, of the geographic tropes and the philosophic patterns present in both *Glastonbury Romance* and Powys's *Autobiography*, also composed at Phudd Bottom, reveals that the anomaly is less between text and site of composition than between the cultural vision proffered by Powys and the alternatives represented by his better known High Modernist contemporaries.

As we have seen, Glastonbury's allure is not unique, autonomous, or coherent. Its composition is multiple, and its reverberations are nearly limitless. Powys does not limit the associations of "Glastonbury" to a vista exclusively British in scale.

He takes care to associate Glastonbury with the ocean to the west and, more precisely speaking, America. Powys many times mentions Glastonbury's proximity to the Bristol Channel, the traditional British mercantile gateway to the Atlantic. Powys sees the image of a possible westward passage from Glastonbury as a figure for the imaginative speculations close to the heart of so many of the novel's characters. Part of the subtext of the novel's title is the traditional association of the New World with the Isles of the Blest. This is where Arthur went after his earthly death, and is traditionally associated with Celtic visions of paradise. Powys's suggestive use of America as a faint spiritual horizon modernizes his archaisms and archaizes its modernism. Powys thus pulls down the barriers between here and there, past and present, on which twentieth-century definitions of modern culture have too often been dependent.

The porousness between Britain and America in the book means that, literally and allegorically, Powys's American residence during the novel's composition does not represent a strategic deracination from his subject. It denotes a heightened engagement with its metaphoric implications. This engagement was strengthened by the fact that Powys, simultaneous with his imaginative flights, had his feet as firmly planted on the social and historical ground of America as he did of that of his native Britain.

Of the European intellectuals who have spent time and/or been interested in America, two dominant patterns have emerged. One is a euphoric embrace of the salvific newness and/or primitiveness of America as an antidote to European decadence. This is a stance represented in Powys's lifetime by the ecstasies of D.H. Lawrence and canvassed in our own days by the simulationist dithyrambs of Jean Baudrillard. The other was a cultivated rejection of bourgeois American optimism in favor of a sagacious and chastened Modernist despair that ironically upheld the Old World as a rebuke to the failure of the New World's revolutionary promise. The chief contemporary of Powys to incarnate these attitudes was T. S. Eliot. Powys's philosophical differences with Eliot are myriad and obvious. Yet in reversing Eliot's path of migration across the Atlantic Powys did not fall into a Lawrentian inversion of Eliot's cultural and aesthetic diagnoses. Powys is as immune to Lawrence's pull towards the uncultured new or the inchoate primitive as he is to Eliot's pilgrimage towards the past. As Powys says of Lawrence in *Autobiography*, the latter writer lacked the "serpentine penetration" (311) that made Powys discontented with Lawrence's segregated archaism, which in seeking a primitive wholly other from modernity cut out the swath of mediation, the historically ambient

consciousness, so prized by Powys. Powys's America, like his Glastonbury, is too complex to embody a single or univocal aspect of culture or history.

In his reflections on America in the *Autobiography*, Powys is notable for avoiding the European tendency to assume, whether positively or negatively, that America is a nation without history or without internal difference. Most particularly, Powys is one of the few to acknowledge America's regional diversity. Most Europeans who have looked at America tend to apply a sort of reverse Orientalism, seeing it as an endlessly promising but ahistorical *tabula rasa*. (The usual banal suspects—Crèvecoeur, de Tocqueville, Mrs. Trollope, can be rounded up here, if the reader wishes.) Powys, on the other hand, knew that the many centuries of human habitation in the present-day United States, both by Europeans and their predecessors, had complicated the country's cultural heritage and scene in a manner comparable to European lands. As we have seen, Powys had a keen sense of the regional differences within England, familiar to readers of *A Glastonbury Romance* by dint of John Crow's sense of perpetual alienation from Glastonbury because of his East Anglian origins. Powys was thus susceptible to being impressed by the corollary diversity, similar in effect if different in scale and means, exemplified in the daughter country.

Powys's indefatigable course of lecture-tours across the United States was one of the empirical factors that supplemented his already-preconditioned interest in regional and cultural difference. He saw more of America than most Europeans, indeed than most Americans. (In his travels, Powys was more Whitmanesque than Whitman.) Another contributing circumstance, though, is the very residence at Phudd Bottom seen as so incongruous by most commentators. Once Powys's interest in American regionalism is comprehended, it becomes far easier to see the connection between Phudd Bottom and Powys's English regional epics. Powys gives us the evidence here himself, when he says in *Autobiography* of the equanimity he has found among his neighbors at Phudd Bottom that it is attributable partly to:

"some curious psychic quality among them arising from the peculiar blending of races among them—the German with the Dutch, and the English with the Dutch, for instance—that make them, to my thinking, so much nicer than either the thorough-going puritanical Yankees or the negro-lynching Southerners."

When Europeans acknowledged America's divisions at all,

they did so on a North-South axis derived from the Civil War, with the "West" coming in as a third term as time went on. Powys, though, is not looking at America as a locus to be adhered to and cathected upon, but simply as a land which he happens to be inhabiting, physically and spiritually. He is thus sensitive to its particularities in a way he would otherwise not be.

What Powys most admires about the area of Phudd Bottom is its ethnic and historical overlay. It cannot be said that the history of Columbia County proceeds from one single antecedent or source. Like the area around Glastonbury, there are a multitude of ethnic influences at work here. Not only is no one privileged above any other, but none of them are ascribed monolithic, culturally determining traits. Powys's Glastonbury "peculiar blending" operates most crucially to forestall the stereotyped dyad of Saxon-Celt. Its American equivalent operates in a similar way to undo the dyad of European-Indian. By seeing the European arrivals to the region (the latest of whom was, of course, himself) as being divided among themselves, Powys prevents any convenient division between the European civilized and the indigenous primitive. Upstate New York was sensitively seen by Powys as the most "settled" part of the U.S., one that, in its overlapping cultural histories (Native American, Dutch, and English) was most like the regions of England or Wales familiar from his novels. Powys's construction of the region can be further seen in his mention of his preference for Eastern "Indian" tribes to the Far Western and Mexican peoples commonly hailed by those who apotheosized the American primitive. "My Indians are the red Indians of the East, not the Indians of New Mexico, or old Mexico, or any other Mexico." (500) Part of this patently anti-Lawrentian preference was surely due to the Eastern nations' more continuous history of relationship with Europeans, or, to be more fair, English-speaking Europeans. This relationship, by making the predecessor peoples more historically implicated with their colonizers, prevented them from being either a castigated or redemptive other.<sup>10</sup> The association of the Native American heritage of this region with a kind of rhetoric of mediating pluralism, rebuking both Yankee puritanism and Southern aristocracy, was evinced in American literature as early as the works of James Fenimore Cooper, both in the canonical Leatherstocking works and the later Littlepage novels. Powys, in inheriting this vision, removes it from an immediate historical partisanship into a more long-term sense of cultural meditation and mediation.<sup>11</sup>

Powys's upstate New York, like his Glastonbury, is a lovingly described region whose essential identity is as a perpetual borderland. These regions operate as what we might call "marches."

A march in geography is a borderland or frontier. Powys's marches are permeable; he writes about regions in England with Welsh influence, regions in Wales with English influences, and, here, regions in America with influence from both, as well as from many other places as well. These places though, are "marches" also in a more active sense. Powys's habit of taking long walks in the areas of his residence is well known. These ambulatory "marches" may express spiritually the sense of adventure and exchange that Powys's borderland denote geographically. For Powys, residence is also exploration, and borders signify an ontological porousness as well as a geographic one. Phudd Bottom, as a "march", thus becomes the mirror-image of Glastonbury and other sites of regions limned by Powys, such as the Edeyrnion of *Porius*. They are marches where solid or coherent identities are fissured and an interchange of consciousness is announced. As Powys said of the region, "It is more like England...than any landscape I have yet seen in the whole of America. It is like Shropshire. It even makes me think of my native Derbyshire." (562) This similarity to England surely is manifested in the landscapes described in *A Glastonbury Romance*. What is the scene described during Owen Evans's "unforgettable" walk to Pennard but an intrusion of the site of composition into the site of depiction? "It was a wild, gusty, rainy day; though the rain was discontinuous and the gusts intermittent; but when it neither rained nor blew there fell upon that stripped landscape a cold paralysed interim of shivering stillness." (785)

The sensations of Powys's Upstate march are intertwined with the musings of Evans's Somerset walk. The landscapes in the novel are never composed, never picturesque, or, for that matter, sublime in any categorical sense; they are laden, catalyzed, with the sort of wild intermittence characteristic of Powys's approach to imaginative experience. They are not symbolic of any abstract idea; rather, what is sought is the kind of aesthetic response adequate to these landscapes. Part of this was Powys's (much-transposed) Wordsworthian inheritance. Powys's landscapes were by no means empirical; they were framed by the conventions of his literary predecessors and of his own mind. But his rigorous yet pulsating description surely also has to do with the landscape described not just being remembered but also lived in Powys's upstate wanderings.

The England-America difference, so dear to ponderous culture-critics on both sides of the Atlantic for centuries, is dissolved. It is replaced by an Anglo-American synthesis in which the common bonds between the two places are assigned as important a place as the divergences. (Powys certainly did not erase

the latter; he expressed incomprehension of Canada, partly because that country sought, in his view, to be more English than the English themselves.)

Powys's interest in marches is different from Eliot's nostalgia for the imperial center and Lawrence's yearning for areas utterly beyond the reach of that center. Powys's marches are in the orbit of the various influences that color them, but are not under their sway. Importantly, Powys's peculiar blending is more inclusive than the traditional modernist mystique of extremity. In this mystique, almost any kind of extremism was good, as long as it was extreme. Thus, for Eliot, both Satanism and belief were preferable to ordinary, middle-class atheism. Thus, for Pound, both Fascism and Communism were more attractive, aesthetically and politically, than democracy.

Powys seems at times to come close to this perspective. He many times comments in *Autobiography* that he is intrigued by both Catholicism and Communism, at one time describing both as "in essence *intensely religious*" (416). This would be a classic Modernist paradigm, of embracing the extremes over the mean. Powys, though, does not do this. His interest in the extremes hardly rules out what is between them. To do this would be to simply elevate the extremes as Arnoldian touchstones to be pitied and admired from a safe distance while cordoning them off from any kind of cultural interchange (as Arnold indeed did with the Celts). If the extremes are allowed to contaminate the mean, they will weaken its grip, which is exactly what Arnold and his heirs feared. This has been the strategy by which, for the past century or so, a white, male Protestant hegemony has been maintained in Western culture, despite the proliferating rhetoric of margin and subaltern which seems to threaten it. Powys does not indulge in avant-garde posturing; he does not exclude what Eliot and Pound would have seen as the bourgeois mean (as, indeed, Joyce does not in *Ulysses*) Powys has a real sympathy with marginal groups, not just a desire to flaunt them as the token of his own aesthetic outrageousness and the cultural politics thereof.

Powys thus does not go all the way with the Catholicism-Communism combination he seems to exalt. After all, John Geard and Dave Spear, though they at times cooperate with each other's plans, are not at all comparable in the spiritual dynamics of *A Glastonbury Romance*, as they would have been if Powys had taken this rhetoric of extremism as seriously as he seems to. Powys sympathizes with Catholics and Communists, but that does not lead him to reject Protestants and democrats, just as his interests in the Mohawks and the Picts does not make him forswear the European "mainstream". The unusual aspect of the mysticism in the

novel, which has made it so difficult for ideologically inspired Modernists to appreciate it, is that it is not simply lodged in one or two prophetic temperaments, set off against the cloddish yet sensible herd. Thus mystical reverberations are not a facet of individual psyches, but have to do with conjunctions between psyches and alongside larger contexts. Even Philip Crow, the prototype of the Arnoldian philistine, has his mystical moments, both in the intensity of his commitment to his own industrial vision and the pathos of his late encounter with his unacknowledged daughter, "Morgan-Nelly." The mysticism in *A Glastonbury Romance* has to do much more with the entire setting and the entire process chronicled by the novel than with a single, conveniently accessible (or inaccessible) crystallization of the numinous.

In turn, this process does not anneal or govern the place in which it develops, nor does the place anneal or govern the process. Powys had certain interests or preferences, but he did not elevate those into ideological absolutes. He cherishes mediation, but he does not subside within it. Powys's blending, after all, is peculiar; it does not seek to encourage facile synthesis, but to discriminate fruitful if often ephemeral overlap. The principle of plurality is more important than any particular instance of it. Thus neither Glastonbury or the region around Phudd Bottom is seen as the only locale where this catalyzing blend of mediation can occur. This is seen in the *Autobiography* when Powys cites as his "ideal Americans" not his Dutch neighbors in Columbia County but the "poorer people" in Arkansas, or "those near Joplin, Missouri, or Galena, Kansas:

The weather is warm and relaxed here, though subject to wild Typhoons and to great winds coming across Texas from the Gulf, and it is easy to pick up a casual, scanty, careless squatter's livelihood, varied, on the border of Oklahoma, by fabulous strokes of luck....All men are equal here, in the deepest sense of that word, all men are care-free, all are worshippers of the Great Goddess Chance! (459).

By lauding a region which even now tends to be uncelebrated and perhaps yet undefined, Powys continues his interests in regions which, far from promoting a "distinctly American" purity of identity, contaminate each other, avoid stereotypes, and are to be appreciated in passing, not seized upon as cultural totems.<sup>12</sup> Whether it be this region or the locales surrounding Phudd Bottom or Glastonbury, Powys's marches are stages for blending and

overlap that present a complex process of interpretation, not a delimitable site. Since it is the permeability, the liability to overlap, of place and locale that Powys admires, he does not elevate a particular place and use it as a metaphor for a governing philosophical principle. He also does not attempt to merge into the indigenous habitat of whatever locale he is describing; he is an interested outsider, but still, here and elsewhere, an outsider nonetheless, with no desire to establish any hegemony or mastery. Powys cultivated marches, but he was not a margrave. Powys's taste for mediation did not mean succumbing to a congealed, compromised stasis. His peculiar blending connotes not moderation, but a condition of risk, where an almost impossibly full meaning can be potentially available at any place or time, as Powys puts it in the stunning proration to *A Glastonbury Romance*, "forever rising, forever vanishing. Never or Always." (1120).

Powys again opposes both the nostalgia of Eliot and the cathartic, ahistorical redemption of Lawrence. He has been in spirit, and in the future, as he is finally appreciated, perhaps will be in letter, more of an influence on subsequent writers who discuss and chronicle the regions of England and America and the relations between and among them than either of his more renowned Modernist contemporaries. Powys manifests the prudence, knowledge, and imaginative acuity which rendered him the most capacious and surprising novelist of his era. The greatness of Powys is that he makes possible connections that would be wildly irresponsible when applied to other texts. He is not simply a source of knowledge, but a conduit for it. His books are Bristol channels; he leads the reader to voyage outward. What has been attempted here is less a reading of Powys per se, than a hint of the way Powys can be used to unsettle long-dormant and long-dogmatic truisms of the various cultures and milieus in which he participated. The role of *A Glastonbury Romance* in this paper is thus more as the springboard for analysis than an object of it.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more insight on the rationale for such an evasion, see C.A. Coates, *John Cowper Powys: In Search of A Landscape*, Totowa: Barnes & Noble, 1982, pp. 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Declan Kiberd, "Bloom the liberator," in *TLS*, January 3, 1992, pp. 3-6.

<sup>3</sup> For an authoritative survey of how this distinction operated along a Saxon-Norman axis rather than a Saxon-Celtic one, see Clare A. Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> See John Cowper Powys, *A Glastonbury Romance*, Woodstock: The Overlook Press, originally published 1932. All further citations will be incorporated into the text by page number and marked "GR".

<sup>5</sup> As Coates says, "John is, from the beginning, placed." See Coates, p. 100. The fact that Powys's mythology was not specifically Celtic was noted as early as Percy Hutchison's mixed if enthusiastic review of *GR* in the *New York Times*, where he says that Powys's Glastonburgh "is not the Glastonbury of Arthurian romance," and that the novel features "legend in general" rather than "particularized legend." See Hutchison in the *NYTBR*, 27 March 1932, pp. 7 and 24. Unfortunately, Hutchison's discernment was unshared by most of his critical contemporaries. An index of this can be seen in the stray comment on the back cover of a late-1950's paperback edition of Aldous Huxley's *Collected Essays*. Here, it is said that many find "Huxley is the finest essayist since Montaigne." It is in this critical climate, with its ludicrous inflation of the speciously current and its consequent discrimination against the brilliantly unfaddish, that Powys's neglect occurred. Huxley, of course, was not as good an essayist as Llewelyn Powys, much less J. C. Powys. But he promulgated the kind of tried-and-true, now-and-then, here-and-there dichotomies that Powys transcended or, better yet, blended.

<sup>6</sup> See Charles Lock, "Polyphonic Powys: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and *A Glastonbury Romance*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 55 (Spring 1986).

<sup>7</sup> For more on this, see Ben Jones, "The 'mysterious word Esplumeoir' and Polyphonic Structure in *A Glastonbury Romance*," in Denis Lane, ed. *In The Spirit of Powys*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990, pp. 71-85.

<sup>8</sup> See John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934, for instance p. 359, where Llewelyn is referred to as "shamelessly heathen." All further citations will be incorporated into the text by page number.

<sup>9</sup> On what might be called the locative tropes in Powys, see Richard Maxwell, "The Lie of the Land, or, Plot and Autochthony in John Cowper Powys," in Lane, op. cit., pp. 193-213.

<sup>10</sup> The association of the Native American heritage of this region with a kind of rhetoric of mediating pluralism, rebuking both



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).